

Molly Jenson

Oh my Gosh, it's Me!

Writer: Dean Nelson Photos: Bil Zelman

Watching Molly Jenson perform in a club feels like you're watching her at a family reunion. Her music is personal and her quirky comments between songs are the kinds of things you'd say to people who have known you forever. She's relaxed, amused, happy to be making music, happy you came to hear her, assuming you'll love her. And she's right, especially about that last part. The lyrics, the melodies, the emotion, the humor, the love, the wonder, all connect with the audience. She's a mix of Joni Mitchell and Bette Midler. She hates the first comparison, but she's flattered by the second. She has toured in Japan, Europe, and the U.S., and her album *Maybe Tomorrow* will be released in March. In addition to hearing her in clubs, you can hear her on the television shows *Grey's Anatomy*, *Knight Rider*, and *Privileged*. *Teen Vogue Magazine* called her one of the stars to watch on MySpace and compared her to Norah Jones and Sheryl Crowe.

Full disclosure: I was Molly's writing professor when she was in college. She did the assignments (I don't remember what grade she earned), but in conversation back then, she told me that writing stories wasn't her passion. Her passion was making music. She was right on both counts.

We met recently at a coffee shop that happened to be across the street from a site where she was supposed to get married a few years ago, but she and her fiancé broke it off at the last minute. I swear, I didn't know that when I suggested the location. She didn't realize it until we sat down to talk.

interviewed exclusively for risen magazine at a starbucks in san diego

Risen Magazine: So how bitter are you right now that we're looking across the street at the place where you didn't have your wedding?

Molly Jenson: I'm good. I'm not bitter. [Laughs] Just surprised!

RM: How old were you when you knew you wanted to make music?

MJ: I was raised with a lot of Christian music around me, some of it pretty cheesy. I wanted to be the next Sandi Patti. I remember leading worship at a camp one night and saying to a guy, both of us with tears in our eyes, [Gets breathy voice] "I could lead worship for the rest of my life."

RM: Did you say it in that same Marilyn Monroe voice you just used with your eyes closed?

MJ: I'm sure I did.

RM: Is that still true?

MJ: No. Absolutely not. It was true then. I did that sort of thing for about nine years. I was in a Christian band for a year called Everybody Duck. It was a great experience.

RM: Do you want to talk about that breakup?

MJ: We were going to get married and he asked me what kind of ring I wanted. I drew him a picture, and the next week he broke up with me.

RM: You obviously drew the wrong kind of ring.

RM: What's the difference between a good Christian song and just a good song?

MJ: Most Christian songs don't relate to most people. They only relate to Christians. They play favorites. My goal is to write music, and if it hits somebody, no matter where they're at, awesome. I want anybody to be able to listen to my music and relate.

RM: Maybe it's a maturity thing on your part. The Christian music was fine for when you were living at one level, but then you experienced something that plumbed something deeper and more painful, and the Christian music didn't address those issues.

MJ: Totally. I haven't done worship music in a long time.





RM: I disagree. When I have seen you perform, sometimes the club takes on a very worshipful atmosphere during your songs. It's even better than going to church.

MJ: OK—thank you—let me rephrase that. I haven't done music with a congregation in a church for a long time. I remember leading worship at a church and afterward a guy said how great it was, and started to buy one of my CDs, and he said, "So, it's a worship CD?" And I said no. Then he said, "Well, is it a Christian CD?" and I said, "I'm a Christian, but the songs aren't really about God. He's interwoven in it, but it's more about boys and stuff and issues." And he said, "Well, you're going to make a worship CD, though, right?" And I said, "Probably not." And he said, "Wow, that's too bad. Too bad." And he walked away.

RM: Eugene Peterson says that any time a story has been well told, or a song has been well crafted, the Gospel has been served.

MJ: I think more people are starting to see things that way, which is refreshing, but a lot of people don't. My best friend's dad just died, and we were all around him when he took his last breath. A man came over to visit during those final days and saw me playing my guitar. He told me about his son who was trying to make it in music—the son is laying tile to support his music career. But the music is secular, the guy said, and he said he just wished that his son would make music that God was blessing. I said, "Don't you think God is blessing your son's wanting to make music even though he's not writing songs about God?" The man said no. And I thought to myself, I'm so glad you're not my dad.

