

**“One day the sound of a woman just being a woman is going to be normal”**

*Singer-songwriter Jennifer Warnes talks about being a life-junkie, the intimate spirituality of singing with others, her upcoming record, the kindness of Leonard Cohen and the complexity of the human nature.*

**András Csúri**

**Good morning Jennifer! How are you? I hope it's not too early for a Saturday morning conversation on the phone?**

Jennifer Warnes

Good morning András, not at all. I am happy to talk to you.

**András**

**I do know of course what you look like, but as we can't see each other I thought I would give you a hint of whom you are talking to. I am in my thirties, tall and blondish.**

Jennifer

Ah, ok, that sounds good (laughs).

**András**

**May we start with some of your childhood memories? These are often getting stronger and more vivid with time. Which are those you cherish the most (and that you could share with us)?**

Jennifer

I was born in Seattle and raised in Anaheim for my first 20 years. It's a very innocent place to have grown up. Lots of nature, orange groves, wide hills to explore and just gentle people.

I moved back here about five years ago to be with my sisters. Sadly, two of them died very quickly, but as I have two more siblings, I really love being back home with the rest of my family. So this place is very unlike Crazyville (which is Los Angeles) where I lived for 45 years of my life in the heart of the metropolitan city and I am glad to be gone.

**András**

**Could you tell something about your parents as well?**

Jennifer

I have an unusual mixture there. My father died in a massive heart attack in front of the whole family when I was only 11 years old. We children watched that. With my mother on the other hand we had almost 60 years together. She was my greatest friend, dearest companion and best supporter.

**András**

**When you were seven, your father declined to sign a record contract, which was offered to you. You mentioned once that it was a great decision of his, as music business hurts any child.**

Jennifer

Yes, I am glad my father turned down that offer, because a child needs to evolve naturally without any sort of forced behaviors and I was lucky to have that. Music business was a cruel and bad place to be and when I later went into music, it was purely because I wanted to.

**András**

**At the beginning of your career, you tried quite a range of musical styles. You were a child performer, you got an offer for an opera scholarship, you were part of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and you even played in an early stage production of the musical 'Hair'. How did you choose the kind of musical path that you have finally decided to follow?**

Jennifer

That's a good question. I have never been interested in *fame*, but in *experiences*. I wanted the experience of theater, the experience of opera, the experience of choral singing, the experience of singing with Leonard, the experience of travelling all over the world and the experience of understanding Texas Blues music. So I guess I am a life-junkie. I tended to stop short of crazy fame, because the music business is brutal. My survivor instinct, the one my mother taught me, always beckoned me to step back and try something else whenever fame started to set me on the brink of the Grand Canyon and I was going to fall off.

I had a deep curiosity for a lot of places that singers might go. My interest in winning an opera scholarship was just to see if I could and not because I was enraptured with opera. To tour the world with Leonard, was just to see if I could understand that music. It's a game I play with myself: can I sing in Seminole, can I sing in French, can I sing ... with Joe Cocker? You know what? *That* is the path I have chosen.

**András**

**So in your case it is true that the journey is the destination.**

Jennifer

Well, our appetite leads us to the next challenge and I generally followed my appetite. I didn't have the traditional manager who directs everything you do. To act like a marionette seemed like an unpleasant way to live. And I didn't really care whether the industry blessed my path or hated it (girlish giggles). I just fell into one interesting job after the other and did the best I could, relied on my instincts, stayed out of trouble and just kept going. Now here I am talking to you, looking back and I am thinking, '*wow that was really fun*'. And the fun continues...

**András**

**So can we say that even with the Oscars and your chart success you chose not to ride the waves of success?**

Jennifer

Well, I was not consciously choosing not to do things; I was just more consciously choosing to *do* things. My career is kind of an octopus with many legs. In 1972 I was working with John Cale from Velvet Underground, hanging out in the Warner Brothers offices. Well, that was a world onto itself. I think I have the ability to slip in-between various forms of art and social strata and business rules pretty easily without disturbing anyone. So I did a screen test for Mike Nichols, I did win Oscars and I was a comedian on Smothers Brothers show. You know that Woody Allen movie '*Zelig*'? It's about a man who shapeshifts and I think that pretty much goes for me. I'm shapeshifting all the time.

