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Trad-Jazz Revivalist Bria Skonberg Explores New Territory

The trumpeter and singer talks about her past, present, and future

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Chilliwack (pop. 100,000) is a rural Canadian town, about a 90-minute drive east from Vancouver, in British Columbia's agricultural heartland. It's known for its mild climate, soaring mountain views, lakes, rivers, and more than 900 farms. It is not known as a hotbed of jazz.

So when Bria Skonberg, the trumpeter and singer, was chatting with me in the living room of her impeccably neat and organized one-bedroom apartment in a high-rise on New York's Lower East Side, the question presented itself: "How did a blonde-haired, blue-eyed farm girl from Chilliwack, B.C. manage to become a singing, trumpet-playing hot jazz icon in New York City?"



Bria Skonberg (photo: Dario Acosta)

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One explanation came a few weeks later in a phone call with Skonberg's friend Molly Ryan, a fellow jazz singer in New York. "She's a 'yes' person," Ryan said. "Everything she wants to do, she finds a way to do it. She doesn't make excuses. She understands that today is the best day to take advantage of something, because you don't know if you have a tomorrow. She lives that every day, and that's why she's successful. If everyone else tried as hard as Bria, I think the world would be a lot better place."

A bandleader since her teens, Skonberg, now 35, established herself as an in-demand trumpet soloist and singer well before she moved to New York in 2010. Over the past decade she became a pillar of New York City's hot jazz revival, playing every trad gig in town. She subbed for veteran trumpet player Jon-Erik Kellso with Vince Giordano & the Nighthawks. She often played the near-legendary Tuesday late-night hot jazz showcase at Mona's on the Lower East Side hosted by clarinetist Dennis Lichtman. She co-founded the New York Hot Jazz Festival in 2013 with producer Michael Katsobashvili and, later, the annual New York Hot Jazz Adult Camp at the Greenwich House Music School, with her friend Ryan.

Kellso, who befriended her after a gig in Washington state years before her move to New York—and who, along with Warren Vaché, ultimately became one of her trumpet mentors—recounts her achievement: "To have developed a unique and mature voice on the trumpet, in that style of music, at that age, is really unusual. It wasn't a novelty thing. She was winning over older fans who were discerning about traditional jazz. ... She could stand next to more experienced musicians and more than hold her own, really deliver the goods, with a maturity that belied her years."

Skonberg has released six albums under her own name, including two on Columbia/OKeh; her 2016 album *Bria* won her a Juno award in her native Canada for best female jazz vocal album. Now she's exploring another side of her talent with the self-released *Nothing Never Happens*, a collection of her own decidedly contemporary songs with a few creative covers, including an engaging mashup of the Beatles' "Blackbird" with Duke Ellington's "Black and Tan Fantasy" and a quirky take on Sonny & Cher's "Bang Bang."

A month before our meeting, she performed many of the album's songs at New York's Jazz Standard. She

peppered the set with such standards as Louis Armstrong's "Cornet Chop Suey" and Ernesto Lecuona's "Malagueña," in an arrangement inspired by Anita O'Day (a singing touchstone for Skonberg), before ending with Queen's "I Want to Break Free," which also closes the album. Describing her versatility, Darrian Douglas, her regular drummer, said, "There aren't many artists that understand music from Louis Armstrong all the way up to today. Bria won't put herself in a box. She pulls from all her influences, no matter what people think about her. Who else is so eclectic? Who else plays Queen and Louis Armstrong in their set? No one!"

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Skonberg practices every day, without fail, on a handsome, brick-and-glass enclosed balcony overlooking the Williamsburg Bridge, evoking the memory of Sonny Rollins' all-night practice sessions. She talks as rapidly as any New Yorker, as if she's trying to get all her thoughts out before a buzzer sounds. Her enthusiasm for her craft, and for life in general, is infectious. Here are edited highlights of our conversation.

JT: How long have you been in this apartment?

BRIA SKONBERG: Just six months. I met my husband Papper [*the artistic director at NYC's Town Hall, he's universally known by his last name*] at the Hot Jazz Festival. I'm the kind of artist who likes to work on the producing side of things—jazz festivals, jazz camps ... I think that my ability to organize things is one of the reasons that I'm able to navigate this world. Meanwhile, he's on the other side, in the music *business* world, but his first love is art. So we complement each other ... and he's out of the house Monday to Friday, so I get to practice and do my thing!