RM: Speaking of parents, were yours OK with your switch from doing overtly worship music to what you do now?

MJ: Oh my goodness yes. Totally. They are 100 percent supportive. There was never even a question.

RM: You're not rejecting anything.

MJ: No, I'm not. My parents want me to do what I want to do.

RM: So much creativity in the world comes out of an experience of suffering, but that's not really your experience, is it? Comedians, for instance, often come from backgrounds of great pain, except for guys like Will Ferrell, who grew up happy.

MJ: I have pain, but not because of my family. They always let me be creative. I was the weirdest kid. I was always entertaining, always up on a stool showing off, always dressing up and dancing around. I was a really happy child trying to make people laugh. My parents encouraged it.

RM: What would change about you once you become Molly Jenson "the brand"?

MJ: I would probably have a personal chef and a personal trainer. I feel a little soft these days and need to get in shape.

RM: Need to tone it up a little?

MJ: Yeah, and feel a little healthier. I'm not very self-motivated. But if I became very famous I hope not a lot would change. It's important for me to be personable with fans.

RM: That is one of your trademarks.

MJ: I am no longer an extrovert, though. I'm an introvert now. I go to movies and eat alone a lot, and I like being alone. Maybe because of how much time I have spent with people. It's probably a safety thing, too. I'm great with strangers, but it's hard for me to cultivate relationships. I love having the right people around me. People in my band are my really good friends.

RM: How old were you when you thought, This works for me.

MJ: I knew that I could sing, even when I was little. That's when I was in my first band, called GALS.

RM: That has to stand for something.

MJ: It stands for "Get A Life, Sistah." I was twelve.

I was the weirdest kid. I was always entertaining, always up on a stool showing off, always dressing up and dancing around.

RM: And the story behind this band?

MJ: I was in a very small school, and we had eight girls in our class. We were all in the band. I sang the solo on the theme song. Wanna hear it?

RM: More than I can tell you.

MJ: [Closes her eyes tightly and sings in a sassy tone] "Get a life, don't want to be left behind now/ Get a life He has for you an eternal one/ Get a life cuz there might not be a next generation." That was followed by a rap. We were pretty conservative.

RM: That was catchy!

MJ: Catchy is a good word for it. I don't want to leave the impression that I was the lead singer for GALS—it was just for our theme song. I don't want the other members to read this and say, Oh, she totally sold us out, that b—ch. After that I started singing in churches. People encouraged me as a teenager to try out for the worship band, so I did and I made it. But then I went to college and tried out for the choir and didn't make it.

RM: You got cut from the choir?

MJ: I think it was because I had a bad attitude. My mom really wanted me to try out but I didn't want to be involved in choir in college.

RM: Are you associated with a cause, like clean water, eradicating disease, prison reform, whatever?

MJ: A friend of mine committed suicide a few years ago. He was bipolar. His parents wanted to do something to remember him by, so they had an event where people could grieve and ask questions. There was music and art, and it was so good that we decided to do it once a year. We're under the umbrella of Yellow Ribbon, the suicide prevention agency. My grandfather also committed suicide. There are so many people who have issues with mental illness, and people don't talk about it very much. Going to Africa and adopting children is the popular thing to do, but there are a lot of people around us who are dealing with mental issues, suicidal thoughts, and it's like a taboo subject. That's something I'm passionate about.

RM: What are the Molly Jenson vices that no one knows about?

MJ: I don't bite my nails. But I have to keep them short or they gross me out. Vices? Forever 21 is my favorite store, even though the new sweater I'm wearing right now is from there and it has a hole in it. And I'm a big Disney fan. It's my dream to write a song for one of the Disney girls. I know all their names.

RM: Maybe you could appear in the next *High School Musical* movie?

MJ: There aren't any more. They'd have to do a "College Musical: Freshman Year," and that would only get dirty. I love *High School Musical*. I loved *Hairspray*. I love musicals. And hip-hop.

RM: Will you start doing hip-hop in your show?

There are a lot of things that I'm trying to figure out about God, but one thing I believe is that He puts desires in our hearts.

MJ: No. It's on my workout mix, though.

RM: Any secret tattoos?

MJ: I have one. It's just a star on my wrist.

RM: And the significance is . . . ?

