Judy Henske Big Judy – liner notes By Barry Alfonso July 2006

"Judy Henske is an exclamation point," wrote actor/musician Fred Engelberg in his liner notes for the singer's first Elektra album. The comparison fit – Judy was tall and bigboned and very emphatic on stage. In the midst of the early '60s folk boom, she punctuated coffee house stages from Hollywood to Greenwich Village with a wail that could set the espresso cups trembling.

But the career of Judy Henske is also something of a question mark. Forty-four years after the release of her first single, she continues to defy classification. From the start, she never followed the scripts that the music biz pros handed her – whether she was framing her murder ballads with comedic riffs or bringing a highbrow poetic sensibility to post-psychedelic rock, Judy played against type. Record execs couldn't tie her up in a neat package for marketing. She was equally at home in bohemian dives and elegant supper clubs, a young woman of devilish wit and volcanic emotion, Dorothy Parker crossed with Bessie Smith. Who was this unclassifiable, untamable Big Judy?

Looking back, Henske herself can't find a method in her career moves. "I was a drifter," she says today. "It was all done for me by kind and unkind men who thought, 'Let's throw a lot of money at this and maybe she'll get famous.' At times, I was dragged from pillar to post. But I liked not having any direction. You know how some people are control freaks? Well, I'm an out-of-control freak..."

In her own meandering way, Judy Henske has recorded an amazing body of work, unique in its depth and diversity. If she still can't explain all of the twists in her career, she can definitely claim to have found a highly individual voice as an artist. That voice has continued into the present day, tapping into new vitality after a 28-year absence from the record racks.

Producer Jack Nietzsche once hailed Judy Henske as the "Queen of the Beatniks." To this day, she wears her crown at a jaunty angle, wandering through the kingdom of the insane that is show business with an air of wry bemusement. Following in her regal wake is a rare pleasure – but it's best to leave your preconceptions behind. There's no telling where she'll lead you...

The Beatnik Queen started out as a small town girl. Born a doctor's daughter in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, Henske received early artistic nourishment in her home. "Poetry was passed around our table with the mashed potatoes," she says. "My uncle was a poet and my grandfather read poetry all the time, so it was always there." Music was present also – after dinner, her mother would sing old sentimental tunes like "Mother Machree" and "The Lost Chord." During her high school years, a cousin exposed Judy to the delights of New Orleans jazz and barrel house blues.

Judy was a multi-talented child, singing in church, acting in school plays and dabbling in the visual arts. When she was about to attend Rosary College in River Forrest, Illinois, her parents urged her to prepare for a sensible career. She would have none of it: "I'd made up my mind that I was <u>not</u> going to be in the adult world. I wanted to <u>play</u>." Henske did well in her art classes and performed as part of the Rosary Blazers, a harmony group. On the whole, though, she was unhappy at college and left during her senior year. Not long after, a boyfriend introduced her to the folk music scene. She took a liking to Pete Seeger's music and learned to play the banjo. The political bent of the folk movement didn't jibe with her personality, though: "The thing is, I kept cheering up all the time – I think to change the world, you've really got to be depressed."

From there, Henske headed for San Diego, where she began her professional singing career at the Zen Coffeehouse and Motorcycle Repair Shop. Her from-the-gut vocal style – so different from the demure folk damsels of the era – began to win her notice. "That came from Odetta, number one," she says. "She sang very deep, and I thought, 'I'm tired of singing this soprano stuff, so I tested out my lower register and there it was." A rather different but likewise key influence was Peggy Lee, whose singing Judy adored.

The year was 1960 and the folk boom was in full roar. Henske hopped a bus for Hollywood, where she hit the streets clad in her Uncle Charlie's duck hunting jacket ("It was as big as a bureau -- I looked like Natty Bumppo.") She was spotted the day she arrived by Herb Cohen, who soon booked her for an extended gig at his Sunset Strip club, the Unicorn, and became her manager in the bargain. Judy wowed the crowds there by alternately caressing and manhandling her batch of folk tunes, often stomping her foot vigorously to drive a lyric home. (This also served to distract the audience from her stage fright-induced wobbly legs, she admits.) Opening for the likes of Lenny Bruce encouraged her to add some snappy stage patter to her song repertoire.

