

Juno Award winner Laila Biali brings modern jazz sounds to Cultural Centre



By Brock Weir

Juno Award-winning singer Laila Biali has toured the world, collaborating with the likes of Paula Cole and Sting ? and this Friday, she's bringing her modern spin on jazz to the Aurora Cultural Centre.

A natural ?storyteller? who won the 2019 Juno Award for Vocal Jazz Album of the Year, she tells The Auroran she is looking forward to connecting with local audiences in the intimate ambiance of the Centre's Brevik Hall, along with the other members of her jazz trio.

?Smaller, more intimate listening-style rooms that more closely resemble a jazz club will feel more immediate to the audience, which then results in more immediate feedback with the band,? she says, adding the ?interaction and interplay? that happens between the band and the audience is something difficult to replicate.

Ms. Biali entered the music scene as a classically-trained artist, but a classically-trained artist who was also interested in pop and world music. When she began exploring jazz, she says that she, like many artists, began emulating what she heard. Over time, she says, she found the variety of music she listened to ? and loved in her daily life ? started to impact her process as a songwriter.

?My husband ? my boyfriend at the time -- was really the one who challenged me to stop worrying about the ?jazz' box and making sure that what I was releasing fit into some tidy definition of ?jazz,?' she recalls. ?Jazz is a very broad style of music anyway. Jazz crossing over into pop is becoming more and more common and I feel a little less alone in what I once did. I learned to embrace the uniqueness of what I do and hoped that it may also reach people who wouldn't typically consider themselves jazz fans.?

That's exactly what has happened as Ms. Biali has attracted legions of fans who come at music from many different directions.

As a genre-bending artist, she says she was quickly greeted with a positive reaction ? both from fans and her peers. The Toronto-based singer's success has also stretched beyond Canada, where she has found new fans in the United States, particularly in New York where she finds fans and artists alike are ?less concerned with labels to a degree.?

But realizing her success and perfecting the formula took going a little too far, she said, citing her 2015 album *A House of Many Rooms*. It's an eclectic album with slight elements of jazz on many of the songs, but it can also be defined as an ?indie-adult contemporary alternative pop record.?

?That one did kind of alienate some of my listeners and supporters, and some people in the industry that are in the jazz world,? she says. ?It was meant to exist in another space. What I realized with that is unless you're Sting it is very difficult as an artist who is still establishing themselves to venture off into another territory. Even though that album was very important to me, especially as a writer testing the boundaries and kind of venturing too far away from my roots as a jazz musician, it led to the self-titled release, which is the one that won the Juno.

?It was coming back to some key foundational components of jazz: improvisation and harmony that maybe pushes the boundaries a little more. When I came back to that, there was still a little bit of pop sensibility to some of the songs that really felt like home.?

Citing Sting as an artist who easily transitions between boundaries is a natural comparison as Ms. Biali counts the British icon as one of her chief influences. Having worked closely with him in recent years, she says she didn't know what to expect when their paths first crossed, but she was struck not only by his ?extraordinary work ethic? but also his warmth as a person and collaborator.

?He still has this very childlike spirit and fearlessness as he explores his views,? she says. ?I still dream of writing music with him.?

Canadian singer Paula Cole is another performer she looks up to. Working with Ms. Cole underscored for Ms. Biali the importance of finding that work-life balance while also giving it her all.

?As a performer, I have never seen anyone who gives as much as she gives on stage,? says Ms. Biali, recalling one evening when she took the stage with Ms. Cole in a 300-seat casino theatre in Las Vegas, only to be greeted by a ?small but mighty? audience of 25.

?I will never forget watching how she responded,? says Ms. Biali. ?She gave 200 per cent on stage for those 25 people in what kind of felt like an empty theatre.?

When she takes the stage at the Aurora Cultural Centre this Friday, things promise to be considerably more intimate.

She plans on bringing to Brevik Hall songs from her most recent release, favourites from what she describes as the 'Great Canadian Song Book' including Neil Young and Joni Mitchell.

'I love human stories,' she says of what gets her creative juices flowing, 'the stories of my own experiences and the people I am close to. It's all storytelling.'

The Laila Biali Jazz Trio performs at the Aurora Cultural Centre this Friday, November 22 at 8 p.m. as part of the Brevik Hall Presents Signature Series. Tickets are on sale now online at auroraculturalcentre.ca or over the phone at 905-713-1818.