

Melody Hollis — Welcome to Melodyland

WELCOME TO MELODYLAND

Back in December of 2010, I was dragged to an opening night at Musical Theatre West to see their production of *Annie*. I've seen *Annie*. Many times. Don't really need to see it again, if you know what I mean, which is why I say I was dragged there. Starring in the production was the original Annie, Andrea McArdle, this time playing Miss Hannigan (time flies, doesn't it). Whatever novelty that afforded wore off quickly, but the real joy of the production was the little twelve-year-old powerhouse playing the title role. Her name was Melody Hollis. I've seen a lot of Annies. They frequently make my teeth hurt and also make me want to rip my eyes out of their sockets. But not Melody. Why? Because not only could she belt out the songs, as required, but she also put something behind them – heart, feeling, and, hold your hats, reality. Her performance made me glad that someone had dragged me to the show. I met her afterwards and she was as delightful offstage as she was on (and, as it turned out, I'd seen her once before, on Broadway, in *White Christmas*).

Flash forward a few weeks later. We're in the midst of doing our monthly series of shows called Kritzerland at the Gardenia – all based on albums I've produced over the years. We're doing a Sondheim evening and I thought of Melody to do the film version of "The Glamorous Life." I contacted the director of *Annie* but it took him a really long time to get back to me, and by the time he had I'd given the song to someone else was already doing the show.

Flash forward a few weeks after that – out of the blue I get a Facebook message from Melody's mom, Dawn. She's heard about me, heard that I sometimes direct and put together acts for people and she wants to know if I'd consider doing one for Melody because there's so little musical theatre in LA and that's what Melody loves and wants to do. She thought it would just be a good project for her to work on, even if we never actually did the show. I wrote back and told her how much I'd liked Melody in *Annie*, but that I thought that putting together a one-person show for a twelve-year-old sounded a little – well – odd. But I said I'd think about it.

I thought about it. And the more I thought about it the more interested I became for a whole slew of reasons, most of which have to do with disliking certain aspects of cabaret. I thought she'd most likely be the youngest person to ever do a solo cabaret evening – I liked that. I thought we could have fun with the tropes of cabaret – I liked that. And I thought it would absolutely not be a project; if we were going to put together a show then she was going to do the show – I liked that, too. So, I told her mom that we should all get together over a meal to discuss and, most importantly, to make sure Melody and I got along and liked each other.

A few days later, we gathered at Mo's, a burger joint in Burbank. Well, it was instant like between Melody and me. We were just from the same planet, on the same wavelength, with good senses of humor, the latter of which is very important if I'm to work with someone. In fact, as the lunch evolved we were like two twelve-year-olds, laughing and having a grand time. Plus, I immediately liked her folks – Dawn, and her father Steve. I can tell you because I tend to create acts over a series of meals, we have to like eating together. And we all did.

At that lunch, I asked Melody a lot of questions, one of which was that if we were to proceed was she willing to try things she hadn't tried before, was she willing to be adventurous and go into new territories as an actress and singer, and she very energetically said yes. And that was that. But just to be sure that we'd work well together, I had her do one song at our next Kritzerland at the Gardenia. And it was a doozy – a long medley of the Sherman Brothers' nonsense songs. She showed up for the first rehearsal letter perfect and at the show she brought down the house – with Mr. Richard Sherman in attendance. As they say in the show business – she killed. In fact, we made her a regular at the Kritzerland monthly shows where she continued and continues to stop each and every show with whatever crazy song I throw at her and they include some incredibly weird and complex numbers.

And so we began our journey.

Over the next few months, we got together a lot, and discussed songs a lot – at first she told me she didn't really like ballads

and didn't want to do any. I said we really had to and that because she'd just turned thirteen, she couldn't keep doing the cutesy kid kind of things she'd always done (and done really wonderfully) – that she had to go into some new turf, song-wise. She was brave, she was bold, she was adventurous, and completely willing to try anything I asked of her. And out of it came her wonderful act, which we christened *Melodyland*. Along the way, we never had one disagreement; we only had a lot of great food, great fun, and lots and lots and lots of laughs. And the added treat of having her very talented father as musical director.

At her first performance – which could not have gone better – this girl was in control and had the audience in the palm of her hand from note one right through to the end, as you'll hear on this CD. The wonderful Les Traub, cabaret's best friend and supporter, came up to me to tell me how much he'd loved the show and how great he thought the songs I'd chosen for Melody were, especially the ballads. I smiled and told him that she'd chosen every single song in the show, including the ballads. I'd made a few suggestions, but the choices were all hers. He was amazed.

I was like a proud daddy that night. I've seen a lot of cabaret in my time, and I've directed and put together more than a few acts for some pretty great folks. But Melody was as self-assured, poised, and perfect as any of them. And yes, she grew as a performer – tackling not-so-easy ballads and making them uniquely hers. I've heard a lot of people sing "Children Will Listen," but the song as sung by a thirteen-year-old just took on whole new meanings and her performance of it was stellar.

I'm not always a fan of live recordings – I've done several because sometimes it just seems like that's the only way to capture the spirit of what's going on between the performer and the audience. And that's why I decided to record this show live because it just captured this really wonderful moment in time. And I hope that once you've visited that uniquely unique place called *Melodyland*, you'll want to return time and again – it really is a magic kingdom.

— Bruce Kimmel