Her first serious foray into recording came in 1962, when keyboardist/producer H.P. Barnum took her into the studio and cut two songs for the small Staccatto label. "H.P. thought I sounded like Mahalia Jackson," Judy says. "But they didn't give me enough time to breathe, or there would've been more Mahalia in there." As it was, she managed to give "That's Enough" and "Oh Didn't He Ramble" something of a gospelly reading. But the single – credited to Judy Hart – failed to generate much response.

Moving on, Judy headed for Oklahoma City to perform at a popular folk club, the Buddhi (as in plural Buddhas). There, she ignited the interest of ex-Kingston Trio member Dave Guard, who was looking to assemble a new group. "When he saw me play, I had a broken collarbone, so I had this big harness," she recalls. "It didn't look bad on me – I had all these buckles that hung down. I wore really tight pants and high heels, and that's why he chose me over Buffy Sainte-Marie. He was looking at her, but she didn't have the harness."

Guard's new combo, the Whiskeyhill Singers, was a misbegotten project from the start: "We had to take jazz dancing lessons. Dave was a very holistic person, and he thought if we danced together, we'd respond better to music together. He couldn't have been more

wrong. The bass player just quit..."The group released an eponymously-titled album on Capitol in 1962 that was reasonably strong. Henske's big solo turn was a raw-edged rendition of Jimmy Cox's "Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out." This wasn't enough to win the hearts of Guard's old Trio audience – Judy reports that the Whiskeyhill Singers were spat upon during at least one performance.

Personal differences brought the group to a swift end. No matter – Judy soon signed a deal with Elektra as a solo artist. Label chief Jac Holtzman had seen her on stage at the Unicorn and wanted to capture what she did live. It didn't quite turn out that way: "The album was done at the cold, big Columbia studio with a captive audience on folding chairs. The second night, we had some alcohol brought in, and that helped tremendously." She also found herself grappling with arranger Onzy Matthews over her sidemen: "His band was totally modern jazz, and I wanted to use my trombone player, John 'Streamline' Ewing, who was more New Orleans-sounding. I thought, 'If they're pulling me away this soon, there isn't gonna be anything left of what I did in the beginning.' In the end, I stuck up for my musicians and picked my own tunes."

Miss Judy Henske (1963) still managed to translate much of the singer's rollicking charisma onto record. Her renditions of songs like "Hooka Tooka" and "Wade In The Water" are riveting and timeless – and something distinct from the usual folk recordings of the era. The reason for this is that Henske was an artist who happened to sing folk songs, rather than a hard-core "folkie." "I always felt that I really didn't belong in the company of folkies," she says. "It was much more fun being with jazz musicians... folk music was not the only kind of music I liked. The idea I had when I started singing was, 'Oh, I can do all kinds of things,' and that's why everything I did seemed so different from everything else."

What did she look for in a song, folk-based or otherwise? "Drama. The old folk songs had drama – they even had murder in them. Something should happen in every song. At the end of a song, it should be like the end of a short story – you're not the same as you were when you went in." Folk balladry also offered those peak emotional moments that Judy relished: "In comedy, it's called 'piling on.' It's putting one thing that's bad on top of another thing that's bad, and on and on – you can only pile it so high until it collapses. And the part that I'm interested in is the moment of collapse. That's what makes it really alive." Her performance of "Love Henry" on Miss Judy Henske offers such a moment, when the horror turns into something transcendent.

In 1964, Elektra released Henkse's second LP, <u>High Flying Bird</u>, arguably the best among her folk-slanted albums. The title track is not only an outstanding song that's impeccably sung – it ranks as one of the first true folk-rock singles. "It wasn't as exhausting and irritating to make as the first one," she says. "This was a lot more enjoyable."

