



## Let the Sun Shine Soaking Up Serotonin with Nellie McKay

BY JON STEELY, PHOTOGRAPHY

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May 2010

Talking with singer-songwriter Nellie McKay has the same effect as listening to her latest release *Normal As Blueberry Pie – A Tribute to Doris Day*. You feel a warm wave of kindness wash over you, a nostalgic throwback to a nicer place and time when things were a little less cynical and a lot less cruel. With an ethereal singing voice that would be more at home pouring out of a 1930's victrola, Ms. McKay is a lovely cross between today and yesterday, known for emoting the sound of the Great American Songbook while peppering it with funk, disco, rap and a biting, Dylanesque wit

Born in London and raised in Manhattan, McKay's unique brand of artistry sprung from an unusual starting point for a young girl. "I loved the movie, *Great Balls of Fire*," she says, from her home near Central Park West. "Jerry Lee Lewis made me want to play the piano and I broke many piano stools because of that movie. Everyone in my house used to get so mad at me! I also really envied Frank Sinatra's lifestyle. It's like the opening line of *Goodfellas*, 'As far back as I remember, I always wanted to be a gangster.'" Soon, the young pianist found another form of expression. "I listened to Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, but I became a singer because of Doris Day. It was reading her autobiography and hearing her songs that made me want to get out from behind the piano."

McKay (rhymes with "pie"), who also strums the ukulele, did a two-year stint at the Manhattan School of Music before receiving a glowing review in Time Out New York magazine for a lower East Side gig. A bidding war between major record labels erupted, jumpstarting an impressive and sweeping career that includes critically acclaimed albums (*Get Away From Me*, 2004, *Pretty Little Head*, 2006, *Obligatory Villagers*, 2007), writing and recording songs for the 2005 Jennifer Aniston vehicle *Rumor Has It*, and an outstanding 2006 Broadway debut, starring with Cyndi Lauper in "The Threepenny Opera." Occasionally, she appears in movies, co-starring with Hilary Swank and Gerard Butler in 2007's *P.S. I Love You* and currently preparing to shoot a feature film directed by documentarian David Grubin. "I don't think I'm a very good actor. I'm more of an improviser. And I'd rather improvise, like on "Curb Your Enthusiasm," than have to remember lines. I think improvisation makes a performance more authentic. If I could play Larry David in every movie, I'd be very happy."

In 2009, McKay was approached by Columbia/Sony A&R Vice President Mitchell Cohen with a concept: A collection of cover songs spanning the expansive musical legacy of Doris Day. "I didn't really know if it was a good idea at first," she says of the magnificent *Normal As Blueberry Pie*. "But I've always been drawn to Doris Day and her wonderful spirit. In all of her pictures, she is smiling, projecting hopefulness and an attitude of always looking on the bright side of life. It's a powerful force. She suffered a lot in her life and to keep having such a joyous spirit is something to emulate."

Nellie McKay is not as normal as blueberry pie. She is an astounding artist, an eclectic and loveable performer and, like Doris Day before her, a bright ray of hope cutting through a world gone wrong. Her greatest gift is that she makes movement towards anything other than being a kind and compassionate soul feel like a complete waste of time. “I think that anyone who feels unhappy for any reason should go to an animal shelter and adopt a pet. It will brighten your life immeasurably. You’ll be doing as much for you as for them. I often think that it’s really best for me to tread lightly and do the little things, like try to make my dogs happy. When you try to do something big, you can make a big mess. If you just stayed in your little house, you wouldn’t make such a big mess.” ▼

*For more info on Nellie McKay, visit [www.nelliemckay.com](http://www.nelliemckay.com)*