My mother used to ask: *have they found out who you are yet?* And I would still say, *no not yet*. Which makes it hard for people like you to nail it down in an article (laughs).

**András**

**Well, actually, it's maybe not that hard for me as in my main job I am a criminal lawyer and another of my 'octopus legs' does music interviews, out of passion.**

Jennifer

Wow, ok, I think that is a valuable choice and comparable too. Artists are measured by, whether they perform according to the 'career-model'. I think that my path *was* a career model, it just was not understood. I think a lot of film actors have this path as well.

**András**

**You mean that they may try themselves out in different genres, in film and theater, in blockbusters and independent movies?**

Jennifer

Exactly. It is a refusal to be pigeonholed too early in your life. If your appetites are complex and deep, then you want freedom to move to the left and to the right and above and below and just shift. That's the joy of life. To be nailed into a role is incarceration.

**András**

**You mentioned your duet with Joe Cocker (*Up where we belong*, 1982 Academy Award for best original song). It seems to me exceptional that duet partners meet over decades to perform the same song. Normally, they just promote it for a few months. Following Joe Cocker's passing you said that you have just realized that you will never sing that song again. It sounds very intimate. Did you have a friendship beyond the song or was it more a connection through the song?**

Jennifer

This friendship was just within the music. However, when you sing with someone you become *very* intimate with the invisible part of them. I am glad you asked, because this is not discussed very often. A song just as ours and the task such as singing with him over and over again all those many times makes you know a person almost like you would *really* knew them. You know them in a way that is hard to explain. It's a spiritual knowing. While singing the song you enter an invisible domain and most of your interaction is out there in that place. Anybody who is a musician can tell you that that is a very real place, there is a '*there there*', a place you go to. If you go to that place with somebody (which I gone to with Leonard and different other artists) it's pretty beautiful, intimate, risky, lovely and unforgettable. So I have a vivid memory of being out *there*. I guess I would compare it to if you had a partner in the circus and you would always depend on the fact that they catch you when you flew on the trapeze. It's that kind of closeness, even if you don't go have lunch afterwards. But you know that moment when you reach your hand out and they catch you every time creates a kind of closeness that is beyond words. I felt that every single time when I was on stage with Joe. It's really wonderful and I treasure that.

**András**

**Beside several movies, many people's songs would also not be what they have turned out to be without your voice and contribution. I would only mention songs of Leonard Cohen or Tanita Tikaram. Would you agree that your voice rather accompanies other artists, just like a unique subtle instrument, like a violin or a harp? You seem to place yourself somewhere between background singing and being an equal duet partner.**

Jennifer

You say 'subtle'. My approach to singing with other people is a spiritual one. I don't really think about my voice too much. I align with the *vibration* of the person, with my sense of the person. I completely leave my agenda aside. I don't have a plan. I pick people that I like and then I can get behind of their point of view and their style. And then I just completely surrender to their vibration, because *service to another* is a great thing. It's the sound of love. You can't make the sound of love when you are all wrapped up in your own image. I just surrender to Joe's sound and follow and chase after and try to ride it like a horse. I have faith that if I care about Joe then the sounds of caring, or the thrill or joyfulness will show up. When the time comes to sing with somebody it is absolutely important to abandon your plan for the song and just fly, go with them with joy and try to be with their vibration. All you have to do is to love the person you are singing with. And it usually works.

Even if I am giving myself to a film I do the same thing. I just dissolve to the pictures. I remember singing in front of a painting once at a museum, humming to myself. I was wondering first but then I realized that you can pick up on the vibration of a great painting as well and you can enter that a little bit.

**András**

**'It's 4 in the morning the end of December'. Hotel lobby, Hartford, Conn. I would obviously love to ask you about the 'Famous Blue Raincoat' album.**

Jennifer

(Laughing). I met Leonard in a hotel lobby in Hartford, Conn and then I met him again in Nashville. Then we toured around the world and did that song called 'Bird on the wire'. After the tour we became friends and we started to have... just fun. A couple of years of having fun that was good. Then he began to be treated rudely by Columbia Records and he was depressed. We knew that he had been widely received in Europe, but the Americans were slower to understand the beauty of what he was doing. So Roscoe and I (Roscoe Beck, who was Jennifer's partner and Leonard Cohen's bass player at the time) were bored one day and we said why we just don't do an album of Leonard Cohen songs the way we hear them. We thought, maybe that will provide another way to looking at his poetry.

