

Mindi Abair

PROFILE

Saxophonist/vocalist/songwriter Mindi Abair has been surrounded by talented musicians her entire life. Her paternal grandmother was an opera singer, and her father was a saxophonist and B3 player in a blue-eyed soul group called The Entertainers – a gig that kept the whole family on the road for several years throughout the early ‘70s. By the time the band broke up and the Abairs put down roots in St. Petersburg, Florida, five-year-old Mindi had already demonstrated musical aspirations of her own by taking up the piano.

She made the switch to saxophone in the fourth grade, and took part in every band program available in elementary, middle and high school. After a year at the University of North Florida, she transferred to Berklee, where she graduated magna cum laude with a degree in woodwind performance.

Abair recalls some wise counseling she received during her college years: “My saxophone teacher told me every week, ‘You have to start your own band. Don’t try to be someone else. Don’t practice a bunch of David Sanborn licks or Wayne Shorter licks. Go out and be your own person.’ It was the best advice anyone could have given me.”

She took the advice and ran with it, all the way to the opposite coast. She landed in Los Angeles, where she began a dues-paying process that lasted nearly a decade and included touring gigs with keyboardists John Tesh and Bobby Lyle and guitarist Jonathan Butler. When she was home from the road, she booked her own band in just about any club that would have them. And on those occasions when none would, she played on the streets of Santa Monica. “I didn’t want to wait tables when I had a degree in music,” she says. “I’d take my horn down to 3rd Street Promenade and just play. I paid my rent for quite a few months by doing that.”

Abair released her first album, the independently produced *Always and Never the Same*, in 1999, while touring with the Backstreet Boys. By the beginning of the new decade, the combination of a nonstop performing and the well-received indie release had helped her solidify her musical identity. “By the time I signed on with Verve in 2002,” she says, “I really knew who I was as an artist. I knew what I wanted to say, and I had a sound that was mine and no one else’s.”

It Just Happens That Way, her major-label debut in 2003, was the first in a string of solo recordings on Verve that also included *I Can’t Wait for Christmas* (2004), *Come As You Are* (2005) and *Life Less Ordinary* (2007). She made the move to Peak, a division of Concord, with the 2008 release of *Stars*, an album that showcased – more than any of her previous recordings – her attractive vocal work as an engaging counterpoint to her solid

saxophone chops.

This combination of highly refined skills takes even more of the spotlight on ***In Hi-Fi Stereo***. Co-produced by Abair and R&B mainstay Rex Rideout, her new album is set for release in May 2010 on Heads Up International, a division of Concord Music Group. In addition to Abair's touring band, the album features a number of guest players: veteran drummer James Gadson (a frequent session player for Bill Withers, Amos Lee and Nikka Costa), bassist Reggie McBride (Aretha, Rickie Lee Jones and Keb' Mo'), Mindi's Berklee classmate and friend Lalah Hathaway, nominated 2010 R&B Female Vocalist of the year, Ryan Collins and David Ryan Harris.

In Hi-Fi Stereo features a more organic approach than some of her earlier releases. "We didn't worry so much about making sure everything sounded perfect," Abair says. "It was more about just the spirit and the vibe in the studio at the time, and getting the right takes and having fun and playing off each other. This is a really feel-good party record."

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