You started playing traditional jazz when you were a kid. How did that happen?

In the 1940s and 1950s, there was a revival of classic jazz on the West Coast that ultimately worked its way up the coast. Some people in our community decided to start a classic jazz festival. By the time I started high school, it had been going on for 15 years. It focused on Dixieland, the repertoire of Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Sidney Bechet ... Every middle school and high school jazz band would have a 30-minute slot in the festival.

I didn't grow up in a major city. We didn't have the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra coming to Chilliwick

[laughs]. Our jazz festival was a once-a-year extravaganza, seeing live musicians play this music. That was my biggest influence. I was in the high school jazz band, of course. But when I got to high school, they had also started a youth combo, and I joined it. I was 15. We were playing transcriptions of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Seven. I was one of the better trumpet players in the school. I learned Jelly Roll Morton's "The Chant" and "Cornet Chop Suey" and "Potato Head Blues." It was challenging and fun, and the camaraderie was exciting.

Jazz camps [she attended two, in Mammoth Lakes and Sacramento, California] are still an important part of my life. I go back to Sacramento every year for what's now known as the Teagarden Jazz Camp. I instruct a combo there. We teach New Orleans-style ensemble playing: The trumpet plays the melody, the clarinet obbligato, the trombone tailgates. I think that's an art form that gets taken for granted—being able to listen and figure those things out on the spot.

Besides traditional jazz, who were you listening to when you were in high school?

My generation was all about "girl power," so ... the Spice Girls. They were very empowering! I liked Lauryn Hill, Brandy, Missy Elliott. Also ska bands. And No Doubt with Gwen Stefani. I listened to classic big-band jazz. And I played with a local group of teachers, the Moonlighters big band. I played fourth trumpet and sang songs like "Orange Colored Sky."

You must have been good back then to be asked to play with the teachers' band.

I guess so. Maybe. It's not a very big pond in Chilliwack. But it was special.

What trumpet players inspired you?

Louis Armstrong, obviously. I'm still trying to play his transcriptions. I didn't have a private teacher and didn't study classical music, so a lot of his solos were my education. Nicholas Payton. Kenny Ball, the English trumpet player. I had a Verve compilation with Clark Terry—I love him.

Vocalists?

I loved Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, other big-band singers. I loved singing before playing trumpet, but I was too shy to do it in public. Trumpet gave me some confidence and a group of friends who were musically minded. That group of friends pushed me to try out for the school musical. So I was cast as Sandy in *Grease* in ninth grade. That was my big



Bria Skonberg (photo: Dario Acosta)

vocal breakout. *[Sings a few bars of "Hopelessly Devoted to You," loudly]*

So you learned how to belt.

Yeah, well, I lived on two acres of farm country. I could make some noise.

You arrived in New York in 2010. How did you go about establishing yourself here and how did you get involved in the city's hot jazz scene?

After graduating from Capilano University *[in Vancouver, where she majored in trumpet performance and minored in jazz vocals]*, I became a bandleader. I continued to manage my high-school jazz band; I had an all-female swing group called Mighty Aphrodite. I would tailor groups for special events. And I played in a big band with Canada's "king of swing," Dal Richards.

I played classic jazz festivals on the West Coast. I learned 400 to 500 songs from pre-1930. And I met a lot of musicians: Jon-Erik Kellso, Dan Levinson, Dan Barrett. I got really inspired by them. Ultimately, by the end of 2009, I needed a change, and moving to New York seemed like the most challenging thing I could do. My best friend, Emily Asher, a trombonist, already lived here, so I moved here and crashed on her couch. It was definitely the right decision.

By that time, I was touring as a guest artist at festivals in the U.S. and Europe: Holland, Germany, France, and England. Moving to New York was just a change of airports for me. I was already sustaining myself full-time as a musician in the classic jazz world.

On one of those trips, in Holland in 2007, I met Warren Vaché. He became one of my mentors. He gave me some pointed feedback on playing. And I thought, "Okay, I want to spend time with this person." So when I moved to New York, it was in part to seek out his mentorship. I studied with him for two years, and I still get together with him.

He is an amazing player.