MJ: Does it have to have significance? I was with a friend one day and said, "I want to get a tattoo," and she said, "So do I!" So we went straight to the tattoo parlor. I'll have to give a lot of thought to whether I get another one.

RM: Maybe a quote from *High School Musical*?

MJ: Or an etching of Corbin Bleu. He's a hottie. I'd love to do a song with him.

RM: How cool is it to hear your songs on television?

MJ: It's pretty incredible. When my song played on *Knight Rider*, it was playing on a girl's CD player really quiet in the background. On *Grey's Anatomy* I heard it in the background and said, "Oh my gosh, that's Greg Laswell!" And then fifteen seconds later I said, "Oh my gosh, it's me!" I loved it. I was with my neighbors and my brother to watch *Privileged* when my song was going to be on it, and just as the song got a couple of seconds in, the picture switched to Barack Obama giving his acceptance speech. It was election night. And I was like, "I know this is a really important event and everything, but did his speech have to be on EVERY channel?" I'm just kidding there, by the way. I understand what's important.

RM: Are you going to write about the death of your friend's father?

MJ: Probably. I played my guitar a lot while he was dying. Some things came together as I was playing for him—something along the line of, It's OK to go. No doubt someone will use it as a breakup song. But I'm not a super-emotional person. A lot of musicians feel things very deeply, are up and down a lot and melancholy, but I'm just not that person. Dealing with this death was hard, but my goal for being there was to keep my friend up and smile and cry with her. I don't write to vent. Sometimes I wish I was a little more emotional or brooding, but mostly I'm glad I'm not.

RM: Brooding might be overrated.

MJ: You're right.

RM: Can you make any money doing what you do? Or is that too personal of a question?

MJ: It's not too personal of a question. Let's let people know! I don't make a lot of money. I got an advance with my record deal, and I'm happy with that. I used to play whether I got paid or not, because I had to get out there and get my name known. But I can't do that all the time and can't afford to bring my band some places. Sometimes I will pay the band out of my own pocket, because I know that what we'll make won't be enough to pay everyone. Sometimes we play at a club and the band gets it all. I pay them before I pay myself. It means that much to me to have them play with me.

RM: How do you stay off the streets?

MJ: I have other jobs doing Photoshop work for clients that pay the bills. I am also doing some voiceovers. I have a great British voice—someone who sounds like she's on the BBC. It is my dream to be the voice of a Disney cartoon.

RM: Who would you travel a long way to see in concert?

MJ: I'm not a super-fan of anyone's, and the thought of traveling far for anything sounds like an inconvenience. But I would probably go far to see Rufus Wainwright. Or Harry Nilsson. But he's dead. I'd be traveling a long time for him.

RM: What's your best concert experience?

MJ: I played at a benefit for Habitat for Humanity, and it was sold out, and I opened. It's always an honor to be the only girl in a lineup of all guys. It was a great, quiet, responsive crowd. The sound was amazing, I was the funniest I've ever been, and everyone laughed at my jokes, and everyone thought I was on. It was amazing.

RM: You really are funny in your shows. Can you keep that up as you keep playing bigger venues?

MJ: If there is a night where I didn't feel that I did all that well in my performance, but I made someone laugh between songs, I feel like I had a great show. I don't want to get on stage and just play for people. I don't think people want to just hear me sing. I think they want me to interact with them.

RM: What's your worst concert experience?

MJ: I was playing at a *Saturday Night Live*-type event, and every time I got up to sing the people in the audience started talking to each other in full voice. They didn't talk through anyone else's acts—just mine. I ended up saying something like, "Excuse me, can I have your attention? Helloooo?" I had to say it a couple of times. "You haven't listened to me at all, but could you listen to this one song, and maybe even sing it with me?" It sounded so snotty and diva-ish, and so not what I want to be, ever. Some listened, and many still chatted in full voice. I haven't been invited back.

RM: Were you ever at a show and said to yourself, That's going to be me.

MJ: I have. It was Jonatha Brooke. I saw her for the first time at the Coach House in San Juan Capistrano, when I was about twenty. I thought, I've gotta do that.

RM: Is making music a vocational call from God for you, or is this just the most obvious thing for you to do?