Roscoe is a graduate of the University of Texas jazz ensemble so he has a very complex head about melodies. Leonard hears melodies in a more simplistic fashion.

Roscoe heard big complexities, so that record was a combination of all those musical sensibilities and it became what it became. But it did its job because it caused people who wouldn't otherwise have listened to the music to listen to it. There are people who are more visual, more aural, more heartfelt. You know, different senses rule different people. And lot of the people who wanted complexity *in sound* listened to this record.

**András**

**There is a very special song on this album called Song of Bernadette, which the both of you co-wrote in Lourdes. Can you share your memories about writing this song?**

Jennifer

We were on the bus on the 'Field Commander Cohen Tour' and we were driving to Lourdes (The place where St Bernadette was born).

I told Leonard that I was named Bernadette but my siblings have complained as all their names start with a 'J'. So they changed my name back to Jennifer. Nevertheless, the story of Bernadette is intertwined with my youth. Leonard said: '*You should write about it!*'

*That's a song Jenny.* I said *'well how would I begin'*? He answered me: *'You just say: There was a child named Bernadette, I heard a story long ago'*. There is a picture of us in the 'Famous Blue Raincoat' booklet writing just *that* verse in the bus together taken by Roscoe. So when we got to the hotel we have finished the lyrics and when I got home I wrote the music with a friend. It was easy.

**András**

**You said in previous interviews that you consider integrity of work, truth and authenticity as very important attributes. On your follow-up album, ('The Hunter', 1992) there is a song called 'True emotion'. Listening to you I was wondering whether this is kind of the essence of your artistry? Transmitting people true emotions.**

Jennifer

Well, the song is about Stevie Ray Vaughan. Roscoe was his buddy and he played on 'Famous Blue Raincoat'. Stevie passed around that time in a plane crash. He was on our mind and so I just wrote that song because I was quite grieved about the loss. There are some artists like Stevie who have a direct line to *truth* and they just go straight to it. In the song I was talking about how rare it is to find an artist, when there is just nothing that can get in the way of their true emotions. I think Elvis was like that. Ray Charles as well and probably Amy Winehouse. That's an ideal place to stand...but a dangerous one. But to answer your other question. Yes, I do want to always bring 'true emotion' to my work. But in me it's *subtler*. I don't have to scream to let you know the complexity of what I'm feeling. My true emotion is more shy, more quiet but still complex.

**András**

**You might be happy to know that people do appreciate your approach to music and understand your 'true emotions'. I bought a copy of the 'The Hunter' in a second hand shop long ago and the booklet was full with newspaper clippings of the reviews of the album. It showed me how much the previous owner cared about this album and your music. It was the best 'review' I could get and I still have it that way on my shelf.**

Jennifer

That is so nice to hear. Thank you.

**András**

**We are also here to talk about your as yet latest album, 'The Well' that you have 'just' released...15 years ago. (Jennifer laughs). This year you have re-released the album. It is also the first time that 'The Well' is available in Europe. How do you feel about it after all this time?**

Jennifer

'The Well' came out at a time when the music industry was disintegrating. Record stores were closing and Napster was ruling and pretty much everything was dying. All the executives were buying second homes and disappearing...it was just a mess. I got caught, like many artists did, in the dissolution of one record company after the other. They just passed me on and it would take them a year to figure out what to do with me. It was just so heartbreaking. I was trying to give birth to a grittier southern record but everyone opposed me. They wanted me to scrap all that, to try a string quartet record and it was just terribly painful. In the middle of all that I had a friendship with Doyle Bramhall out of Texas and I was coming and going to Texas to try and learn a certain kind of music that I wanted to learn. Then it got all complicated because we couldn't

finish the record, somebody seized the tapes, and then I had to do the string quartet record. It was just hysteria, I think it lasted like gosh...5 or 10 years. So 'The Well' is the only music that survived that period. It's not cohesive, but it is noble (laughs). It is brave, courageous and big. There are really lovely moments in it and I am very happy with it.

