

Andrea Claburn Long Bio

Born in Baltimore, Maryland to a classical pianist mother and a jazz aficionado father, Andrea Claburn knew what she wanted to do by the age of four. “I started begging my mother to let me to take piano lessons. She would play Chopin and Beethoven, and I would go to the piano when she was done and try to recreate what I’d heard. I wanted to play so badly.” Her mother finally relented when Andrea reached the ripe old age of six. “My mom was very smart. She said, ‘you’re not ready’ when I was in preschool. She was the opposite of a pushy stage mom. By making me wait to study piano, she made it clear that it was a privilege and I should treat it accordingly.” Meanwhile, her father introduced her to his favorite jazz artists: Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, the MJQ, Bill Evans. “I have no memory of not knowing every song on *Kind of Blue*” she says. “It’s like it was part of my DNA. That album, along with another of my Dad’s favorites, *Time Out*, were both released in 1959 when he was a young man and everything was possible, and I think they were sort of the soundtrack of his youth – and, consequently, of mine.”

Her family moved to Northern California when she was five, and Andrea was raised in Davis, a university town known for both agriculture and fine art. “Davis had all these apparent contradictions. It was a small town in the middle of Yolo County, but with a pretty sophisticated populace. UCD was known for its agricultural and vet schools, but in the ‘70s and ‘80s the university also had some of the most celebrated artists in the country on faculty, like Robert Arneson and Wayne Thiebaud. Davis was laid-back, but with a lot of creativity and a progressive, experimental vibe that made it an interesting place to grow up.”

In addition to piano, Andrea picked up her great-grandfather’s violin at age eight, and within three years was playing in youth orchestra. The collaborative aspect of orchestra motivated her as a violinist: “I loved being a part of a multi-instrument organism that moved together and breathed together, making great music.” Her orchestral work culminated in a first place win for her high school chamber string orchestra, under the direction of local legend Richard Brunelle, at the invitation-only Vienna International Youth and Music Festival when she was sixteen. “That experience was just beyond anything I could have imagined at the time. It was my first trip to Europe, and it made me want to travel and live abroad.” In addition to orchestra, Andrea sang in the DSHS Madrigal choir, an *a cappella* ensemble that performed intricate and challenging repertoire. After high school, she headed for the University of California at Berkeley and became immersed in theater, with music taking a back seat to being on stage. “By the time I was about fifteen I was considering a career as a classical pianist, but in the end I couldn’t face that much time alone with my instrument – musical collaboration was much more interesting to me. So I kind of put music on the back burner and looked to other avenues for creative expression.” After spending her junior year abroad at the University of Sussex in England, Andrea returned to Berkeley to graduate with a BA (with high honors) in Humanities. “Such a marketable degree,” she deadpans, “I knew I’d have to start out on a bottom rung somewhere to earn a living.”

Landing an entry-level administrative job at San Francisco PBS affiliate KQED fresh out of college led to an eight-year stint during which time Andrea worked her way up to the position of Unit Manager in the TV production division. Putting television shows together

appealed, like orchestral work, to her collaborative spirit. “I really enjoyed making television, mostly because of the production team. It takes a lot of people to put a show together, and every single one has to be really good at what he or she does.” But she continued being an avid jazz fan, as well as playing piano and singing, and there was always a nagging awareness that TV production wasn’t her true passion. When she gave birth to her first child in 1999 and decided to resign her position at KQED, there was a moment of clarity: “I had left my job and had this beautiful baby girl – which really does change your entire outlook – and for the first time in my adult life I asked myself a simple question: if I could do anything at all from this day forward, what would it be? The answer was, go back to music. I wasn’t quite sure how to make it happen, but I knew it was what I wanted, and I knew I wanted it to be jazz.”

A call to one of the most respected vocal coaches in the Bay Area got the ball rolling. “It was actually my husband who found Raz Kennedy. I was so nervous at my first lesson, but Raz, being the awesome person he is, immediately put me at ease. Now we’re colleagues and friends, but I was such a newbie then.” Voice lessons with Kennedy led to classes at a small music school on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley called the Jazzschool, which at the time consisted of three small rooms above a café. “My first teachers at the Jazzschool were Ledisi and Frank Martin. It was, and still is, a great place to learn from the best.”

