

the arts

live music view

Olivia Newton-John Goes Live*Lon S. Cohen*

What do Olivia Newton-John and Albert Einstein have in common? Can't guess? Both know Max Born, Nobel Prize winning physicist. Max Born was a contemporary of the greatest minds in physics during the early part of the twentieth century. He was a good friend to both Albert Einstein (Einstein nominated Born for the Nobel Prize) and Werner Heisenberg (Heisenberg worked with him on Quantum Mechanical formulas). In a letter to Born in 1926, Einstein made his famous remark that, "The Old One does not play dice." Newton-John is Max Born's granddaughter. Quantum Physics and Sandy from "Grease" in one family - now that's some set of genes.

"I didn't ever get to meet him but my mother was extremely proud of him and spoke of him often," Olivia said of her famous grandfather when I spoke with her by phone before her appearance live on WLIW.

Olivia said she is attending a planned celebration of Max Born's 125th birthday in Germany this coming December. She will be singing a few songs at the event.

"He was kind. A good person as well as a wonderful mind," she said, proudly. "He helped many Jews leave Germany during World War II."

Although he was Christian, Max Born, along with many other scientists, was forced from Nazi Germany because he had a Jewish heritage. In 1933, Born was invited to teach at Cambridge. Along with Einstein and others, Born worked to rescue as many Jews as he could from the Nazis.

First getting to know Olivia Newton-John from her role in the iconic film version of "Grease", I have had a crush on her since she appeared as a blonde beauty in black leather, stamping out a cigarette in high heels, quipping her famous remark to Danny, "Tell me about it, stud."

In many, many daydream fantasies of my youth, while listening to the double record soundtrack, I was the one that she wanted, not John Travolta. (In full disclosure, my first crush was on Princess Leia in Star Wars of the previous year.) As you can see, I am not ashamed to admit that she was one of my boyhood crushes after seeing "Grease" on my eighth birthday. Men adore Olivia and women want to be her.



The influence of this classic musical movie is still seen in the “High School Musical” phenomenon of the pre-teen crowd today. It cannot be seen in the wretched sequel “Grease 2” that had something to do with bowling and starred young Michelle Pfeiffer as Stephanie Zinone. After years with “Grease” as a phenomenal and well-deserved success, influencing many imitators it is strange that they’ve reached back and brought “Xanadu” to the stage. But I guess it’s better than brining “Grease 2” to Broadway.

Way back when, Olivia Newton-John began her career as a Country Music singer. In 1971, she recorded a cover of Bob Dylan’s “If Not For You.” In 1973 her U.S. album debut, “Let Me Be There,” led to the first of many top ten singles. With a sweet and powerful voice, Olivia won Grammy Awards for Best Female Country Vocalist, Record of the Year, and Best Pop Female among many other awards.

“To me it was just music, not Country Music,” Olivia said of her early career. “My producer decided that my voice suited that type of music. I was fortunate that I had that opportunity back then. Luckily, Country Music was beginning to become popular.”

The crossover success of such popular Country stars today such as Shania Twain and Carrie Underwood owe a nod to the female artists who did it first. Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton, Crystal Gale, and Olivia Newton-John all pioneered the Country Pop sound.

“Today I think there is much more competition,” Olivia said of today’s Country Pop artists trying to come up with crossover hits.

Recently, Olivia Newton-John performed at the Sydney Opera House. The film of that concert is premiering on WLIW on October 2nd and showing nationally on public television in December. Backed by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and a variety of talented performers Olivia’s voice has not wavered in all that time. I forgot what a beautiful voice she had on her hit, “I Honestly Love You” until I heard it again, live.

If anything, her voice has gained a little. She said to me that she is probably much better now because she does work with her voice more often keeping it exercised. Steve Real, who does background vocals in the show, helps keep her in practice.

Of course she also dipped into the classics that cemented her pop icon status in both “Grease” and “Xanadu”. In the Eighties, Olivia Newton-John went from Country Star to Fifties Wannabe to Disco Diva. Her poppy, jumpy Eighties tune, “Physical,” topped the charts for ten weeks. You can imagine this may be hard to recreate with a full orchestra, but Olivia Newton-John has re-imagined it as a ballad. It’s so interesting to hear, that I almost wish she’d release it as a single.

“That came from messing around,” Olivia said of the song. “Andy Timmons, my Guitar Player, came up with something different for it.”

As for performing her songs with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Olivia said that it didn’t affect her singing or the composition of the other songs very much.

“(Conductor/Arranger) Rick Kin did most of the arrangements,” she said. “The strings added to the songs but didn’t change them very much.”

- The concert performance from Sydney is presented nationally by WLIW New York. It premiered on WLIW on October 2nd and will be showed nationwide in December. Check www.wliw.org for details.
- A breast cancer survivor well known for her humanitarian and wellness-related activities, Olivia will co-host the new season of integrative health series “Healing Quest” in early 2008 on PBS.

Lon S. Cohen has been a short order cook, a Generation X slacker (aka artist), a fence installer, a marketing designer and once he was the only Jewish kid working on a Christmas Tree lot. There is no order to the aforesaid list. He currently works full time but only to pay the bills for a McMansion, beautiful wife and three lovely children. What he really wants to do is write, podcast, blog and drink a really good IPA. Again, not in any order of importance. Visit him at www.lonscohen.com and contact him by email at lon@lonscohen.com.

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