

On the Record with Andrea Superstein - Vue Weekly



A background in musical theatre, a penchant for bands like Radiohead and extensive jazz vocal-training coalesce on Andrea Superstein's sophomore album, *What Goes On*. Produced by Les Cooper, the album moves through original compositions that span a plethora of jazz influences as well as reimagined covers of songs like Bananarama's "Venus" and Radiohead's "Karma Police." Prior to her show in Edmonton, Superstein answered a few questions about the album via email.

Vue Weekly: How long did it take to make *What Goes On* from the initial songwriting through to the end of the recording?

Andrea Superstein: It's been a work in progress. The original songs were composed first. I like to sit with songs for a while before I record them, to make sure they feel right. I knew which standards and pop tunes I wanted to include and had a rough idea of what I was hoping for in terms of arrangements. When I went to Toronto the first time in August 2013, we reworked about four of those arrangements and recorded them along with two of the originals. What was meant to be a demo turned into an LP because I was so thrilled with the results. So I flew back to Toronto in October to work on the second

half. It took a few more months to mix and master. There was lots of communication back and forth between Les (Cooper) and I (Toronto to Vancouver) about the mixes. We wanted to make sure we got it just right, so we took our time. And then I had a baby, so we waited to release the record at a time when I could start touring again. That brings us to now. So in short, it took about two-and-a-half years for this project.

VW: When you were writing the songs, did you come at them a particular way? Lyrics first? Music first?

AS: Each song is different. Sometimes the melody comes to me first, sometimes a particular lyric, that either becomes the opening line or the chorus. Sometimes it's a groove. And things come to me at very random times. I don't often sit down and say, "OK, now I'm going to write a song." It's more organic: long walks, driving, listening to the radio. It usually starts as a fragment of an idea. Thank god for the voice recorder on my phone—I've got lots of gems stored on that thing. Then, when I have some quiet time, I listen to those fragments and develop it from there. It's a lengthy process, but it gives me some time to breathe into the work and think about what works and what doesn't.

VW: Where did the lyrics begin for you and what did you want to express with them?

AS: "Just One Time" is inspired by a particular event: a first date I went on. I was a bit confused at the end of the night if he was into me or not. I thought it would be interesting to write a song about it, from the female perspective saying, "Hey, it's OK to kiss me at the end of the night. I give you permission."

"What Goes On" is definitely a nod to traditional jazz in the melody but also in the form of the lyrics. It's about overcoming heartbreak and recognizing your self worth. I guess that's a universal theme regardless of the decade, but I think the lyrics speak to empowerment and standing up for yourself in matters of the heart. I think it's pretty easy to write about love. What I find interesting is to write about it from more nuanced, less overt angles.

VW: What were the recording sessions like for this album? Is this the kind of thing you recorded live or did you piece it together one track at a time? Why?

AS: They were super fun! We recorded the piano, bass, guitar, drums and vocals live off the floor but in isolation booths so we could rerecord certain parts if need be. We found that wasn't really necessary with most of the songs though. The supporting tracks were done later, like the clarinet in "What Goes On" and the percussion in "I Lost My Baby."

I like recording this way, with everyone in the room. Music is a collective activity and there's something to be said for the energy that's created when recording together. It's as much about the space that's created between the players as it is about the sounds they make. So if the players aren't together, you end up missing an element of magic. To me, this experience was pretty magical.

VW: Were there any other songs written that were left off the album?

AS: Yes. They may get a makeover and reappear at a later date.

VW: How did you decide which songs to include on the album? Did you have an idea of what you

wanted *What Goes On* to be when you started, or did the finished shape emerge as the writing and recording went along?

AS: This project definitely changed shape throughout the process. I had an idea of what I wanted it to be before we started but it ended up being something quite different. That's the beauty of collaboration: you think you know where things are going but then something beautiful happens and you end up with something beyond your wildest imagination.

VW: You worked with Les Cooper to produce the album. What made him a good fit, and what did he bring to the process?

AS: Where do I begin? Les is a champion! He has won Junos for a reason. I think most importantly, Les is an intuitive listener. He understood my desire to work outside of the jazz box while still being inside it. So, for example, he suggested a saw solo on "After You've Gone." It encompassed everything I was trying to say. It was just perfect!

VW: There's a couple of interesting covers on the album, including Radiohead's "Karma Police." Why did you choose these songs, and what did you want to bring to them?

AS: I *love* Karma Police. I love all the bands and songs we cover on this record. They have such a deep meaning for me. They make me feel something, and that's what makes me want to cover them. I think it's important that if you're going to cover a song, you make it your own while still respecting the original. So for "Karma Police," we changed the time signature and we "spaced" it out. But I think the integrity of the song remains intact so you still know what song you're listening to.

Sat, Nov 14 (8 pm)

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