

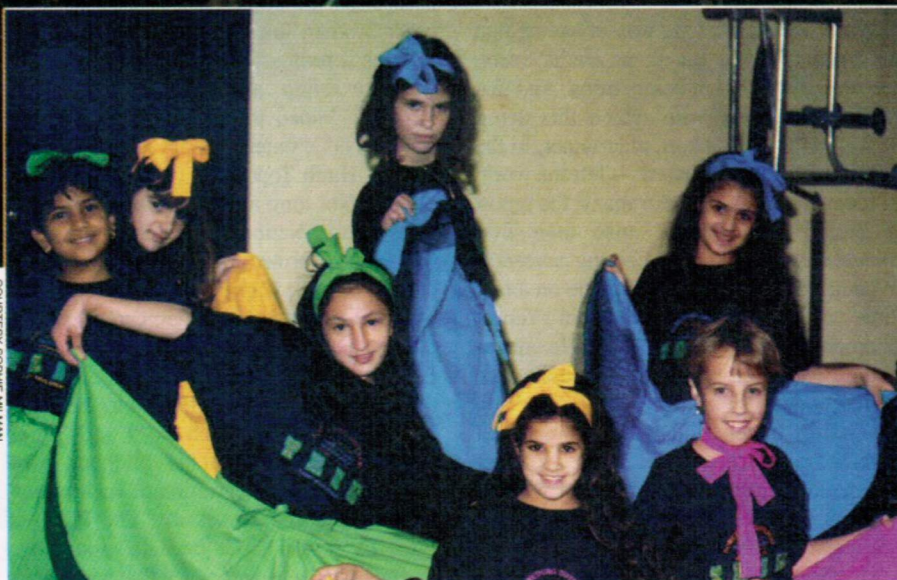
Stacey Stein Toronto

ON ONE OF THE biggest nights of her still tender career, rising Canadian jazz sensation Sophie Milman was in her hotel room, with only a half-hour left to get ready. Even though she was about to sashay down the red carpet and get some major face time on national TV at the Juno Awards — the Canadian equivalent of the Grammys, held in April, where her debut CD was

She may be the most promising new talent on the jazz-vocalist scene in North America, but Sophie Milman — Russian-born, Israel-raised, with no formal musical training — still finds it hard to believe that everyone's talking about her

nominated for best vocal jazz album of the year — she hadn't hired anyone to do up her face, but says she wasn't stressed about the way she looked. "When I look in the mirror, I don't like to see any makeup," she says.

There's some irony here, considering that 23-year-old Milman, whose disc was competing for the Juno with new releases by luminaries Diana Krall and Paul Anka, got her professional start at a weekly music showcase called "The Diva Series" at a Toronto club, where she impressed audiences as she took on jazz standards with a rich, honey-laced voice. But despite the glamorous photos that grace the jacket of her eponymously titled album and her dewy cover-girl looks,



COURTESY SOPHIE MILMAN

Though Milman ended up losing the Juno to Krall, she still got some screen time when she presented the award for artist of the year (to Vancouver crooner Michael Bublé). Her appearance at the awards show, along with her nomination for Canadian music's highest accolade, is sure to further establish her on the jazz scene, coming a month after her album's U.S. release and before its launch in Japan.

And yet Milman seems to have achieved success almost in spite of herself. Her speech is peppered with more than a few self-effacing comments, and she readily admits her insecurities and shortcomings. She never planned on becoming a jazz singer, and didn't even know she could sing until she received encouragement from a high school music teacher. And unlike most jazz vocalists today, she hasn't had any formal training. She isn't well-versed in music theory, doesn't practice much and is happy building her career

singing jazz standards. Right now, song-writing doesn't even have any particular interest for her. "I'd rather sing good covers than bad originals," says Milman. "I need to learn more about music and life before I can write a

song and I don't know if I ever will — I don't know if it's a strength I have. I can't make things rhyme if you put a gun to my head and I don't know enough about music to work on melody structure."

She says her album is a reflection of her personality and her musical and cultural interests. It's an eclectic mix of classic jazz ballads, two original tunes by British songwriters, and some international fare, such as Edith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose" and the peppy Brazilian tune "Agua de Beber," which she sings with élan. Milman's smooth, velvety alto is versatile enough to adapt well to this wide-ranging material — she does a spirited rendition of Sondheim and Bernstein's "I Feel Pretty," there's a soulful interpretation of Gershwin's "The Man I Love," and she injects a strong dose of verve into Cole Porter's "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," with its horns and bass line reminiscent of

A BUSINESS STUDENT WHO SINGS:

Milman (pictured here, performing with the Bill King Trio at Toronto's Top of the Senator club) says she was scared off performing for years after she appeared at age 9 in Israel's Festigal event (inset, Sophie is at bottom right). A decade later, a friend urged her to take the stage at a Toronto club — and three gigs later, she had a record contract.

A Star in Spite of Herself

in person, Milman is very much an anti-diva. Perhaps that's not surprising, considering she's a full-time student of business at the University of Toronto, whose eyes light up when she talks about the economic effects of demographic shifts. And the jazz career? It just sort of happened.

