

# **CALABRIA FOTI**

## **Interviewed by Joao Santos for**

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When someone like Sammy Nestico, famous for his arrangements for the Count Basie Orchestra and for Sarah Vaughan, says a lady can sing you had better listen to her because he knows quite well his business: producing great songs for great singers. The truth is that Nestico could hardly be more positive about Calabria Foti, who has just released a new CD, *A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening*: "Calabria is the complete artist." Over and over, critics remark how she draws out the "bare essence" of a lyric, just by singing the notes with unadorned sincerity, making her songs fresh and full-faced, as if each were important news. She brings emotion, intelligence and ultra-high standards to the music, and has that rare quality of 'letting you in on the little secret she seems to be keeping.' So let's find what these secrets are...

**AAJ:** Besides being born into a family of musicians that played standards and took you to jazz clubs what was the main thing that turned you to Jazz?

**Calabria Foti:** I turned to jazz because of the expression it allows. I am also a classically trained violinist in addition to being a vocalist, but it's the ability to improvise and to bend notes, rhythms, melodies and changes that I find really interesting and fun.

**AAJ:** Your first instruments were jazz guitar and bass and then violin. At what point did you decide you were going to be a singer?

**Calabria Foti:** Oh, I've always been a singer. I was a singer long before I ever picked up an instrument. I was writing songs on my guitar as a little kid and singing for my classmates and in the community from an early age. Being able to express my emotions, what's in my soul, is the highest joy for me, and being a vocalist allows that more than any other instrument for me. But, I love to do both - playing and singing. I could never make a choice to do one or the other. It's all musical expression, and I must express it, no matter how.

**AAJ:** Who were your first influences?

**Calabria Foti:** Well, my parents were my first influences. Then they introduced me to all kinds of music, and artists. I was able to hear legit and jazz musicians on a regular basis, so music was always in my head in one way or another. I think as singers, I really loved hearing Frank Sinatra, Ella

**Fitzgerald, Sammy Davis, Tony Bennett, Nancy Wilson, Barbra Streisand. Those singers put so much emotion into their songs, made something really special out of them, really *owned* the song.**

**AAJ:** How much of those influences do you still keep in your own singing?

**Calabria Foti:** Oh, I don't know. . . I don't think about it consciously. I just feel the music and try to express what the writer and lyricist wanted and get into the music and the story. If I feel like scatting on a tune, I do. It's all just communicating with the audience and the other musicians. I don't think about emulating anyone else, I just let go and do it.

**AAJ:** You have been collecting good reviews from the most demanding people in the music industry and I mean songwriters, like Johnny Mandel, and arrangers, like Sammy Nestico. Where are you aiming in your career?

**Calabria Foti:** I am incredibly grateful to Johnny Mandel, Sammy Nestico, Jorge Calandrelli, Johnny Mathis, Chris Botti, Dave Koz, people whose musicianship and accomplishments I admire so much, for being in my corner. I am very touched by their kindness and generosity. I would like very much for the CD to receive the recognition it deserves. It's a very special record as it crosses over from really great Jazz playing to Broadway showtunes to the Great American Songbook, so it can be enjoyed by a lot of different people, and my wish is that everyone gets to hear it. It's very hip and very commercial at the same time. I REALLY want Bob McChesney to receive all the recognition he deserves, as the producer, string arranger and trombonist extraordinaire! As for me, I want to keep growing as a musician and continue recording high quality music with great musicians, and keep receiving good notices from the industry and the public. That's it!

**AAJ:** Let's talk about your new CD - *A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening*. What can people expect from it?

**Calabria Foti:** I like making records that can be enjoyed on many different levels. And, as I've said, this CD has a lot of musical depth. It's a concept album about spending a romantic evening with that "special someone", and it's full of wonderful songs to enjoy, perhaps while you're by the fireside with a cup of cocoa or a glass of wine. You may even fall in love! The music is quite heavenly from the standpoint of bringing out certain emotions and taking you places, but ultimately it brings you home at the end of the evening.

