“Judy at Carnegie Hall”--Judy Garland (1961)

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Essay by Rufus Wainwright (guest post)*

I’ve always thought of Judy Garland as more of a sphinx of old Hollywood than a goddess, and like that mythical creature, at the end of the day, she has constantly provided me with more riddles than answers.

Judy Garland supremely mastered three distinct genres of the performing arts in that she was a great musician, a consummate actor and a classic movie star. But this triple threat creates an unfocused quality to her brilliance, essentially blinding the beholder and giving birth to the enigmatic.

Proven by countless magnificent recordings all along her illustrious career, Miss Garland’s musical ability is without question. So let’s begin with the craft of acting and the phenomenon of movie stardom, two seemingly identical abilities that in my opinion are diametrically opposed: the former emanating and the latter a form of absorption. We will end with music.

At its core, acting is an extroverted exercise and, in essence, crafted for a live audience. Unfortunately, Judy Garland was never in a staged play or musical, but it’s pretty safe to say that no classical theater role, be it Broadway or even Shakespeare, would have been insurmountable for her. The woman innately devoured the stage and thankfully NOT the scenery.

Both the intensity and, more important, the subtle nature of her live performances bewitched audiences the world over. Her ferocious yet precise animal instincts dominated any physical space, be it concerts or interviews, and no one in her presence ever left unscathed by the energy she emanated. Like Callas or Bernhardt, those who saw her in person never forgot it.

In fact, and this is a sad truth, unbeknownst, the western world arguably experienced one of its greatest losses in never witnessing Garland inhabit a major theatrical role, something like Mama.
Rose in “Gypsy” for example. Rarely has the earth hosted such an individual so holistically built for the wooden planks of a stage.

Of course, it is difficult to say if she would have had the stamina to pull off eight shows a week, especially considering her battles with loneliness and addiction, but (and I’m going out on a limb here) perhaps the required discipline and loving camaraderie of that more grounded world could have been a help to her? Alas, sadly, we will never know.

Movie stardom on the other hand is a far more mysterious subject. It’s a kind of intimate sorcery, an exceedingly private bargain struck between humankind and technology and then, ironically, diffused to billions of people for arguably all eternity. In this dramatic dynamic the slightest bat of an eyelash or twitch of a lip is thunderously amplified, and a kind of tight magnetic dance occurs between the actor and the lens of the camera. Less is always more on the silver screen.

This truly magical Power (it cannot be taught) Judy possessed in spades and it’s almost a scientific fact that no matter who shared a scene with Judy, be it Fred Astaire or Frank Sinatra, inevitably they were somewhat obliterated. One’s eyes always gravitated towards her, all the more mysterious since Miss Garland wasn’t necessarily a great beauty or typical comic actor. She was a Star.

It is usually at this point of the process that my abilities as a writer start to waver in terms of the subject of Judy Garland, and the great sphinx appears open eyed. This phenomenon is probably due to the fact that, in summoning the “Movie Star” (namely Dorothy Gale from “The Wizard of Oz”), her powers magnify and I’m no longer capable of analyzing her in a clinical way. So let’s move onto music.

As a professional singer myself I can categorically state that both from the perspective of a performer and as a listener, Judy Garland’s voice was one of the most resounding masterpieces that nature ever created. If one had to name three of the all-time greatest vocalists the world has ever known, few would argue that her name would be right up there; in fact, for many, in the top slot. Be it musicality, technique, emotion, or humor, the heights and depths to which her voice can take the listener are infinite in either direction, and certainly in her heyday with the might of MGM’s sorcery supporting her, the power of her musical montages was irresistible and it’s no wonder that for a good 20 years she was by definition “the world’s greatest entertainer!”

It’s impossible to quantify the meaning of what her voice did to me and countless other little dreamers as children when witnessing “The Wizard of Oz.” From my personal vantage point I can attest to watching the film as a child and, miraculously, Kansas becoming Montréal and somewhere over the rainbow became the vision of just a few years down the line when I would discover all the colorful and dangerous pleasures that life had to offer. And, of course, in course, a whole other string of numbers like “Zing Went the Strings of My Heart,” “The Man That Got Away” and, finally, in maturity, the life lesson of “Get Happy,” a veritable parade of music emanating from Judy’s voice mapping out my journey to adulthood.

I could continue down a myriad of paths concerning the great Judy Garland and get endlessly lost in the maze of her incredible legacy, but for the moment, the great sphinx has
closed her eyes and we must journey on. So let us continue wandering through the desert of life until a song is heard in the distance and Judy appears again, both quenching our thirsts and giving us the strength to continue on in this dry world.

*Rufus Wainwright is a Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter with over ten solo albums to his credit. He is an avowed fan of Judy Garland.*

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*