

To boldly go...

Piers Ford meets up with outrageously funny and stunningly talented stand-up comedian and jazz singer, Lea Delaria

Give Lea DeLaria a boundary and she'll just punch a hole in it and charge through. It's what she's always done: using her intelligent, quick-fire wit to lasso righteous conservatives and the painfully politically correct alike before hauling them in for devastating comic scrutiny in her acclaimed gay stand-up act; or seducing her audiences with a voice that has been called 'one of the most beautiful' in the notoriously exacting world of jazz.

The term 'portfolio career' might have been coined for her. Alongside her work as a stand-up and singer, DeLaria has also worked successfully on Broadway, in films and as a television actor. To her delight, she is currently playing two characters, a female psychic and a male professor who has cracked time travel, in the American soap *One Life to Live*. And yes, they do have scenes together.

But you get the sense that amid so much variety, it's the music that really matters. And DeLaria's new album *The Live Smoke Sessions* – her third for Warners – is a showcase for a musicality that has always been steeped in jazz. She has taken a set of standards and reinvented them with a boldness that is often breathtaking: taking the listener into the intimate arena of one of New York's most famous jazz clubs; and letting a voice to which the word 'warm' hardly does justice swing freely through some audacious arrangements.

'Smoke is my favourite jazz club in New York City,' she says. 'It's not a tourist trap, as most of the jazz clubs in the world have become. It is totally committed to the music. They still do a late-night set, so when the cats are done at Bird Land or wherever, they will come down to Smoke. You never know who's going to walk in. Many times I've had my breath taken away because George Benson is sitting there, or Herbie Hancock. Not that many singers get to perform there, it's more of an instrumental place. So when they let a singer perform, they are thinking of them as a musician. I'm so honoured that they said, "Yes, please come and record your album here." And the acoustics are great.'

It was her stand-up routine that initially brought her to public attention. DeLaria was the first openly gay comic to appear on national television back home in the States, and her scorching, funny act broke new ground for British audiences when she started appearing here in the early 1990s. But she is quick to point out that music was always an important ingredient in her stage appearances.

'Singing was the first thing I did, even as child,' she says. Born in 1958, she grew up the daughter of a jazz musician in Belleville, Illinois, listening to the great instrumentalists of the age – Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Zoot Sims and Gerry Mulligan – before turning to vocalists when she could afford to buy her own records. 'Then it was tons of Ella Fitzgerald, Betty Carter, Mel Tormé, Chet Baker. And of course Billie Holiday and Judy Garland, although you listen to them for different reasons. Much as I love Billie Holiday – and she is a jazz singer – you listen to her more for the pure soul and empathy of the singing. And you listen to Judy for the same reason you listen to Sammy Davis Jr. They are fantastic musicians and great, swinging singers, but there's a show business to what they do that can't be denied and must be respected.' DeLaria is herself a one-woman melting pot of serious musicianship and showbiz. The integrity of the music is incredibly

important to her, she says, but so is what happens between the songs, and the desire to give a good show on stage is paramount.

It's taken her a little while to acknowledge the quality of her own craft as a jazz singer. 'There's a language to jazz and the numbers, structures and harmonics are all built into it. They can be applied to anything; but whether or not it's the right song to apply it to is another question,' she says. 'Do I have a talent? It seems to be. If you'd asked me five years ago, I don't know whether I'd have said that. But having put out three records and worked with the people I've worked with, I am ready to say that yes, I do.'

'I'm also very lucky in that really talented people want to work with me, so whatever I might be weak in, they fill in. I had a great creative team on my first two studio records – Gil Goldstein arranged and Matt Pierson produced – and the three of us work well together. It's like a three-way honey! But it's gotta work together. If you're gonna do a ménage à trois, it's no fun if one person's doing all the work. We fill in each other's corners.'

“It's not about betraying anyone. It's about me evolving as an artist and performer. And if I can talk to people in the mainstream – like an 80-year old cat who comes to a jazz show, sees me in my suit wailing out a great bebop tune and goes and buys my record – that's saying something.”

Lea DeLaria

DeLaria's way with a standard – the new album includes stirring versions of 'Down With Love', 'Night and Day' and a particularly angry 'Miss Otis Regrets' ('Of course she regrets but she is full of rage with her man, Wouldn't you be?' demands DeLaria) – is fascinating. But equally intriguing is her knack for spotting the swing potential in less obvious places. She has earned plaudits for her treatment of Blondie's 'Call Me' and Green Day's 'Longview', as well as Sondheim's 'Ballad of Sweeney Todd'. It was the latter, performed at a charity gala in the composer's honour, that helped her land her record deal and featured large on her debut album, *Play it Cool* in 2000.

'If you understand JAZZ, you can hear that "Call Me" swings already,' says DeLaria. 'Just slow it down. It's already got a 1-4-5 set-up, which is a swing form. Then it's just a matter of putting in the syncopation. It's just knowing that it's there and knowing how to do it. Deborah Harry sent me a nice note about it. She put out a jazz record and said she wished she'd thought of "Call Me" for that. And I got a nice compliment from Green Day, too.'