**András**

**You also said once that you have 2,5 albums of unreleased material from that period. What will happen to them?**

Jennifer

Well, I have a pretty large backlog of unreleased stuff, so when it comes time to retire I know what I am doing (laughs).

**András**

**How different was it to record 'The Well' in Texas and not in Los Angeles?**

Jennifer

I have always felt that the players I grew up with and made music with in Los Angeles, like the Wrecking Crew and those guys, were able to do records very quickly. They were more like session artists. I had learned what I needed to learn from them: The importance of a beginning and an ending, the importance of the three-minutes, the importance of emotional moment, the importance of a hook. Those of us from Los Angeles are skilled and proficient (laughs). We know how to do it, but that doesn't mean we do it better. I have learned a lot from those guys, but every time I went to Texas there was a whole other art form that I did not feel confident to sing but wanted to learn. There is a different kind of music that comes from the South. The session artist is like a professional jockey, but the southern musician is more like the boy who grew up with a pony and rides it bareback and only rides that one horse. Its more personal, its earthier, it's a different vibe. So that was my motivation to go to Texas.

**András**

**This album must have been quite a journey in many senses. Some very important persons in your life led to 'The Well'. I mean Roscoe introduced you to Stevie, then Stevie's music introduced you to Doyle and the friendship to Doyle and the loss of Stevie together led you to Texas and to Jacob's Well. Isn't it a beautiful circle?**

Yes, I know what you mean. Jacob's Well is a place in the earth, a natural cave inside of a lake so if you dive down you might get lost. People have been pulled away there. It is a really interesting power-spot. I walked down to the Well about the time that Stevie died and just after that. I needed a metaphor for how I was feeling. The nature is always the place I going for answers and the Earth always seems to deliver them to me. My friendship with Doyle was at the beginning also because he took the time to show me how to sing behind the beat. He was patient with me and he guided me forward and to an understanding that I asked him to teach me. Out of that we became friends.

**András**

**Jacob De Cordova, the man for whom some believed the spring was named, described the Well, as a solid rock cut out by a skillful artist. I thought you might like this quote as your album somehow connects nature and art.**

Jennifer

Beautiful quote. It's also a scary and sad place as lot of people were swept away by the Colorado River. It's like a wound. On clear days you can see all the way down.

**András**

**There are also some covers on the record. I would like to play you a short portion of one of the originals. (I play Jennifer 'Invitation to the blues' from Tom Waits on the phone). This song is one of the 'tomwaitsiest' of Tom Waits songs that I know. When listening to a song, how do you realize that you could and you would cover a song sung in original by such an extremely different and masculine voice?**

Jennifer

That's a really really good question. I knew Tom before he had that voice and I love his earlier voice. I have a hard time getting through the grit. I think that's a smoke screen. His earlier voice lets you in to his vulnerability. The other one is a bit of a shield, however it's now become his art form. You can never question why Jackson Pollock throws paint. It's a style and that's what Tom wants to do. I met him around the 'San Diego Serenade' years and that is the Tom I love, because he sounded like the son of Steven Foster. He sounded like he came from that kind of Gershwin, Randy Newman romanticism that I love. But you should ask Tom that question. Ask him what his reasoning behind that rendition, that voice and why is that the *true* one.

The other half of the answer is this. I grew up in a very feminine and strong family of three sisters, a mother and a grandmother and aunts. We were expressive, opinionated and *unapologetically female*. As soon as I got to Los Angeles I had the rude awakening that to be female was a deficit in certain areas. As a result, part of my agenda in my career has been to unapologetically bring my feminine nature onto the male stage and just not cave in, just not die, just not apologize. That's what my generation had to do. I love this subject. It is quite powerful and I hope you can find a way to write about it. It is taken for granted that women are weaker on some level or let me say less effective because they don't play with the same chessboard. For my generation we had to not only be skillful, be physically strong but we also had to flourish. Not 'just' survive like Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf and Judy Garland and go down like Amy Winehouse with drugs. We needed to flourish. My goal was if I could just make music that lasted and not die doing it. I consider it now as part of my gift to women. Just stand up and do it. I would say in 40-50 years from now the sound of a woman just being a woman is going to be more normal.

