

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO MOLLY JOHNSON



Margaret Atwood once gave **Molly Johnson** advice on how to juggle being an artist while raising a family: wait until you can afford a nanny. And while Johnson has a nanny now, it certainly wasn't always the case. Thankfully that didn't stop the former child performer from devoting herself to the arts anyway; Johnson has gone on to earn a reputation as one of Canada's greatest voices. She is the youngest of a family of talents. Her brother Clark is an actor / director (*S.W.A.T.* , *Homicide: Life On The Streets*) and her sister Taborah appears regularly in CBC productions. In the 80's Johnson was part of the art / rock band *Alta Moda*, and the 90's saw her become lead singer of the Juno Award-winning *Infidels*.

In recent years she has switched gears - to jazz - starting over with this new genre playing gigs at venues such as the tiny back room of *The Cameron House*, but going on to perform for the likes of the late Princess Diana aboard the *Royal Yacht Britannia*. Now Johnson is still managing life with her sons and a husband she describes as 'Mr. Canada, metrosexual and just gay enough', while focusing on taking her career to the next level. She ended 2003 opening for none other than *Oscar Peterson* at *Roy Thompson Hall*, and followed that with trips to Paris to do media and promote her second solo album *Another Day* , which was released here in Canada in 2000 and is now enjoying brisk sales in France, with a single landing on their jazz charts.

I sat down for lunch with the down-to-earth Toronto legend late last year to discuss the slings and arrows of the outrageous fortunes that only come from being an artist in Canada.



Congratulations on the Oscar Peterson gig. How did that come about?



I called Roy Thompson Hall the day I saw it advertised in the paper and asked if they had an opening act booked. They hadn't, so I said, 'Do you think he wants one?' They didn't know, so I said, 'Can you call him and ask?' And they did and he said okay. It took twenty minutes.



Now that's the power of picking up a friggen phone and making things happen.



Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Make it happen. A lot of artists don't. Someone will go, 'Oh, so-and-so's got a great voice', and I'm like, 'Yeah? And?' There are a million great voices, but there's all of this other 'stuff' that really puts you there.



I find it fascinating that you just saw and ad and in twenty minutes had yourself booked.



Plus ten years of playing and Oscar knows who I am. If you want to be in the arts in this country you've got to be a self-starter, you've got to be pro-active. You always have to have a couple of balls in the air. Maybe that's what weeds a lot of people out, not having those skills innately. You must self-promote. But in a very Canadian way.



And the gig itself?



Oh my God. That was so nerve-wracking. Nerve-wracking! You know, Roy Thompson Hall is certainly not Massey Hall. It's not built for singers; it's built for orchestras and stuff. And it was a heavy audience. It was a heavy jazz – capital J – crowd, there for Oscar, right? So that's always a little rough for us pop singers (*laughs wryly*). And we only had five songs. But I'm making excuses. It was great and it was a treat to play there. I played there once before. I opened for someone but I can't remember who.



That's a nice place to reach: 'I've played Roy Thompson Hall but don't remember the details.'



(*Ponders.*) Yeah, that could be all the pot smoking in my formative years. (*Laughs.*) No short-term memory anymore!



So if your Oscar gig was nerve-wracking, how did you calm yourself down?



I allowed myself about two days before hand to be an idiot. To be flighty and nervous. Monday and Tuesday I was kind of wiry. By Wednesday I was starting to calm down. At a certain point with any show I just put it into the hands of the higher power. I got the dress, I got the van, I've done every possible thing I can do.



Were you happy with the way things turned out? Because in a marketing sense you were selling yourself to a whole new audience that night.



Yes. We sold lots of CDs that night and it was a really good audience for me to introduce myself to. It cost me about \$1200 to do that show, but money well-spent. People probably think I made twenty grand at that thing. I got paid five hundred bucks. For the whole band. Four of us on stage and one guy who had to be flown in from New York .



What you'll get off that gig is worth far more than \$500. There are other ways of being paid as an artist - you can't buy the push that night gave you.



That's another thing: you have to invest your own money into your career. When I started doing jingles about ten years ago I hated that it was so commercial. Then I realized: these jobs pay into an RSP and things I deserve. But my rule with the jingle thing was I had to take a good percentage of it and apply it back into my music. In simple ways, like my bills being paid in a more regular fashion than usual. Hence, I don't have to make a record just to pay my hydro bill.



This goes back years ago: I remember reading *NOW* and you were being interviewed. You were talking about being a known artist yet worried about paying your telephone bill. Do you remember that?