"I wasn't looking for this," Milman says during an interview at a student café back in Toronto, the day after the awards ceremony.

She's clad in jeans and a gray zip-up, and looks bookish in black-rimmed glasses, her chin-length blond hair still perfectly coiffed from the night before. "I never even considered making it my career, so when this happened, it was a very overwhelming, kind-of surreal experience. I didn't think I was good enough — I was always a real academic nerd, so the fact that it happened to me was really mind-blowing."

the theme song of the James Bond movies. If it sounds like there isn't an overall theme to the album, it's because there isn't.

"The label in the beginning was, like, there's no central theme, and I'm, like, you know what, I don't have a theme yet. I don't know what I am yet. Why the hell should I have a theme?" she says. "I'm diverse, so it makes sense for my first album to reflect that."

It's a formula that seems to have worked well, considering the album became a top 10 seller in Canada only four months after its release, with 15,000 copies sold, considered a very strong showing for an indie jazz release. The album is also in the top 20 on the U.S. jazz charts, and by early May had reached the No. 1 spot on iTunes jazz downloads. While musicians often toil in obscurity for years, with success eluding most, Milman was signed to a label, Mississauga-based Linus Entertainment, after her fourth gig. The Juno nomination came with only 30 performances under her belt and a mere three and a half years in the business, which is why her meteoric rise and breezy success have raised a few eyebrows, and taken Milman herself, as much as anyone, by surprise. She says it took a lot of convincing and "a lot of people telling me I'm great" before she thought she could pursue jazz seriously. Indeed, if it weren't for her blossoming jazz career, which she intends to pursue full-time after she graduates next year, she probably would have ended up in law school.

"It's going to take a lot of exposure to convince myself I'm a celebrity," she adds. "It took me a year and a half after signing the record deal to realize that I'm a singer, and even after I finished recording the album, I didn't think of myself as a professional singer. I saw myself as a commerce student who sang."

And while she says other musicians are nice to her to her face, she seems to have a sense that this may not always be the case when her back is turned. But she is far from apologetic about the ease with which she's found success. "If people say I haven't suffered for my art, I've suffered in other ways," she says.

MILMAN IS REFERRING TO her childhood and teen years, during which she lived in three different countries by the age of 16 and her parents often struggled to make ends meet. A peripatetic life during her formative years took its toll on her social life

and she was often lonely.

Born in the industrial city of Ufa, in Russia's Ural mountains, Milman was 7 when her family moved to Israel in 1990.

PHOTOS COURTESY SOPHIE MILMAN



Although she describes her childhood in Russia as idyllic, both her parents and grandparents experienced anti-Semitism. The final straw came when her father, an engineer, was called into KGB headquarters after attending a Purim party, and was asked to provide the names of the other attendees, their political affiliations and whether they were Zionists. When he refused to cooperate, he was threatened with a work transfer to Siberia. It was soon after that that the family emigrated to Israel.

Growing up in Haifa, Milman was introduced by her father to the music of such jazz greats as Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington, and gospel singers like Ray Charles and Mahalia Jackson, who she says "taught me passion and influenced my music tastes." Most of her childhood in Israel, she says, was difficult, as her parents juggled several jobs and Milman had trouble fitting in with other children. "I was always stuck between two worlds," she says. "I didn't fit in with the Israelis, I didn't fit in with the Russians and it took me six years to find people that I felt were sim-

ilar to me and that really resonated with me." But by the time the family was integrating into Israeli life and her parents' economic situation started to improve, in 1999,

VALUED FAMILY: Milman sees herself as combining Israeli 'warmth and honesty' with Russian 'family values and traditions.' (Above) With her parents before leaving Russia; (right) with her mother and the family's first car after their 1990 arrival in Haifa.



when she was 16, the Millmans immigrated to Canada due to concerns over the security situation.

Having spent her formative years in Russia and Israel, Milman describes herself as "Russian Israeli," saying her personality is "a real combination of the two" — a blend of Israeli "warmth and honesty" and of "Russian family values and traditions."

Milman is very close to her parents (and a younger brother, Tal), who are supportive of her jazz career, and she still lives at home.

Sporting necklaces with a *hamsa* and a Magen David, she clearly is proud of her Jewish identity. Milman says that culturally she's "very, very Jewish."

"That's how I identify myself," she explains. "As a Jew first and everything else second." She says she has very strong feelings for Israel and ardently supports the country, which she will be visiting this summer with her family to celebrate Tal's bar mitzvah.

It was while still in Israel that Milman had her first taste of performing, although the experience doesn't bring back fond memories. At the age of 9, she was one of 10 children chosen from about 10,000 who auditioned to perform in Festigal, the nationally televised live children's music festival. Milman says she didn't fit in with the outgoing Israeli kids and the experience

warm reception to her rendition of a gospel tune — discover that she could perform.

