

MARY CARRICK

OMAHA SONGSTRESS TAKES FLIGHT IN NEW ALBUM

by Leo Adam Biga

photography by Hooton Images

IF THE LATE soul master James Brown was the hardest working man in show business, then singer Mary Carrick is Omaha's hardest working woman in entertainment.

When the Nebraska Arts Council touring artist isn't performing her own cabaret act, she's singing in the Opera Omaha chorus or acting in a musical theater production. She also does special events like the Omaha Press Club Show and Omaha Creative Institute Spring Fling.

In addition to her rehearsals and vocal exercises she attends cabaret workshops. All this comes on top of working a full-time marketing job, being married and raising two small children. Yet she's made time to create her debut CD, *Let's Fly*, with artistic producer and arranger J. Gawf, a pianist whose day job finds him serving as Opera Omaha resident music director and chorus master.

The album, available on iTunes, Amazon.com, and CD Baby, showcases Carrick's big voice, wide range, and eclectic tastes. The 10 tracks about love and desire include the Harold Arlen-Johnny Mercer standard "Come Rain or Come Shine," Cole Porter's "So in Love," the Hank Williams classic "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," Barry Manilow's bath-houser "Man Wanted," and the Jon Mitchell hit "Both Sides Now." There's even Leonard Cohen's edgy "Dance Me to the End of Love."

The project's an intriguing collaboration between a versatile singer deeply rooted in the Great American Songbook and a multifaceted musician immersed in opera. Carrick, who can sing anything, has a voice with operatic qualities, and Gawf, who can play anything, is well-versed in popular music. He's also Carrick's primary vocal coach and the two have developed an aesthetic kinship and personal friendship.

Gawf has worked with world-class singers and is a great admirer of Carrick's vocal instrument.

"It's crystalline clear, it's shiny, it's got shimmer,"

he says. "She has such a range to go from the high register, which I think is a beautiful part of her voice, to the low register."

Then there's what Carrick can do with a song.

"Well, she's a storyteller, number one," he says. "She comes from a theater background and she can tell a story like nobody's business."

Carrick has found a niche in cabaret performances that often find her teaming with pianist-vocalist Todd Brooks.

"There's so much artistic freedom in cabaret," she says. "There's really no rules. I can program whatever I want. I can do songs that are traditionally sung by men and make them my own. I can infuse myself and my own experiences into the songs. There's a very intimate connection with the audience that I love very much. I can talk and tell stories throughout my show. I love that audience-to-singer energy that happens in the room. It's exhilarating."

She's been recognized by the Omaha Entertainment and Arts Awards and the Theatre Arts Guild for her cabaret shows as well as productions of her own Broadstreet Theatre Company.

When Carrick broached the concept of her album, Gawf wanted in and says the chance of "doing something I'd never done" appealed to him. "Mary gave me free license."

The songs on "Let's Fly" have been covered many times by other artists, but Gawf was intentional in taking a new slant.

"I pride myself on not listening to other artists before I tackle something because I don't want to get preconceived ideas of how something should be. I like to take the song off the page and then re-imagine it. After we got our arrangements together I listened to what other people did to see where ours fit in, and we've got some unique things. Half the fun was coming up with what works for us."

Carrick feels she's in good hands with Gawf.

"I put my trust completely in him. It's just been an awesome match. I think we work in tandem really well. He totally gets me. He can tell when I'm not giving as much as I need to. There was one session where he said, 'I don't feel like you're giving your all to me,' and he was right. I know where he's at, he knows where I'm at. We can sort of feel where we're going, where things aren't working."

Carrick says she most enjoys "the creative process," and with the CD she's pleased to have gone to "a real vulnerable place in being completely true to the material. It's a scary place to go if you really want to be an honest singer, but I think we achieved that."

For the album Gawf assembled musicians he's worked with before, including three Omaha mainstays in percussionist J.B. Ferguson, bass player Mark Haar, and accordion player Kate Williams. Jazz pianist Eric Andries joined the ensemble from his home in Baton Rouge, La.

The CD marked the inaugural project for Dreamtree Recording, a new studio operated by Omaha musician and sound engineer extraordinaire Marty Bierman.

The recording sessions became Gawf's playground to have the musicians try different rhythms and tempos—adding, subtracting, mixing, matching various sounds.

"It was true experimentation all the way around," he says. "It was fun to be able to do that, to not take it straight from the page and to work with such great instrumentalists."

Carrick says the CD was both "a fascinating" and "massive undertaking" that "organically developed." Don't be surprised if she and Gawf re-team for a new project. **ENCOUNTER**

Follow the singer at marycarrick.com.



Mary Carrick and J. Gawf