

“She’s So Unusual”--Cyndi Lauper (1983)

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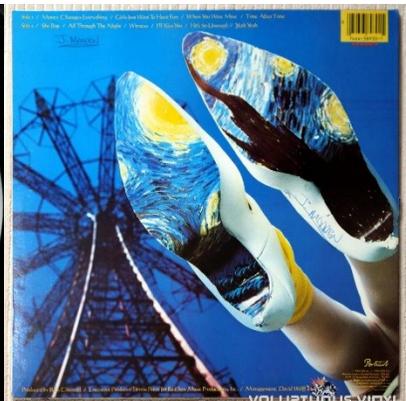
Essay by Dale Sherman (guest post)*



Album cover



Original label



Back of album

When Cyndi Lauper was signed to Portrait Records to do a solo album in Fall 1982, the plans by those at the label for the recording sessions were not that unusual: place the spunky unknown in front of a microphone to sing songs producer Rick Chertoff had collected and be satisfied with a hit single or two. Little did they realize that Cyndi was not some waif-like innocent, unfamiliar with the big, bad world of the music business. Instead, through her determination to make sure her personality and creativity came through in the music, “She’s So Unusual” (released October 1983), would result in four U.S. top ten singles (and a fifth that made the top forty), multiple awards from the recording and video industries, and ultimately produce a legacy of material that has been remixed, reinvented, and interpreted by many fellow artists over the years.

Born June 22, 1953 in Brooklyn, Cyndi had already been a professional singer for nearly ten years before beginning work on “She’s So Unusual,” and was quite wise to the inevitable ups and downs that come with making it in the music business. Cyndi’s early years in cover bands meant only long hours with little creative output, and eventually having to spend a long year with a voice coach to regain her four-octave vocal range after damaging her vocal cords by using improper voice technique. Later, Cyndi found freedom to write and sing her own material with her band Blue Angel for a self-titled album in 1980, but the record label, Polydor, soon lost interest in the band when Cyndi refused to be reinvented (as she told “Rolling Stone” in 1983) “into Barbra Streisand; put cement go-go boots on me, so I couldn’t do anything onstage.” The band’s break-up soon after the album fizzled led to a lawsuit by the band’s manager that stifled Cyndi’s career for a time as well as force her into bankruptcy.

Cyndi, however, was not one to let anything stop her from continuing to move her career and talent forward. Further, she had faced abuse from critics, band members, and many of the individuals who pull the strings in the business. Now she was determined to go her own way. This determination became even more vital for Cyndi’s future success once signed by Portrait Records after being brought to their attention by her manager David Wolfe. When Portrait sent her to producer Rick Chertoff to go over material he wanted her to do, she knew that the album

they would record was to be her best and possibly her last shot to let her singing, as well as her inner-voice, be presented to an audience the way she wanted.

Fortunately, Rick Chertoff was open to Cyndi rejecting a certain number of songs he had in mind for her, while also allowing her to rework and help arrange songs. He also brought in Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian of the band, the Hooters--both of whom had previously worked with Chertoff--to rehearse the material and collaborate with Cyndi. "She's So Unusual" was then recorded between May and June of 1983, with Hyman, Bazilian, and Chertoff all performing alongside Cyndi, as well as fellow musician Anton Fig (drums and percussion), Neil Jason (bass and guitar), Richard Termini (synthesizers), Rick DiFonz (guitar), Peter Wood (synthesizer), William Wittman (guitar and associate producer), and with Ellie Greenwich, Maeretha Stewart, Dianne Wilson, Krystal David, and Jules Shear on background vocals.

The final result was a mesmerizing collection of songs that allowed Cyndi to demonstrate her stunning vocal skills, such as the dynamic mantra near the end of "Money Changes Everything" that leaves listeners breathless, and the magical heights of her soprano voice in "All Through the Night." The album also allowed Cyndi to dramatically bring her musical characters to life with each song, which is why so many of the music videos filmed for the album (of which three were conceptual in nature) allowed Cyndi to easily emote and further expand on the material. It is obvious that she is certainly not someone who was simply going through the motions of singing her songs, but she honestly felt deeply while expressing her stories in song as she moved through each one. The video for "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" shows the girl who wants to be her own person, yet it naturally leads into the video for "Time After Time," where her character discovers that her independence is evolving emotionally as well as physically away from her boyfriend. If we did not have our image of Cyndi from "Girls" first then the emotional depth of the "Time After Time" video would not have quite the impact. Further, "She Bop" may have been at the time a rare subversive song about a taboo topic--especially coming from a rising pop artist such as Cyndi was at the time--but the video compounds the comedic aspects Cyndi ingeniously brought to the song, making it more palatable for the public at the time.