1963 and '64 was a golden time for Judy overall. Greenwich Village was still a mecca for folk and jazz musicians, with the two camps mixing freely. "It was a good time for the country and a good time for us playing the clubs," she says. "Everybody was famous to a

degree and there was always somebody to talk to. It wasn't as competitive as show business later became." Among her frequent companions was Woody Allen; the two shared the bill at the Village Gate and became close pals. Years later, Allen drew upon Judy for the personality of Annie Hall and even made Chippewa Falls the hometown of his now-immortal heroine. Judy and Woody shared a love for literary references and odd exploits. She recalls one of the latter: "One time, we were in his apartment and we were trying to turn the pages of a dictionary with the power of our minds. I think we sat there for an hour, grunting and straining. It was Woody's idea..."

Judy was in seemingly constant motion in those days. If she wasn't hanging out at the Playboy Mansion with buddy Shel Silverstein, she was co-hosting a summer-season TV talk show in Chicago or turning down movie offers from director Leo Penn (Sean's dad). She appeared on TV's <u>Hootenanny</u>, cracking up over flubbing the words to "Stewball," and bailed out of <u>The Judy Garland Show</u> when she was asked to make fun of farmers. In the folk exploitation film <u>Hootenanny Hoot</u>, she sang a murder ballad in a bathing suit while standing on a picnic table and offered a rendition of 'Wade In The Water' wearing a white dinner dress in a circus tent.

Most notable of all was her lead role in <u>Gogo Loves You</u>, an Off-Broadway musical written by Anita Loos (of <u>Gentlemen Prefer Blondes</u> fame) which closed after two performances. "I played Gogo, the too-tall showgirl," Judy says. "I was forced to wear tassels on my breasts, which I twirled around. It was the best scene of the play. It happened first, unfortunately."

Times changed – the Beatles hit America, Bob Dylan went electric and the Village folk scene petered out. By early 1965, Judy had married musician Jerry Yester (producer of the Association and, later, a member of the Lovin' Spoonful) and had switched from Elektra to Mercury. For that label, she recorded Little Bit Of Sunshine...Little Bit Of Rain, an album that moved her away from folk and towards jazzy pop stylings. Judy wasn't pleased with the results.

Later in '65, she hopped labels once again, this time signing with Reprise. Judy went into the studio with Jack Nietzsche, the arranging genius behind Phil Spector's Wall Of Sound. The resulting LP – <u>The First Concert Album</u>, a.k.a. <u>The Death-Defying Judy Henske</u> – was recorded in front of a studio audience with a 50-piece orchestra. "I enjoyed making that album," she says. "Jack was stubborn and eccentric. I felt right at home."

This was an unsettled time for Judy, artistically and personally: "I was casting about for something to do...I had a feeling that the music wasn't going anywhere." Reprise released a series of Henske singles from 1966 through'67, none of which caught the public's ear. The strangest among them were Nietzsche-produced covers of "Let The Good Times Roll" and "Bye Bye Blackbird"; the most appealing was probably "Day To Day," an uplifting pop-hymn written by Chip Douglas and produced by Yester.

Then something positive happened: Henske started seriously writing songs. Ever since childhood, she'd been a committed reader and writer of poetry – "I was really dedicated

to the Oxford Book of English Verse," she says. She didn't full apply her talents towards song lyrics, though, until the Beatles began releasing tunes like "Eleanor Rigby." Inspired, she began collaborating with Yester on the material that would ultimately be released on Farewell Aldebaran in 1968.

There's a cult surrounding <u>Farewell Aldebaran</u> that flourishes to this day. Released on Frank Zappa's Straight label, the album's exquisitely-crafted songs have a haunting, otherworldly charm. Says Judy: "It's mostly about love and death, isn't it? I didn't want to write a bunch of sappy love songs – that's never interested me in the least." The exception to the overall mood was "Snowblind," a snarling rocker featuring ex-Lovin' Spoonful member Zal Yanovsky on lead guitar.