**AAJ:** The CD is all about standards. How did you select the songs?

**Calabria Foti:** I did a great deal of searching to find just the right mix of

songs that are designed to “put you in the mood”. As someone who likes to do themes, each of the songs had to continue the arc of a romantic evening, so it becomes one seamless piece. Also, I wanted to find songs that hadn’t been overly done. Then I did a lot of rearranging and reharmonizing with Matt (Harris) and Bob (McChesney) to make these great old tunes sound fresh and modern.

**AAJ:** Some people say that standards are like a dead alley. I think you fully disagree...

**Calabria Foti:** It depends on the song and how it is treated, I think. I love great old tunes, I really do. I write my own songs but they’re more ‘poppy’, not at all the same format as “jazz standards”. I love to do my originals, favourite standards, and introduce songs that are great but not as well-known. It’s fun to do retro and modern stuff on the same program. It’s all enjoyable.

**AAJ:** Being also a songwriter why did you choose not to introduce your songs in this record?

**Calabria Foti:** I have projects in the works which will include some of my own songs. But on this CD, I decided, as I did on my first record, *When a Woman Loves a Man*, to honor the great American songwriters and singers who made those songs famous. I did my own little twist on the charts, but I really wanted to pay homage, in my own way, to Gershwin, Porter, Coleman, Van Heusen, Styne. I hope I accomplished that goal.

**AAJ:** How do you perceive the evolution from your first CD to this one?

**Calabria Foti:** My first record, *When A Woman Loves A Man*, was also a concept album, the arc of a relationship from beginning to end, while still paying tribute to the great singers who were my influences as a kid: Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Nancy Wilson, Judy Garland, Sarah Vaughn. As I’ve said, I like having a theme and a multi-layered approach to my recordings! *A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening* explores an evening of romance from beginning to end. The songs on this CD cross over more from show tunes, to edgy jazz, and romantic ballads. There’s a wider swath of styles on the new record. Both CDs are very lush and very jazzy at the same time, and they’re both really nice records that I believe will hold up over time. The next one is just a bunch of great tunes . . . no theme!

**AAJ:** Having heard your CD what can people expect from you in a live context?

**Calabria Foti:** It depends on the venue. We’re starting to do concerts with orchestras and strings so those will be a sort of live re-creation of the record. If I do a small group concert, then we do a variety of stuff, a lot of

tunes which will include songs from the CDs and some of my own tunes. I don't like to be penned in musically, I like to keep the live gigs a little loose, try new things, stay open to what I might want to do in the moment.

**AAJ:** Is there any musician you would like to play with?

**Calabria Foti:** Of course! So many players, so little time. . . There are so many wonderful musicians in the world it would take all day to list them and talk about them. All I know is there is so much to learn and so many people to learn from and play with, and I hope I get to do half of what I dream about!

**AAJ:** If you could bring a singer back to life who would you pick and why?

**Calabria Foti:** That's a tough question! (After some thought) How about Peggy Lee? She was a very sweet lady, and a good songwriter, too. Ella? I'd love to have a long conversation with her about scatting! Frank? No one delivered a song the way he did. We all miss him very much. Sammy Davis Jr. - He put so much of his heart and soul into everything he did. He had such gusto for living, for his music and for entertaining his audience. I wish I could just see his act once more, watch him dance and do his show the way he did it so masterfully. Those folks were ARTISTS, man. You've got me in tears, here!

**AAJ:** What projects do you have for your near future?

**Calabria Foti:** Oh, lots of things! I am working on material for my next CD, which will include at least a couple of my original songs. I'm also revisiting a record of lullabys which I started a long time ago but never released. I'm writing a book, and there are some other things in development. I'll have to keep you posted on those. Please stay tuned . . . and visit the website for news and updates: [www.FotiCD.com](http://www.FotiCD.com) Thank you, Joao!