

SOPHIE MILMAN

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Photography SUBMITTED

So Much Accomplished...So Much More To Come

JUST 24 YEARS old, Canadian vocalist Sophie Milman has already seen and done more than most people twice her age.

One of jazz's most rapidly ascending stars, Milman, who performs at the Lyric Theatre on March 1, broke onto the music scene like a firestorm four years ago with the release of her self-titled CD. The debut album was well received by jazz aficionados and critics alike, quickly reaching the Billboard Top 5 in Canada and Top 15 in the United States. Almost overnight, Milman's signature rich tone and teasingly light vibrato began drawing instant comparisons to some of the genre's most legendary greats. The immediate notoriety also helped launch a rigorous international touring schedule for the young sensation, of which she routinely sells out headlined shows in Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Japan and throughout Europe.

In short, it's been a three-year whirlwind. And, with the release of her much-anticipated second studio album, "Make Someone Happy," the time has finally come for the chanteuse to reflect upon it all.

"I've grown a lot the last few years, both personally and professionally, having experienced a number of new trials and tribulations," she says. "I'm a lot closer now to understanding what it means to be a singer – for me. When I recorded my first album, I was simply a young girl with a nice voice singing her favorite songs. That's not a bad thing, but it's not what I wanted. On my new album, I've chosen songs that are more personal and connect more intensely on an emotional level to where I am now."

Milman's new approach may very well have been sound aesthetically, but it was not without risk. In addition to featuring several traditional jazz classics, the new album includes a number of covers that were not originally recorded as jazz arrangements, a clear reflection of Milman's eclectic approach to music.

"I love all kinds of music, but jazz has always held a special place in my heart."

For someone barely into her mid-twenties, this might sound a bit odd. But believe it or not, there's not even a touch of jazz snobbery here. You see, Milman acquired her jazz palate in the most unusual of places – the former Soviet Union.

"I was born in the Ural Mountains, and my father was part of an underground culture that craved Western culture, especially music and literature. Of course, this was taboo to say the least. Once he stayed up all night to read a smuggled copy of Mario Puzo's 'The Godfather' so he could pass it on to someone else the next day. But Dad's true love was jazz, and he amassed a large collection of jazz records that included most of the greats... Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and many others. I literally grew up listening to those records and still cry when I hear them."

Sentimentalities aside, not all of Milman's memories of the Motherland are positive.

"I'm Jewish, and growing up in Russia I never felt at home. Instinctively, I always knew we were different and that we weren't liked, but didn't know why. This was very confusing, and the sense of being an outsider looking in stayed with me until well into my teen-

age years."

The Milmans' desire to "get to the West" reached a fever pitch following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and shortly thereafter the family arrived in Israel.

"At first it was very traumatic. Here I was 7 years old, in a strange land, not knowing a word of the language. But it all turned out for the best, despite our financial difficulties in the beginning, because it was in Israel where I learned what being Jewish really meant. Not that anyone in our family is really very religious, but for the first time I had a sense of identity. I felt like I belonged."

In Israel, there was unlimited access to American culture, and the Milmans' vinyl collection grew leaps and bounds. But nine years later, Milman found herself cast into another strange land.

"Seeking greater economic opportunity, we immigrated to Canada. I felt alienated all over again."

In retrospect, Milman would be the first to tell you that her wide range of experiences have given her an insight and emotional maturity far beyond her years.

"People are always asking me how I can express so many different emotions in my work. Well, I can relate to all of them."

She has also developed an intense love of her newfound country.

"I'm a superpatriot and very proud of the goodness that Canada represents. I don't think I could have had the career I've had anywhere else."

As for her favorite singers, Milman cites Carmen McCrae as "my greatest influence," but acknowledges Stevie Wonder as "my favorite artist of all time." Fittingly, Milman includes her own arrangement of Wonder's 1980 composition "Rocket Love" as a personal tribute on the new CD.

Milman also pays a salutation to another one of her musical idols, fellow Canadian Randy Bachman.

"The Guess Who had some of the most interesting songs of their era, a totally unique style. So, we went out on a limb and e-mailed Randy Bachman to play on 'Undun.' Miraculously, he said yes... It was one of my coolest musical experiences yet."

Incredibly, Milman, who speaks four languages fluently, continues to balance her demanding musical career while pursuing a business degree at the University of Toronto.

"I'm really a giant nerd at heart and only became a 'girly girl' in recent years because my career demanded it. But in all seriousness, when I'm not singing, I'm extremely logical and analytical. I'd rather read a book any day than go to a photoshoot," she says.

As for how she handles all the numerous accolades, Milman had this to say: "It's nice to be compared to some of the greats, to have my work described as Ella-esque or Billie-esque, but it's more important for me to feel that I have a voice of my own... that I have something unique to contribute."

In this sense, perhaps the words of renowned *LA Times* critic Don Heckman provide the greatest compliment of all:

"She's not the next Ella or Sarah, but the first Sophie Milman... she is one of a kind."

