

## INTERVIEW

# Amanda Carr

*Amanda Carr is a Boston-based vocalist and pianist. She has extensive experience doing TV and radio commercials, and she operates a recording studio in the Boston area. She frequently featured vocalist with the Artie Shaw Orchestra and Harry James Band. Her fourth album is entitled Soon. Visit Amanda at her website: [www.originalmusic.com](http://www.originalmusic.com)*

Interview by Jamie Cosnowsky  
Photo by Brian Malloy

**JJ:** Your latest recording, *Soon* (2007), has received rave industry reviews and led legendary jazz writer, Nat Hentoff, to write an article about you in *The Wall Street Journal*. Please talk about the development of the project and how Hentoff's words changed your world.

**AC:** *Soon* was the second recording project with our band as a collective musical endeavor. Coming off a good debut with *Tender Trap* in 2005, we felt our working together on a regular basis allowed us to develop our sound and synergy and recording *Soon* was a natural progression. With the usual promo regime, I mailed it to a somewhat generic list of reviewers, and Nat was on that roster. You cross your fingers that you get any kind of attention and positive reviews from any reputable publication or reviewer. About a week later, my phone rang and it was Nat Hentoff, raving about the CD and my singing, and him thanking me for such a wonderful record. At first, the phone call didn't register... It was a little surreal. But it was pretty evident that he got what we were trying to achieve with the music. He said he appreciated my vocal approach as being integrated with the rest of the band and not merely a platform to showcase vocal ability. He was very interested in me, my past CD's, my background and asked for bios on the band members along with a personal retrospective from me. He definitely was poking me with a stick to see if I was soft in the middle before he was about to write about me in the *WSJ*. I couldn't have imagined a better story when I finally saw what he wrote. How do you thank someone for that? The article was far reaching and, even though it's virtually impossible to measure the ripple effect, there was a definite spike in sales, Amazon being the most impacted. I guess "the word of Nat" has helped me to think of myself in terms of being a jazz singer as opposed to just a singer...something I still have trouble integrating because I hold the genre in such high regard. I also have trouble relying on the article for self-promotion because it somehow feels disingenuous to use it that way. But, undeniably, it's provided me with global

exposure and some associations that I most likely wouldn't otherwise have at this point. It's sewed me into the fabric of the music consciousness with a highly respected endorsement. No matter what happens in my career, I'll be feeling the effects of this for years to come. It's the gift that keeps on giving.

**JJ:** Can you talk about how your parents—who are themselves musicians—influenced your direction to pursue music as a career?

**AC:** Like most kids, I pretty much took it for granted what my parents did for a living. I didn't really give it much thought that they were musicians except that it was a natural thing for me to take piano lessons very young and then begin singing in my early teens and, of course, start gigging right away. It really felt seamless and natural...Even though it was around me growing up, I didn't have any interest in jazz or big band. I was a rock/pop keyboard player/singer for a number of years because that was the music I grew up listening to in the 70's & 80's. Then after playing the club scene through the early 80's, I left the business to pursue other types of work and support my fiancée's music career. He was a touring musician with major pop acts. It wasn't until I returned back to Boston from L.A. in the early 90's that I began filling in on my Mom's big band gigs and really became interested in the American Songbook. I also began to

appreciate the emerging legacy of Boston jazz history and the part my parents have played in that. So as I was maturing, my appreciation for this music came of age, too. A variety of musical experiences and tastes inform my approach to singing standards, but I can specifically say I draw upon my mother singing lyrics clearly and my father being able to play well in a section. here's a lot of other influences from my parents as musicians that come into play, and it's hard to identify them specifically as cause and effect, but having a little pedigree gives you an identity of sorts, a feeling of belonging and the benefit of perspective.

**JJ:** Who are some of the influential artists with whom you have performed who have created different demands on and challenges to your musical perspectives, life understandings, and other



wise helped you grow? How have they done so?

**AC:** About six years ago, I made a commitment to learn to sing better and grow as a musician and performer in this genre. Up until then, I was basically winging it on raw talent and realized that, unless I made this commitment to get better and understand the music more, I was destined to never be more. So, I sought out drummer/band leader Kenny Hadley for whom I had and have great respect. Maybe it was intuition, but I approached him and came right out and said, "I need a mentor in this business." It was a designation he took quite seriously and, for the most part, he's taught me how to develop my jazz singing. He had the musical vision to pair my voice with guitar and put me with the rhythm section of his big band along with Arnie Krakowsky, who plays sax. So, in with being a guiding force, he took a leadership role in the production of the record projects. I'm an excellent student and knew to take advantage of this mentorship because it's the opportunity of a lifetime, and most successful people will tell you that they couldn't have done it without some kind of mentoring along the way. There've been other influential people, but Kenny has made the greatest impact in regard to how I've emerged as an artist. The influence he's had on me has certainly been profound as I don't believe I would've had the courage and confidence to explore and develop my talent in this genre without his support and encouragement. The fact I can even use the word "career" is a testament to his mentoring. I think one way to thank people like this is to always exceed their expectations.

