

KACEY JONES / BIOGRAPHY

*"It's true I'm a fool and a dreamer
I'll do what a dreamer must do
I'll dream long enough, and I may just be fool enough
To see my dream come true ..."*
-- Mickey Newbury, "Song of Sorrow"

The seed for this extraordinary album, ***Kacey Jones Sings Mickey Newbury***, was planted one day in Nashville, 26 years ago ...

Intro

Kacey was on her first visit to Music City, an up-and-comer from the San Francisco Bay Area. She was still a few years away from making her splash as one of the great musical comediennes, founder and frontwoman of Ethel & the Shameless Hussies (MCA), creator of albums like *Men Are Some of My Favorite People* (Curb), and *Every Man I Love Is Either Married, Gay, or Dead* (IGO), profiled in *People* and *USA Today*, featured on CMT, GAC and *A Prairie Home Companion*, and touted as a cross between Jeff Foxworthy and Alanis Morissette.

But on this particular day she was a stranger in town, a work in progress, looking for something distinctive within herself as a singer and songwriter.

The real discovery began when she had finished her last vocal on a two-day recording session and someone asked a question that would change her life.

"He said, 'Would you like to meet Mickey Newbury?' I had no idea who he was talking about," Kacey says, "but something inside told me, 'Say yes!'"

She would learn soon enough about Newbury, already a legend among his peers, author of songs recorded by hundreds of artists, about whose work Kris Kristofferson would say "there are levels of mental landscape that can take you in some strange directions, past the edges of understanding ..."

For the moment, though, Kacey was in the dark as she made her way to the Acuff/Rose Studios, where Newbury was recording some solo tracks. "His voice carried me away immediately" she remembers. "It was so beautiful. He had a four-octave range, and he would sail into those high notes so effortlessly. And the songs...I'd never heard songs like his. I sat there and listened to him, mesmerized, for more than an hour."

It was the kind of experience that can inspire and discourage a young artist at the same time. And when Kacey muttered that she might as well pack up, head back to the Bay Area, and get a job in retail, Newbury overheard her, took her aside, and spent two more hours talking with her about songwriting. Almost every word he said stays with her to this day.

After that night, their paths separated. Kacey would move to Nashville in 1986; by that time Mickey had left and headed up to Oregon. They wouldn't speak again until 1997, when she was producing *Pearls in the Snow*, a tribute to Kinky Friedman, featuring Willie Nelson, Tom Waits, Dwight Yoakam, Lyle Lovett... It was a distinguished cast of participants, which is why Kacey also invited Mickey to take part.

“I called him in Oregon, and he asked, ‘Well, would I have to come to Nashville to do it?’ I told him he would, and he said, ‘You know, I’d love to, but I don’t think I’m feeling well enough right now.’ I could tell, even then, that he was hoarse and somewhat short of breath. I will always regret that I didn’t suggest to him that I fly out and record him there.”

This second conversation was their last. Mickey would cut two more albums but his health continued to decline until his death, from pulmonary fibrosis, in 2002. And in Nashville, Kacey found herself thinking about recording a collection of his songs, in part as a thank-you for what he had imparted to her back in 1980, partly as atonement for not making that trip to Oregon, but mainly because of her love for the music he had left behind.

In November ’02, just two months after Mickey had passed, Kacey appeared at a concert in his memory at the Frank Brown International Songwriters Festival in Perdido Key, Florida. After her set of Newbury songs, she left the stage and was on her way to the back of the room.

“That’s when this little hand reached out to me,” she says, “and I heard the sweetest voice say, ‘C’mon over here, darlin’. We need to talk.’ It was Mickey’s mother, Mamie, dressed in a red cowgirl hat, red cowgirl jacket, red cowgirl slacks, and white cowgirl boots...with diamonds on every finger. She was 82 years old at the time. I’ll bet she didn’t weigh more than ninety pounds soakin’ wet.”

Their friendship, which endures today, began with the conversation they shared that evening. And so did Kacey’s determination to bring her Newbury project to life.

Verse/Chorus

Mamie’s friend Susan Williamson got the ball rolling with an initial investment to cover recording expenses. Kacey began going through Mickey’s catalog, picking songs that she had been singing for years – “You’ve Always Got the Blues,” “Apples Dipped in Candy,” “Lovers,” “Remember the Good” – and discovering gems that had escaped her attention, mainly from his later albums, such as “Ramblin’ Blues,” from *Lulled by the Moonlight*, and “Lie to Me Darlin’” and “Some Memories Are Better Left Alone,” heard on *Stories from the Silver Moon Café*. Deciding on 14 titles for her project, she began recruiting musicians – guys from her band, studio players, people who had played and recorded with Mickey, and members of his family.

The one thing they had to have in common was a feeling for Newbury’s songs. “That’s why my bass player, Eddie Dunbar, is on the album, even though he wasn’t familiar with Mickey’s music when we first spoke about it,” Kacey says. “So I had him come over one night and played him some of Mickey’s recordings, including ‘What Will I Do (in the Dead of the Night).’ I looked over at one point and saw that he had tears running down his cheeks. And I said, ‘Yep, you’re the right guy for this job.’”

Other participants included Jimmy Nichols, who has played sessions with pretty much everybody in Nashville except Kacey. “I knew he was an extraordinary piano player,” she says, “with the Midas touch when it comes to putting string sounds together. And he was familiar with and admired Mickey’s writing.” She lined up Mark Dreyer and Brent Moyer, both of whom had also worked with Mickey, for guitar work – Brent also plays trumpet on “Apples Dipped in Candy” – and her longtime drummer, Paul Scholton, because “he’s a

close friend, and I knew he was a sensitive enough player to make the right choices about percussion for these songs.”

Perhaps the most poignant contributions were those of Toni Jolene Clay and Chip Davis, who sang on Mickey’s two final albums, and Laura Shayne Newbury, at age 20 his youngest daughter and a rising singer/songwriter. She whistles at the end of the opening cut, after which a moment of her father’s ethereal whistling fades in and flies, like a bird through the mist, to “Some Memories Are Better Left Alone.”

That first cut, by the way, “Song of Sorrow,” came late in the game, after Kacey had already determined what she thought were the 14 songs that would comprise the album. “When I stumbled across this song I knew I had to record it,” she says. “And I knew it had to be the first song because the very first lines are: ‘They call me a fool and a dreamer, tell me I’m wasting my time, how I will search for the rest of my life for a rainbow I never will find.’

“The fact is,” she continues, “some people out there may say, ‘Kacey Jones is a fool and a dreamer. She’s been doing comedy all these years, and now she’s making a U-turn.’ All I can say to that is, sometimes you have to let go of who you’ve become to make room for who you might be. I was compelled to do this project. It was not done ‘by chance’ rather, it was my destination. Mickey’s hand has been on it since the beginning. In fact, the credits should probably read: ‘Produced by Kacey Jones and Mickey Newbury’ because his spirit has permeated this thing since day one.”

Coda

It’s true: You can feel Newbury’s magic, not only in Kacey’s empathetic, emotional vocals but also in the ghostly sounds – train whistles, thunder and rain, a parade band marching by – that flow like streams of memory from one song to the next, in the fashion that Newbury himself pioneered. Taken together, these elements – the format, the performance, and the incomparable material – turn *Kacey Jones Sings Mickey Newbury* into something more than a great album.

It is, in fact, Kacey’s gift back to Mickey, for that night in Nashville, for passing along a bit of the flame ...

*“Goodnight, my love, goodnight
May all your dreams come true
And may God be with you
Goodnight, my love, goodnight”
--Mickey Newbury, “Goodnight”*

KACEY JONES

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