Nevertheless, although she also excelled in her studies and ran her school's tutoring program, she says that socially she was miserable in high school, and she found herself "living from one music night to the next." When she was 18, for about six months, she sang with the Toronto All Star Big Band, a "semi-professional" group made up of teenagers, although she says there was very little performance involved. While in high school, she also spent a lot of time listening to jazz discs she took from the library. "I'm such a nerd," she says with a self-deprecating laugh. "I wish I was invited to more parties."

A decade after Festigal, Milman took to the stage at the "Diva Series" at RD's BBQ and Blues with the encouragement of a jazz musician friend. Three gigs later, at the same club, the then-19-year-old was signed on to Linus Entertainment after the label's president, Geoff Kulawick, was impressed by her mature, sophisticated voice. Kulawick has managed her career ever since, and Milman's lawyer-boyfriend, Casey Chisick, acts as her legal representative. She recorded her debut CD over two summers, and spent last summer touring all over Canada, singing as a top attraction at all the major jazz festivals, including those in Montreal, Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa. She was nominated last year for a National Jazz Award and Canadian Smooth Jazz award in the category of female vocalist of the year, losing out

on the former to Molly Johnson and the latter to Krall.

Although her star is on the rise, Milman's success hasn't yet translated into a burgeoning bank account. She says she hasn't yet seen a penny from CD sales, as her label is still recouping its costs, and while she has received some earnings from her performances, much of that also goes to cover costs.

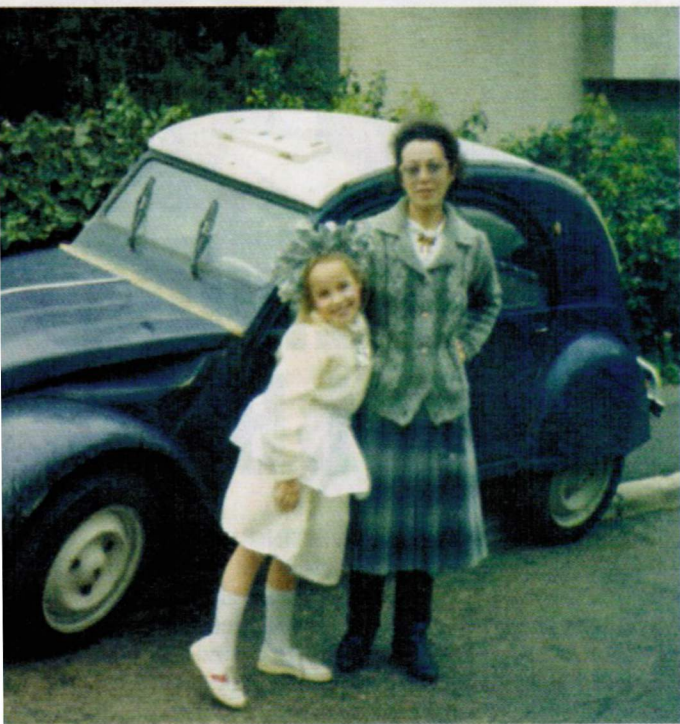
However, she is confident that the hard work will eventually pay off. "I believe the financial benefit will come," she says.

IT'S BEEN A WHIRLWIND, SO far, and the pace is only likely to intensify. Milman made her U.S. debut in New York in February, prior to the American release of her album. She performed a set at Joe's Pub, an East Village institution known not only for the international stars like Elvis Costello and Norah Jones it features, but also for showcasing up-and-coming musicians. She sang in front of a packed house, was very well-received by the enthusiastic audience and ended up doing two encores. And she is scheduled to tour the country for two weeks in July, with confirmed stops in California, Colorado, New York and Utah. Subsequent to her New York performance, an article in Canada's leading national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, described her as an artist "on the verge of breaking." And a recent album review in Maryland-based *Jazz Times* magazine, says the solid notices suggest Milman "could follow Diana Krall as the next great jazz vocal gust to cross the 49th parallel." Indeed, reviews of Milman are almost universally glowing. Toronto Star jazz critic Geoff Chapman wrote that Milman "has jazz smarts singers with twice her experience can't match," adding that she manages to sound as if she has "packed a lifetime of song into her short career." And in late May, Milman launches her album in jazz-crazy Japan with a performance at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo. August will be devoted to recording either a second album or a DVD.

"The stakes are definitely higher, so there's more pressure now than there used to be," she says. And then the insecurities start to surface again. Despite an enviable career arc and in spite of all the empirical evidence of her success, Milman still seems unconvinced of her newfound status as the fresh-faced darling of the Canadian jazz scene.

"I wonder how long it's going to take me to realize that I'm a singer — my life is so fast, but my brain and my perception of myself are lagging behind," she says. "I have a lot of work to do before I'm at the point of being a huge star — a lot of work on my social skills, my schmoozing skills, my artistic skills."

In the meantime, she has other things on her mind, like her impending finals. "The Junos were very cool, I was on TV, but now I need to shift gears," she says matter-of-factly, as she finishes her mochaccino before scuttling off to class. ●



scared her off of performing for years afterwards. She contented herself with singing at home and listening to her father's collection of recordings — a combination of jazz, classical and gospel. Only after the family moved to Toronto, and a high school music teacher offered her a solo at the school's music night, did Milman — spurred on by the audience's