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C O M E A W A Y W I T H

# Norah Jones



Unless you’ve been living under a manhole cover for the past year, you know about the spectacular success of singer/pianist Norah Jones. *Come Away With Me*, her 2002 debut album, won eight GRAMMY® awards and has sold more than nine million copies—an astonishing feat for any new artist, let alone one whose stylistic hallmark is quiet understatement. Jones’ success proves that the world still hungers for strong, simple songs, performed with honesty and taste.

Norah spoke to us from a cavernous rehearsal hall in Florida, where she and her band were preparing to embark on their summer tour. She talked candidly about her music and gave us an update on her most important project: the breathlessly awaited follow-up to *Come Away With Me*.



**You’ve spoken often about the singers you admire. But which piano players are closest to your heart?**

Ahmad Jamal and Oscar Peterson are two of my favorite jazz people. They swing in very different ways. Like, Oscar Peterson is just so swingin’! That sounds corny—“swingin’”—but he really does swing so hard. And Jamal always had these cool arrangements. But Bill Evans is probably my very favorite jazz player—he’s so unique, and his touch is so lyrical and beautiful. I was a big Bill Evans fan all through high school.

**What else were you listening to then?**

I got into Willie Nelson and listened to the album *Red Headed Stranger* over and over. That’s one of my favorite albums ever. I think it’s his sister, Bobbie Nelson, playing piano on it. I love country piano like that, like Bobbie Nelson and Floyd

Cramer. Also, one of my favorite piano players ever is Ray Charles. He might be my favorite overall, actually, because he kind of embodies everything. The same with his singing. He can sing anything—he's country, he's bluesy, he's just bad, you know?

**When your album came out, some people might have been startled by your treatment of a country song like “Cold Cold Heart” by Hank Williams. But it sounds like that influence goes way back for you.**

Oh, yeah. Well, I'm from Texas, and my mom's family is from Oklahoma, and my grandfather's favorite album was that Willie Nelson record. My mom owns every Ray Charles album ever made, up to like 1980. Oh, and I love Nina Simone's piano playing too.

**Ray Charles and Nina Simone are better known as popular singers than as pianists. Do you ever feel like your own singing gets so much attention that the piano playing takes a back seat?**

No, because I feel like I'm not nearly so good as a piano player that it needs to take the front seat. I'm nowhere near as great a singer as they are, either, but I'm definitely nowhere near the level of piano player that they are. I do think I accompany myself well, and I enjoy the little thing I've grown into. I think it's my own style—influenced, of course, by a lot of other people. I'm really messy, and sometimes I hit wrong notes, but I'm happy with what I do. I'm definitely not a piano player's piano player, though!

**You have a background in jazz improvisation. When you're playing live, how do you balance between improvising and playing the songs audiences expect to hear?**

It's really hard, actually. My whole band comes from that school of playing jazz gigs, playing different stuff every night. And it's kind of weird having to play the same stuff every show, especially when you get into singles, which you really do have to play every night even though you're sick of them. But it's okay—we always throw in some new stuff for ourselves. Some new songs we wrote, and some cover tunes. We're on the lookout for more cover songs, actually, because we've exhausted the ones we used all last year! They'll always be great songs, and we still love them, but you've just got to have something different.

**You really have a gift for making familiar songs sound new and surprising. What's your philosophy of interpreting other people's music?**

The one thing about covering songs is that it has to feel honest while you're doing it. If it doesn't feel honest, then it's going to come off as contrived, especially with songs that people know.

With the more obscure songs, it's easier to just do them however they work, and however they feel natural. But with a really popular song, you don't want to change it too much—you want to respect the person who did it, or the person who wrote it. And I hope I do that. I really do respect these songs, otherwise I wouldn't sing them! So hopefully people feel like I'm not screwing them up. I've found that if I just feel it, and it feels good, then we're playing it in the most honest way we can. Hopefully people hear it that way too.

**What stylistic changes do you make as a pianist when you're playing with a group versus playing solo?**

Man, my solo chops have gone downhill, because I haven't done it in so long! But I used to play solo at a restaurant every week—that's kind of how I learned to play and sing at the same time, coordination-wise. When I'm playing solo, I play lots of chords and lots of bass notes. When I play with the band, I don't want it to sound too piano-heavy, so I usually let the guitars and the rest of the band take over the rhythm and the support parts, and I just play little fills. Unless it's a blues song, in which case I play more chords.

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**When you amplify a piano in a theater or an auditorium, it's hard to make it sound like an acoustic instrument.”**

**Having played and recorded so much in the last year and a half, what have you learned about getting good piano sounds in concert?**

I don't really know much about engineering, but I do know when it doesn't sound right. Usually the biggest problem is getting the piano to sound warm. When you amplify a piano in a theater or an auditorium, it's hard to make it sound like an acoustic instrument. But they've done a really good job for this tour. We're traveling with our own piano for the first time, so the sound will be the same every night. And in the studio, I've got a great engineer, Jay Newland, who knows what I like. It's just a matter of making the piano sound like what it is.

**What's your ideal piano?**

I like warm pianos more than bright-sounding ones. I find bright ones harder to play—I don't want to touch them, because they're so harsh-sounding. I like dark, warm pianos that sound good! As far as action, I don't like it too loose, but I don't like it too hard—pretty much in the middle. [Laughs.] This sounds like a dirty conversation!

**You're touring with a Yamaha piano. What's special about Yamahas?**

Yamahas are great. They're so reliable. I've played Yamaha pianos my whole life. Now that I've been touring so much, and I've played so many different pianos, I've found that the Yamahas are by far the most consistent and good-sounding pianos. They sometimes have a reputation for being bright, but Yamaha also makes a lot of darker sounding ones. Anyway, some of my favorite pianos I played on tour last year were Yamahas.

At home, I rented a Yamaha upright for four years—I probably paid for it four times over, actually! I finally bought it last year. It's

pretty warm sounding, but kind of funky too, which is nice. And then I've got this Yamaha grand for the new tour. I can't believe I get to tour with this piano! I think I'm also getting a Yamaha grand for myself next year.

**Tell us about your band.**

I met Adam Levy, who's an amazing guitar player, the first night I moved to New York. We were doing jazz gigs, and I needed a bass player, so he gave me Lee Alexander's number. I sort of went through this whole transition with Lee, actually, where we started playing with Jesse Harris, and we started writing songs together. Lee's become this great songwriter—I'm really proud of him. He's like my partner, pretty much. Through Adam and Lee I met Andy Borger, who's a beautiful drummer. And Kevin Breit is a guitar player I've listened to for a long time—he played on my last record, and now he's also on the road with us. He's the glue, and he basically can play anything with a tuning peg. Then Daru Oda sings backup. She was tour-managing us last year, but she sings so great that now she's joined the band.

**With all the changes in your life over the last two years, has anything changed in the way you think about music?**

I think I'm the same musician I was before all this happened. If anything, the way it's changed how I think about music is that I feel a little more limited about what I can do in shows right now. But as soon as the next album comes out, and we have more material, I think I'll feel a lot less that way. My audience has already been pretty receptive to new material in the past, so I don't really feel that limited. But it's kind of scary sometimes, all these changes.

**When will we hear the next record?**

It's about one-half recorded. It's probably coming out in February 2004. It's pretty cool so far. Again, it's a mix of originals and covers. It's still a band sort of record. But we're not even jazz anymore—everything has a backbeat, and we sound like a '70s soft-rock band or something! [Laughs.] Okay, I don't want to be labeled as that, but I really do like this record a lot!