[Sighs] He will *break your heart*. He's very special. He set me up for everything that came next. He said, "If you want to play jazz, listen to Blue Mitchell," and guys who were on the cusp of bebop like Roy Eldridge and Charlie Shavers, "the guys who informed the guys." That era is really interesting to me. Bobby Hackett to Ruby Braff. Warren Vaché, Jon-Erik Kellso. I love that sound.

Kellso is great, too.

Yeah, I've been jazz crushing on him for a long time *[laughs]*. There's a depth and tension in [all of] their playing. And what Kellso does with plungers; I love the grittiness of his sound. And, as a teacher, Warren cuts through my bullshit and tells me what I need to hear, and I love him for it. That's why you want to move to New York. Nobody has time for bullshit in New York.



Tred jazz is something that you excel at, but it's



Bria Skonberg (photo: Krista Stucchio)

Trad jazz is something that you excel at, but it's clear on the new album that you don't want to let it define you.

If you look at my discography from the last five years, I've always taken a lot of risks. It has never been only about trad jazz. I'm constantly challenging myself. My latest music is more about songwriting. Writing has been a great vehicle for me to discover my own voice. Playing classic jazz has given me the skills I need as a foundation, and I'm constantly working to be a better trumpet player. But I'm also trying to find, or write, songs that will make my music more accessible.

Nothing Never Happens puts a stronger emphasis on your songwriting than your previous albums. There's also less traditional jazz.

Yes. There's not a lot of straight-ahead swing on it. It wasn't necessarily a conscious move. I'm trying not to judge it. This is what needed to come out, and there it is. I'm certainly not turning my back on trad—I run a trad jazz camp! Everything in this album is more cinematic. The sounds are more specifically

placed, like where the piano enters at the end of the first chorus of *[her original]* "So Is the Day." There's just a little "pling" in the chart, for dramatic effect. It helps tell the story.

At your CD release show at Jazz Standard, you played a trumpet made from AR-15 bullet casings. Tell me about that.

It's called the Instrument of Hope. It was made for an organization called Shine MSD founded by students who survived the shooting at Margery Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. They provide instruments to victims of school shootings. Nothing is more important to me than the issue of gun violence in the schools. Shine MSD lends the trumpet to artists in order to keep the conversation on the main stage. Making music to me is a way of fighting the evil that's out there. *[Other artists who have played the instrument include Terrell Stafford, Randy Brecker, and Theo Croker.]*

What are your artistic priorities going forward?

Right now, my priority is to play this new music. I'm working on a "symphony" book *[for playing with a symphony orchestra]*. And continuing to stay involved in education, through my jazz camp, and as an educational consultant to the Louis Armstrong House Museum, among others. I chair the jazz committee for the International Trumpet Guild, a worldwide organization. I'm a mentor in the Women in Jazz program. I also keep in touch with about 10 girls who play trumpet. It's a priority for me to be available to

them—I call them my “little brass sisters.” It’s important that they know that a career in jazz is possible and accessible to them.

I like being the wild card in situations. Last year I got to do Monterey Jazz Festival on Tour, with Cécile McLorin Salvant, Melissa Aldana, Christian Sands, and Yasushi Nakamura. Last week I put together a New Orleans-style brass band to play at a Prince tribute with the New Power Generation. I’m going to be part of an Aretha tribute at the Kennedy Center. I might be doing a gig with Elmo! *[Note: She appeared with the Muppet as part of the 2019 Kennedy Center Honors when Sesame Street was honored.]* And I’m open to some more cool collaborations.

With anyone in particular?

[Yelling] Harry Connick, Jr.! Call me! *[Laughs]* Funny story: Three years ago, I went to his TV show, and I was randomly selected to take part in an on-air game of musical chairs. Being a musician, I just watched the band, and whenever he cut them off, I sat down. So I won the game and a trip to Iceland for two. He has no idea that I’m a trumpet player! I’m slowly orbiting him—I’ve got a long game on Harry Connick, Jr.

Read our review of *Nothing Never Happens*. (<https://jazztimes.com/reviews/albums/bria-skonberg-nothing-never-happens-self-released/>)

Listen to “Blackout” from *Nothing Never Happens*. (<https://jazztimes.com/audio-video/premieres/jt-track-premiere-blackout-by-bria-skonberg/>)

ALLEN MORRISON

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