**JJ:** One of the ways artists in jazz have, in large part, developed their own styles and or reputations, has been to apprentice—to play in the groups lead by high-profile, established jazz artists for extended periods of time. Could you comment on how your own independent path has helped or hindered your music and opportunity in light of the aforementioned realities?

**AC:** Well, I have been a working musician for so many years that there really hasn't been one band situation or leader that's influenced me in great measure, aside from recently. I work in so many different musical situations. I'm a hired gun to the extent that I take on a variety of work as it comes my way. I honestly try to learn something from every situation and every single gig that I do and I try to work on some aspect of my singing and performing within every framework, good or not so good. It's about making the most of the music at hand. I also try to listen to things that older players impart because they have a lot to say about the business and I understand how much you learn by hanging in there for decades. Survival tools are imperative. The Boston area is blessed with great jazz players so with all the "jazz" gigs I've done over the last fourteen or so years, I've cut my teeth with some great accompaniment. It's been about making the most of the gig, the situation and the discipline that comes with respecting it all...All this has been crucial

in maintaining my work ethic in my own career growth. So I guess it's the collective experience that's been the most influential.

**JJ:** You have international distribution in over a dozen countries, and your CD, *Soon*, has made it to #32 on Amazon.com, as well as being a best seller on iTunes, and CDBaby. What are some of the challenges you face and expect to face as an independent artist, and how do you make them work for you?

**AC:** Being independent, you have to learn to be multi-faceted in running your business. First you have to think of it as a business. Aside from "being" the product, you have to understand about promoting and moving the product. You need, at least, a cursory knowledge of production, marketing, strategy, goal setting, budgeting, logistics, graphic design, marketing, licensing, etc, etc. All this while applying basic common sense. The list is definitely long. But even if you end up being able to delegate any of these tasks, you still have to understand their application in order to delegate them successfully. So my challenge is to multi-task to this extent while still moving the whole ball of wax forward and, ultimately, still focus on my craft. It's definitely a lot, and nobody would blame anybody for waving the white flag and bailing out. With the music industry turning this ball back over to the individual artist to do the things that used to be done by record labels and management, the indie artist has to now somehow navigate through the industry jungle with only the tools on their back, so to speak. There's a lot of practical "how to" guides that have helped me figure things out along the way and they're all very accessible. I think having realistic expectations and patience has helped me to stay focused and trust that if I stay the course, my career will continue to grow in a way that will have me doing less of the administrative and more of the actual art form. In the case of some greater entity approaching me and offering some kind of desirable deal, I think that, in essence, good business people want to do business with other good business people. I try to present myself as a "package" with good product, sales and performance. If this "deal" never happens, I'm still left with good product, sales and performing...still not a bad place to be by any means. It's a brick-by-brick process with no shortcuts. This isn't even touching on developing a fan-base. The bottom line is you have to enjoy what you do because wherever you're at is where you may end up.

**JJ:** Self-consciousness can be the enemy of creativity. If you've experienced that kind of performance anxiety or nervousness in your career, what helped you or how did you overcome that?

**AC:** I recently heard a great line, "Excellence is the enemy of Good." Sometimes we're our own worst enemy and harshest critic, and I think I fall into that category. Generally, the smaller the audience, the more exposed you are. It's easy to sing for thousands, but the small audiences are

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where you're the most vulnerable and under a microscope. So, I don't usually worry about singing well or being able to perform the material as much as I get nervous about the actual performance. I never want to "phone it in" and want to bat a thousand every time I perform in terms of how well my audience has become a part of the experience and feels they got what they came for. I don't have a prepared "schtik" so my performances are spontaneous, and I'm always concerned about being able to make that connection. So, the more you perform in specific situations the less anxiety there is for that situation. But that's just a part of growth. Getting too comfortable presents its own set of challenges. You don't want to separate yourself too far from the moment or even your own vulnerability because then you're just going through the motions. Coming from my background, I'm always concerned about delivering the goods and doing what the job requires. It's a working-man mentality that I most likely will never lose.

**JJ:** In addition to your involvement in music, what other activities help provide balance in your life?

**AC:** Being a creative person, I'm victim to having too many interests and wanting to be involved in all of them. I am on the board of directors for a busy animal shelter; I'm on the conservation commission of my town and somehow find myself volunteering for way too many causes. But working with animals is very grounding for me. I have to stay pretty healthy and in shape to keep my schedule, so I'm prone to physical activity being the center of my hobbies like yoga, skiing, swimming, skating, biking, etc. But because my instrument is inside my body, I have to take exceptional care of myself: Eat well and get enough rest or my voice won't work. So, balance and staying centered is really important to the longevity of anything and everything I want to continue to do. In some aspects, I'm dull as dirt because it seems I just can't do anything fun anymore or it will affect my voice. Maybe that's what they call "being a slave to your art."

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"Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are."

- John Wooden