1968 also saw the birth of Judy and Jerry's daughter Kate. "It changed my life," Henske says. "You can do whatever you want until you have a child, and then you'd better get your shit together, because you have to. It's childhood's end. I didn't want to sing any more and I wanted to be the mom."

There was more music to come, however – in 1970, Judy and Jerry began to assemble a band called Rosebud. An early recruit was Craig Doerge, a gifted piano player from Cleveland who had accompanied Judy on some live dates in the mid-'60s. "Craig's music was swingin," and I wanted to write with him." Doerge was signed up, along with ex-Turtles drummer John Seiter and bassist David Vaught.

The quintet's lifespan was brief, but it did manage to release an eponymously-titled LP brimming with luminous melodies, inspired arrangements and reflective, often quirky Henske-penned lyrics. Its music veered from moody and insinuating ("Reno") to shimmering and tender ("Lullaby II") – in some ways, it anticipated the summery folkrock of Fleetwood Mac's late-'70s hits. As it turned out, though, Rosebud marked more of an ending than a beginning. Henske left Yester, married Doerge and turned away from her music career.

Judy was happy to put her years on stage behind her: "I'd had enough. At that time, I very much wanted to be a mother and a wife as well as a writer. So I withdrew." She stayed home with Kate while Craig became an increasingly in-demand keyboardist, recording and touring with Crosby, Stills & Nash, James Taylor and Jackson Browne during the 1970s and early '80s. Judy and Craig earned success as songwriters with such tunes as "Yellow Beach Umbrella" (covered by Three Dog Night and Bette Midler, among others), "Might As Well Have A Good Time" (recorded by Crosby, Stills and Nash) and "Sauvez-Moi" (a Number One in France hit for Johnny Hallyday). But despite an offer from at least one label, Henske refused to record or tour again.

After years of putting aside murder ballads for PTA and Girl Scouts meetings, she began to feel drawn back into the spotlight. Kate grew up and headed for college, giving Judy time to think about performing again. Her profile was raised in the late '80s when crime fiction author Andrew Vachss began using her as a musical leitmotif in his books.

Encouraged, she and Craig started performing at small clubs around the L.A. area, testing out songs they'd been saving up for over a decade.

Even die-hard Henske admirers were startled when Judy re-emerged after nearly 30 years with Loose In The World, released on her own Fair Star Music label in 1999. Its songs were alive with the skewed humor and dagger-true insights of her earlier work – but it was her singing that impressed the most. "I had to work for a whole year to get my voice in shape," she says. "It was gone. I went to a couple of vocal coaches and had some meldowns, then got a cheat book of old ballads and practiced every day." The long, keening wails on "Blue Fortune" are evidence of how much power she'd kept locked up inside her.

A rejuvenated Judy performed in tandem with Craig at venues across the country. Next came <u>She Sang California</u> (2004), a more-than-satisfying follow-up to <u>Loose</u>. This album touched upon nearly every facet of Henske's music, reviving folk ballads with fresh swing ("Duncan And Brady"), plumbing the depths of private sorrow ("Cocktail World") and looking back on childhood with palpable longing ("Western Wisconsin," a tune first recorded on <u>Rosebud</u>).

Self-assured, heckling humanity and fearlessly exposing scars, Henske has never sounded more timeless or relevant than on her two most recent albums. It's as if the Judy of 1962 had stomped a hole in the stage of the Unicorn and fallen straight into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, laughing all the way. If this is her way of drifting through life and music, we should all be so blessed.

"Hollywood People," recorded in 2004, celebrates Judy's adopted home with cheerful cynicism and rueful love. It's a fitting closing statement by an artist who embraces all the contradictions of her career with a sly wink and a sense of grace. Judy Henske's life story reads like a movie script; her music is the soundtrack. It's hard to believe and a delight to listen to. There's no question about <u>that</u>.

-- Barry Alfonso