She also got the seal of approval from Sondheim himself – a man not known for appreciating any liberties taken with his music. 'He

is a great hero of mine, and he came backstage after the show at Carnegie Hall in that typical, muttering, Stephen way, and came up to me, gave me a fantastic hug and told me how much he liked "Sweeney Todd"; she recalls. "He was so lovely, and said I was an interesting performer because when I'm being funny, I forget that I can sing, and when I'm singing I forget that I'm funny. Coming from him, I thought that was a great compliment."

As you might expect, Sondheim nailed DeLaria's multi-faceted stage persona in a few well-chosen words. Some die-hard lesbian and gay fans have taken her detour into music amiss, assuming that it means less comedy and a general selling-out to the broader demands of show-business. Not so, she says. And DeLaria has certainly done her bit for equality – as she points out, she has achieved her success without ever being in any closet, and talking to a purely gay audience has its limitations as far as changing minds is concerned. "Did I feel more emboldened by doing a swing version of "Sweeney Todd" or sitting on the White House steps in the early 1990s and saying that I liked the Clinton administration because we finally had a first lady we would ****? I'm not sure..." she ponders.

"They feed off each other. The reality is I've never been afraid to try anything new. A lot of lesbians are very upset with me right now because they don't think I'm doing enough comedy. But it's like, "Follow along with what I'm doing. Trust me – I'm funny between songs. I don't know how not to be. It's just that the main focus of the show now is not the comedy, it's the music. The rest of the world is in on that, and you should be too!" In some ways they seem to think I've betrayed them. I'm still up there in a suit. I don't change any pronouns. If the song is written to a woman, I sing it to a woman. If it's for a man, I sing it to a man. I don't mess with the lyrics. And I certainly am ridiculously gay during the show. Whether I'm at the Albert Hall or Pizza Express, if there's a cute girl in the front row, I'm on her!

"It's not about betraying anyone. It's about me evolving as an artist and performer. And if I can talk to people in the mainstream – like an 80-year old cat who comes to a jazz show, sees me in my suit wailing out a great bebop tune and goes and buys my record – that's saying something. And I don't have Tony Bennett doing a duet with me to make me accessible. I only have me!"

DeLaria does a monthly "Wall to Wall" gig at Pizza Express in Soho – she now divides her time between the UK and her homeland – showcasing the work of a different composer and giving it a new, specifically jazz, spin. The shows keep her sharp and give her a chance to share the stage with her singing peers. Clare Teal and Ian Shaw – her great friend, who also makes a guest appearance on the new album – have both shared the spotlight recently. In May, she was thrilled to see a Stevie Wonder evening packed with a young, gay crowd.

"That's unusual for Wall to Wall but they loved it," she says. "And these jazz interpretations, well it wasn't Stevie Wonder as they expected, but they were fun. Anyway, you can only hear so much Judy Garland and Melissa Etheridge. You've got to widen your horizons a little bit. And that's from someone who's been a Judy Garland fan forever!"

One of the standouts on the new album is "Puff", which DeLaria turns into a poke at the global success of the anti-smoking lobby, something which obviously pushes her anti-PC buttons! She quit years ago, but still allows herself the odd cigarette on special occasions. "I always used to worry about my voice," she explains. "But when I was at the Newport Jazz Festival, somebody offered me a drink and I said: "Oh no, never before I go on stage." Peter Walton said: "Lisa, you know how Sarah Vaughan used to warm up between sets? She used to have two whiskies, a cigarette and steak frites. That's just my way of saying

go on, have a glass of wine." So I've become more lax around these things. He played with her enough, so it must be true!"

In any case, DeLaria points out, abstention has never been easy in this neck of the music business, and the jazz world has always taken its toll. She baulks at the way the media uses the word 'responsibility' when imposing a view of expected behaviour on young singers like Amy Winehouse. "We work in an industry that goes after younger and younger people. Children will be children. I'm 50 and I'm still a child, I still catch myself doing it! We're in a medium that is excessive. You work late at night. It takes a long time to shake off the energy of the stage. You party and drink. And it's condoned. Nobody thinks twice about it. So if you're young or weak, or both, it's going to be hard to bypass all that."

"Responsibility is a big **** word," she says. "And I tend to find that if you're in a special interest or lifestyle group, it plays on you in a way that no singer wants: that you have a "responsibility" to behave in a certain way because you are a "role model" for children, or wannabe singers, or gay people. I just think that you have a responsibility to your art – which means that when you open your mouth to sing, a sound should come out. And if you have a voice like Amy Winehouse – and she is fantastic – I just hope that she and others like her can find a way through the excess!" ■

Lea DeLaria, *Live Smoke Sessions*, Warner Music, is out in September.
www.Delariadammit.com