When a second daughter came along in 2002, music once again took a back seat to family. But it wouldn’t last long. By early 2005, Andrea was back at the Jazzschool, studying improvisation with Suzanne Pittson, now the chair of the CCNY music department and a leading vocal jazz educator. Andrea started gigging professionally in 2006 and made the rounds of local venues over the next few years, rapidly gaining confidence as a bandleader and performer and forming connections in the jazz community. “Our talent pool in the Bay is so deep – the east coast-centric music media often overlook world-class players here.” When the Jazzschool (now the California Jazz Conservatory) launched a degree program in 2009, she felt it was the perfect opportunity to take her career to another level. “There was so much I wanted to say musically that I didn’t feel I had the chops to do yet, and the faculty there is second to none.” At the CJC, Andrea studied with west coast jazz luminaries including Laurie Antonioli, John Gove, John Santos, Marcos Silva, Jeff Denson, Mike Zilber, Erik Jekabson, Anthony Brown, and CJC founder and president, pianist Susan Muscarella. At the beginning of her second year, she was awarded the Mark Murphy Vocal Scholarship, an honor bestowed on a student who demonstrates “exceptional creativity and artistic promise.” Graduating with a B.Mus in 2015, the wealth of compositions and arrangements she had put together during her years at the CJC – as well as a call list of outstanding instrumentalists she had gotten to know along the way – gave her ample material for a full-length recording. In January, 2016 she went into Fantasy Studios with a group of top-tier players to record her debut album, *Nightshade*.

The songs on *Nightshade* capture Andrea’s eclectic musical sensibility while remaining squarely in the jazz idiom. As sole producer and arranger, she assembled a band that could expand and contract as each arrangement required. As a result, the album has both instrumental variety and a cohesive sound. Featuring an all-star lineup of Bay Area players including Matt Clark, Sam Bevan, Alan Hall, Terrence Brewer, Erik Jekabson, and John Santos, the songs are wide-ranging and adventurous, including a four-horn arrangement of her original *My Favorite Flavor*, and the unusual combination of string quartet, guitar, bass,

and percussion on *Steal Away*. “I’m a little obsessive... I labor over compositions and arrangements forever. I read once that Monk did that with his melodies, and now I totally get it. It’s about creating something that’s interesting and tuneful but making it sound effortless, as if melody just springs from the harmony naturally.” Her family is one source of compositional inspiration: *Lionheart* was written for her younger daughter, Natalia, and *Colors of Light* for her eldest, Catherine. *My Favorite Flavor*, with its strong NOLA groove, is an ode to the art form she loves: “My organizing metaphor when I sat down to write it was: if jazz were a man, what kind of a song would I write to describe him?” *The Fall of Man*, a cautionary tale about desire and betrayal, evokes a classic swing-era standard but with a darkly modern edge. The last song on the album, *Steal Away*, is the outlier: composed as an elegy to Claburn’s parents, who died 18 months apart in 2009 and 2010, the song is wistful with a palpable melancholy and unexpected instrumentation. “It’s a meditation on memory, loss, and the ephemeral nature of existence. It’s meant to keep you slightly off-kilter, with 10-bar A sections and a tri-tone at the end of the melodic line. My arrangement features a string quartet, and I was thrilled to have great string players for the recording.” Grammy award-winning violinist Mads Tolling layered both violin and viola parts, and Joseph Hébert, Assistant Principal cello of the Oakland Symphony Orchestra, played cello.

The handful of standards that appear on *Nightshade* were carefully chosen from several of Claburn’s strongest musical influences: Betty Carter (“I Can’t Help It”); Bill Evans (“Turn Out the Stars”); and Hoagy Carmichael’s “Skylark,” a song she was drawn to by vocal legend Mark Murphy. “Murphy’s version is so brilliant – to be honest, he kind of scared me away from even attempting that song for a long time. Then I heard a fantastic arrangement by my friend Ruthie Dineen for two horns with a hip groove and reharmonization; I rewrote the horn lines and juggled parts around a little so I could sing the melody.” Nearly a century after it was first recorded, Andrea re-imagined Turner Layton & Henry Creamer’s *After You’ve Gone* – one of the few early jazz tunes to become a standard – as a Ska romp. “I always wanted to re-interpret that song and give it less self-pity and more spite.” *Turn Out the Stars* was chosen for Bill Evans’ characteristic harmonic and melodic depth. “Evans wrote it after his father died. It’s an exquisite expression of desolation, especially with Gene Lees’ lyrics.” *Stars*, along with her own *Lionheart*, presented opportunities to feature the virtuosity of pianist Matt Clark. A first-call sideman and bandleader, Clark is well known to jazz musicians on both coasts but less so to the general public. “Everything Matt does at the piano is interesting. He’s just brilliant. I could listen to him play all day long.” A little-known 1936 Duke Ellington tune, *Echoes of Harlem* (lyric title *Infinite Wisdom*), sets Andrea’s lyrics – which open with a quotation from Langston Hughes’ poem “Acceptance” – to her own inventive arrangement and features percussion great John Santos on bongos. “John is a legend, but he’s also the nicest man you will ever meet. Smart, dedicated, generous – he’s all about the music. I was so honored to have him play on my debut album.”

Nightshade also features a composition by Marcus Shelby, one of the Bay Area’s most prominent bandleaders and composers, the jazz waltz *Daybreak* (original title *Blue Monday*), and guitar great Pat Metheny’s *Timeline* appears in lyric version as *Bird on a Wire*; Andrea wrote the lyrics to both songs.