MJ: It's just the most obvious thing. There are a lot of things that I'm trying to figure out about God, but one thing I believe is that He puts desires in our hearts. Growing up, some of us were told to pray, and that God would then give



you the desires of your heart. But I think He already gave them to you when you were born. I had a friend who was obsessed with Australia. It's all she would talk about, and she'd always say, "I want to go there, I want to go there." And I said, "What are you waiting for? Why don't you just go?" And she said, "I'm waiting for God to just tell me what to do." I'm thinking, Are you kidding me? The desire is God saying, Hey, go do it. Waiting around for God to tell you what to do is so silly. I mean, I understand that there is a place for waiting, but not when the opportunity is right in front of you. I've always wanted to sing, and be a musician and entertain, and I'm doing it. This is a gift God gave me, and I would be doing a disservice to Him and to myself if I didn't go for it.

RM: When you're writing, do you get the sense that you're tapped into some-

MJ: It's always different.

RM: Do you have a routine before each show?

MJ: I do some warm-up exercises, and have to be careful because I have nodules on my vocal chords. I don't have a certain diet I follow. I try to stay away from tea and alcohol right before a show. I had a pint of beer before one show and I found out after the fact that I was sort of rude to my band. I didn't really notice it. But they brought it to my attention. So I drink a lot of water.

RM: What does the word *success* mean?

MJ: It means doing what you want to be doing, whether you're making a lot of money or not. It means you haven't been pushed down so hard that you

stopped doing what you wanted. Success is when you do something even though people tell you that you can't. When you're doing what you are meant to do.

RM: So is Molly Jenson successful?

MJ: Yes. I feel successful. I still have a couple of part-time jobs, and it's still a struggle, but I'm doing what I want to do and making it happen. Not in the most conventional way, maybe.

RM: What is failure?

MJ: You know that dad who said that God wasn't blessing his son's music because it wasn't all about God? If his son gives in to that, then that's failure. Giving in to people's closed-minded ideas of things. Not searching, not asking questions, just doing what people tell you to do. Giving in.

RM: What moves you to tears?

MJ: Kindness. Compassion.

RM: What makes you happy?

MJ: The TV show *Friends*. That makes me laugh out loud. My family, my dad, always does silly stuff to make me laugh.

RM: What would it take for you to say, "I've made it."

MJ: I would feel that way when I am making enough money to buy my parents something like a house or a car. Money is one of my biggest stresses. I would feel like I've made it when money isn't a stress and I know it won't be. And also if I was headlining my own arena tour. Or had a bus to tour in. And a personal chef and a trainer.

Success is when you do something even though people tell you that you can't. When you're doing what you are meant to do.

thing bigger than yourself—where something transcendent happens?

MJ: No. How's that for a short answer?

RM: Some people do have those moments and say they're just pencils in God's hands.

MJ: That's ridiculous, there is no way that is true.

RM: I was quoting Mother Teresa there. You just insulted Mother Teresa.

MJ: Shoot! I've been to her place, too! Shoot! But people who say things like that are usually more emotional than me. I've tried to feel like that, and have spent the majority of my life trying to feel like that, but I've never felt like that.

RM: I don't know that I've ever heard you swear before.

MJ: The first paper I ever did for one of your classes had some swear words in the title. It was a satire piece on girls who cuss in order to sound cool.

RM: Sorry, I don't remember it. What grade did I give you?

MJ: You gave me an A, and said you were proud of me.

RM: Why do you like the "Chronicles of Narnia" so much?

MJ: It's a lot easier for me to picture Jesus as a lion than as a human. I'm not sure why. I love the "Lord of the Rings" books. Loved "Harry Potter." I also read the "Twilight" series. I loved them. I read the second one, which is about 560 pages, in a day. She's not a great writer, but she's a great storyteller.

RM: You paint in your spare time?

MJ: I love to paint. I like to use acrylics, I like to paint collages, robots. If I went back to school I'd probably want to study art.

RM: What's the writing process like for you?

MJ: I start writing a new song almost every time I pick up my guitar to practice. My problem is follow-through and finishing it. I also have a voice recorder in my purse or on my phone. So when I get ideas I record them wherever I can.

RM: Does the phrase come first or the tune?



*Molly Jenson is an award-winning singer/songwriter with a new album, **Maybe Tomorrow**. Check her out on MySpace or at www.mollyjenson.com. She is not planning on getting married any time soon.*