(Nods.) I'm on my way to pay the phone bill after we have lunch, actually. I remember June Callwood had a television show and a book called *National Treasures* . And I was in the book. And June called me to do her television show, but my clothes were all at the dry cleaner. That day I went in told my dry cleaner I was going on TV but couldn't afford the \$26 to get my clothes from him. So he not only gave me the dry cleaning, but a little bit of money. And later I paid him back. (Loudly into the tape recorder:) And his dry cleaning company is called *Sun King* . His name is Gordon . And they are on *Bathurst* . And they are fabulous.



What made you stop the rock and start the jazz?



Lots of things. We were a black rock group in Canada – right away big problems. Lenny Kravitz told me, In Living Colour told me, my record company told me ... I didn't listen for year's though, continued to bang my head against the wall. I think the big thing that ended Infidels was that I had a record deal with IRS Records that just went south. South. People just dropped the ball on it. Miles Copeland forgot to register the name of the band in America. We got a five-star review in *Rolling Stone* magazine and promptly got sued by every band with the word *infidel* in it. Which, by the way is way more than I ever thought. There was a whole complicated issue of publishing, which I wasn't able to do for years unless I wanted to make money for people I really didn't want to make money for. I couldn't get out of my contract and didn't have the money for lawyers. Many artists face that. George Michael, Michael Jackson. If you love a band and you suddenly don't hear them anymore you can pretty much guarantee they are sitting with a bunch of lawyers, sorting it out. It's a huge part of this business.



That's when you started Kumbaya.



My AIDS event. I had lots of contacts. A couple of friends who had died. The gay community nailed it. They suffered the loss first, they were the front line. They got their ducks in a row, they got organized. The message was getting to the community. But at the time I was playing universities, with a bunch of drunken students going, 'I'm not gay, and I'm not a hairdresser and I'm not at risk.' A lot of people in the gay community got mad when they found out I was saying AIDS was everyone's problem, not just a gay issue. Anyway I put together Kumbaya. I was part of a tight community of artists and it was very easy to pull them together for this and we raised just over \$1 million for people living with AIDS. I went to the North West Territories with Peter Gzowski on a literacy campaign, and was able to bring literature with me and talk to kids up there. Great things spun out of it, but what didn't spin off of it was the real solid force of the entertainment community. It just got to be too stupid. There's another side to these events too. You wonder, as you're standing onstage – not being paid - looking out into a sea of flowers and food and table cloths and lights and production: 'Hmm... am I the only one not getting paid, and how much is this event really making, and how much of the money raised is going where it needs to go?'



I always wonder that about the mega-fundraisers like Fashion Cares.



I didn't want to say that out loud. I'm concerned about those kinds of things too.



Even the Rolling Stones being paid for their SARS concert and called 'heroes': what?



The Stones could have taken a tax receipt and been done with it. Everybody got paid. There's 'charity' and then there's charity.



You've always been community-minded.



Sure. We in this entertainment business, aside from the lack of cash, have certain freedoms most of the world doesn't enjoy. You are your own boss. Doors and experiences open to you that aren't open to a lot of people. These are pretty nice things. I hate the term 'give back' – it's so overused, but that's what you do.



How will you avoid being in the wishy-washy 'adult contemporary' pigeon-hole?



I'm kind of in there a little bit. I'd rather be there than in the pop world right now. Frankly, it's a nightmare if you're a girl. You've got to be seven years old with a pierced belly button and have absolutely nothing to say. If you are between the ages of 16 and 48 you can't be in this business as women. Once you are fifty – Annie Lennox, Cher, Tina – you're clear. But ask Sheryl Crow how old she is. No one knows and that's because this is a stupid business that doesn't give women of a certain age group with respect. I found my audiences pretty darn good. Toronto is a tough crowd – there's a lot of choices when you want to do something on a given night in this city.



Speaking of tough crowds, what did you do back in the 90's when you looked out into your audience and saw Eartha Kitt, a little tipsy, in the front row drying her eyes?



Well that was (*ponders*) ... DISTRACTING! I didn't know she was going to be there. She came with Gino Empry, who I've known since I was a small child when he worked for the Mirvishes, as did I. I didn't know who she was right away. Didn't have that Catwoman suit on. She said to me 'You're everything we fought for.' And I live in that. I live in that history of what has gone before me and I think it shaped my attitude. I don't do a lot of 'woe me'. Just look back twenty years - whoever you are. We have come so far.



Thanks a lot for this. Time to go pay your phone bill?



Yep, time to go pay my phone bill.