



HORN IS WHERE THE HEART IS MINDI ABAIR

"I GOT GOOD ADVICE EARLY ON from Joe Viola, my saxophone teacher," says Mindi Abair. "He said, 'Look, there's already a David Sanborn. There's already a Wayne Shorter. There's already a Cannonball Adderley. Your only chance for success is being you.'"

Consider it a lesson learned. After graduating from Boston's Berklee College of Music with a Woodwind Performance degree, Abair moved to Los Angeles and forged her career with a warm, accessible style that lets her move freely between the pop and jazz worlds. She's toured with Josh Groban, the Backstreet Boys, Duran Duran, and other mainstream acts. Meanwhile, her albums as a bandleader routinely top the Billboard Contemporary Jazz charts.

If anything, Abair's departures from jazz norms have heightened her successes. She's not just an instrumental soloist—she alternates between sax lines and silky vocalizing. And despite her straight-ahead jazz pedigree, her compositions often rely on pop and rock instrumentation and harmonies.

"I've never made records to fit into what's hip at the moment," Mindi says. "I've always made records that are where my heart is."

Judging by Abair's latest release, *Mindi Abair in Hi-Fi Stereo*, Mindi's heart is in a fun, down-to-earth place. While some of her previous records feature manicured arrangements and fastidious overdubs, this one has a more relaxed, live-in-the-studio vibe.

"I wanted this to be a more organic project," she says. "I was looking back towards the old '60s records by Ramsey Louis, Junior Walker, and King Curtis. They didn't have a lot of 'production'—just the vibe of a bunch of guys having a great time playing. I don't know if it was the hip thing to make an album inspired by that era of music, but it's what was in my heart."

“IT’S A TRAVESTY HOW SO MANY SCHOOL BAND PROGRAMS ARE BEING CUT THESE DAYS. KIDS NEED THAT OUTLET.”

Abair grew up in a musical family in St. Petersburg, FL—her dad was a sax player, and her grandmother sang opera. “I was a Top 40 kid,” she recalls. “I really didn’t know what jazz was. I was listening to Earth, Wind & Fire, James Brown, the Police, the Stones, the Doobie Brothers, and Supertramp, but if you play the saxophone for any length of time, you’ve got to get into jazz or you’re just not paying attention.”



Her initial jazz passions were David Sanborn and the Yellowjackets. “When I heard David Sanborn screaming on saxophone over the pop rhythms I knew from the radio, I realized the saxophone could rock,” Mindi remembers. “Same with the Yellowjackets when Mark Russo was out front wailing. And after that, I wanted to learn about the guys that they listened to.”

That curiosity inspired a passion for such sax giants as Wayne Shorter and John Coltrane. “I was searching for tone,” says Abair. “Sound was the number-one thing for me. That’s why I loved Cannonball Adderley and Phil Woods. I never aspired to be the fastest, most technical player—I loved the people who could play a couple notes that make you cry.”

Abair’s chief horns are alto and soprano. “I’ve never been a tenor or bari player,” she says. “Up until this past record, I played about 50-50 alto and soprano. I especially like using soprano on songs I sing, because I think it complements my voice.” But for the new disc, Mindi plays alto only. “When I started writing this time,” she says, “I kept coming up with gutsier, funkier things that lent themselves to alto more than soprano.”

Whichever one she’s playing, Abair prefers Yamaha horns. “My 62R curve-neck soprano is just beautiful,” she says. “I’ve had it since I was 18, and it means so much to me. It’s been through a lot of action, but now Yamaha is overhauling it. It’ll be nice to see it shined up to its original luster!”

Abair’s alto is much newer. “Last year,” she says, “I tried out a Yamaha Custom Z, because everyone had been buzzing about them. I thought my old alto sounded pretty great, but the new Yamaha had a bigger sound, and the tuning scale was just perfect. That’s the horn you hear on every song on my new record.”

When she’s not gigging or recording, Abair pursues another passion: promoting music education as an ambassador for the GRAMMY® Foundation and Campbell’s Labels for Education program.

“I only had a handful of private lessons as a kid,” says Mindi. “I learned everything from being in band class. It’s a travesty how so many school band programs are being cut these days. Kids need that outlet—not only if they’re thinking of becoming professional musicians. I learned so many things that I didn’t learn in reading or math class. I learned discipline. I learned that practice makes you better. I learned teamwork. Integrity. Respect. That’s amazing stuff for a kid to learn! So I want to do whatever I can to get the word out.”