**András**

**Another song on the album that should crack the stoniest hearts is your rendition of the Billy Joel song: 'And so it goes'. It seems like one of the centerpieces of this record for me and therefore I would be very interested about your thoughts on this song.**

Jennifer

Thank you, I agree with you. Everyone walks around this world with a body and a spirit and a history and a family life, with hopes and dreams and tragedies and illness. Everyone walks around with this drama inside of them. Music does not always touch on the vast complexity of that reality we all share. I like songs, like those of Leonard Cohen, that point towards that we are bigger than we think we are. That our souls are deeper and our hearts are warmer and our needs are greater and that our suffering is happening in silence. Songs like that help people to accept themselves in their complexity. If they can that means that they are in a higher state of consciousness. It's my wish that the music will just lift people a little bit by saying that '*yes I feel that way too*'. That song, 'And so it goes' is such a song. It's so vulnerable; it's so open-hearted that it lifts you a little bit.

**András**

**I can assure you that you have achieved your goal with your rendition.**

Jennifer

Thank you.

**András**

**You mentioned Leonard Cohen several times and you are always associated with him. I would like to ask you what are the greatest values for you in this famous friendship that you cherish and that you can give away in an interview.**

Jennifer

We just emailed yesterday and I was telling him how much...well, I was telling him the answer to that, just so he would know. I have to remind him from time to time. His acknowledgment to me was so tender, gentle and kind. I would say *that* really is the thread that's run through all our time (I was 22 when I met him). He taught me about how to be gentle and he taught me how to be kind. The kindness he offers a person (a friend) is an art form itself. It is so unusual in this industry and it is hard to find in the world. It is *very* rare. So when I do find it I just want to be around it, I want to be near it. And the other thing is that we had fun! He taught me about literature and poetry. Roscoe and I taught him about chords (he learned of course from other musicians) but I mean we traded our understanding of art. I guess I am able to talk to him about art in completely deep ways and that's nice. Lot of musicians can play but they can't talk. And we travelled along the world together, and he is Canadian, so he has great manners (laughs).

**András**

**Sounds like a very heartfelt friendship. Nevertheless, you had posters of three other men in your teenage room, Bob Dylan, D.H. Lawrence and Joe Cocker. Looking both back and forward in your life whose poster would you put on your wall these days.**

Jennifer

I love the question and I tell you right now that I would put a picture of my white golden retriever Leo, who has now passed away, who I had for 15 years. I would put a poster as big as the wall of his face because I fell into his nature completely. My relationship with this dog, that I never would have got out of the house if not to the dog. I tended to be a little bit of a hermit. Because of him I saw the mountains and the snow and the pathways and the rivers. We were just go go go go everywhere. I think I experienced something so transcendent from that animal that people can't give me. So I'm sorry to say it's become nature and animals for me, because people I guess have hurt me, so it had me turning to the safer places to go. So on the wall in the night I would have to not think about any human being, just nature.

**András**

**You are working on a new album. I don't know how much you can give away but can you tell something about it?**

Jennifer

I think it's my best record on some level. It will probably come out mid-2017. Making my new album right now I know that it is very honest and it's naked and quiet. But that's just who I am. It's me at this time of life. I really love it and I am very peaceful when I fall asleep these days (laughs).



**András**

**Do you plan to tour this album?**

Jennifer

My wish is that I won't be forced to do anything that is painful or uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable to travel as it involves a great deal of physical suffering. I have become very sensitive in my older years and I think my best gift is to keep giving things in the forms that I can give them and writing, studio and documentary is easy for me, but travelling is not. I am not willing to die on the road (laughs). Harry Nilsson hated touring and I know why, because he was very sensitive. I went out on the road to Canada for several years in a row and it never was easy. So now I am looking for other ways. I am looking for co-writers to write my book with me and for documentary filmmakers to help me tell the story. Because it's a great story. I have 20.000 photos scanned that have to be documented. So there is work to do but I don't think that's on the road.

So my wish is that I could take these conversations, like I am having with you, and do them in a documentary form. Maybe film in Texas with those fellows that I am working with, because they are all there. Maybe doing a little concert with all of us being in a room, being ourselves and let that film travel.

**András**

**Dear Jennifer, many thanks for your time and for sharing your interesting thoughts. I wish you all the best, also with your new album and that it brings you lot of joy without any suffering.**

Jennifer

Thank you very much, András.