Interesting as well is that the songs of the album do not represent the type of material one usually heard being done by a female solo artist, where the focus is how to find, keep, or survive the loss of a man. Rather, they extolled self-awareness, self-confidence, and humor. For example, of the nine major tracks on the album, three songs deal with heart-break--"When You Were Mine," "Time After Time" and "Witness." Yet, none of these pieces show women defenseless in their grief or even establishing that they are/were with a man at all. "Witness," co-written by Cyndi with former Blue Angel member John Turi, is a flat-out rejection of a relationship in favor of leaving and happily moving on. "Time After Time" has a protagonist who perhaps is reflecting sadly on losing someone, yet knows in the end that she can no longer "fall behind" to stay with a person holding them back. Finally, while "When You Were Mine" was already a humorous and certainly non-traditional song about the protagonist's concessions to stay with a partner that has found others that had been written by Prince for his "Controversy" album, Cyndi's vocals near the end of the song seem to dictate an emotional breakthrough for the protagonist that this relationship is not healthy.

The need for her independence also shines through on the first two tracks of the albums; both written by men but then reworked by Cyndi in order to make them solidly songs about strong women: "Money Changes Everything" (composed by Tom Gray of The Brains) and the anthem "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (by Robert Hazard). Lauper's edit in "Money" was subtle, changing one word from "she" to "I," but it transforms the song's story from that of a man upset over losing his girl, to one of a person wising up and leaving the fantasy of "everlasting love" behind. "Girls" on the other hand, had much more definitive changes from Hazard's demo of the song, initially sung from a man's point-of-view about how fortunate he was to have so many girlfriends at his beck and call. Instead, Cyndi revamped the song with the help of songwriter Ellie Greenwich where fun is defined not as being about sex but about wanting to enjoy life as a person and not an object for someone to hide "away from the rest of the world." It is little wonder that this song in particular would be embraced by outsiders--whatever their gender or sexual orientation--and become an anthem to many over the years; the song breaks against such inflexible traditional role-models, such as where women must be ornaments for their men's use and...little else.

The programming of the songs bounces from dark to light, until the final third of the album where Cyndi's messages of standing up for oneself becomes even clearer. After "Witness" is "I'll Kiss You" (also co-written by Cyndi), which flips the old standard "Love Potion No. 9," into one where the protagonist happily makes the first move instead of waiting to submit. That theme continues, after the silly except of the 1929 Helen Kane song, "He's So Unusual" (leading to the naming of the Lauper album), straight into the final track, "Yeah Yeah," a celebration of having fun with the one you love and a final blast of Cyndi's voice to end the album on a lyrical and funny note. More specifically, these final songs deal with the protagonists taking the initiative and not waiting for someone to save them or having to change to fulfill a role set for them.

There were other elements that helped push the album upon the American public beyond the music: the music videos created for the album came in the early days of MTV and thus received heavy rotation on the channel; Cyndi's shrewd "rock 'n wrestling" invasion into the world of wrestling that helped (and, some could argue, later would hurt) Cyndi's notoriety with the public; her energetic humor that got her plenty of guest shots on talk shows to help promote the album. However, all that would have had little meaning if the album itself did not catch the imagination of listeners who saw empowerment in Cyndi's music. Although these songs namely deal with women in control, the overall message is that we all can make a stand, that we don't have to listen to the naysayers just because we're different. That we can have fun.

"She's So Unusual" obtained six-times platinum status and multiple awards, including a Grammy for Cyndi for "Best New Artist." All because Cyndi decided not to simply take the road of least resistance and being like everyone else, and instead make sure her true voice came through. It has led to a career already lasting close to 40 years in music, with multiple albums over time and, in 2013, a Tony Award (amongst others) for music and lyrics to the successful Broadway musical "Kinky Boots."

No doubt to people in the industry, Cyndi Lauper was not what they expected, but she proved that being unusual could lead to something magical in the end.

Dale Sherman is a professional writer out of Louisville, Kentucky. He has written 12 biographical studies about music and movies, including "Women in Rock" (a book celebrating top female musicians of the 20th Century), "John Waters FAQ: All That's Left to Know About the Provocateur of Bad Taste," "Quentin Tarantino FAQ: Everything Left to Know About the Original Reservoir Dog," and "Black Diamond: The Unauthorized Biography of KISS."

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.