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Jazz singer Melody Gardot makes beautiful music out of the blues

*By Andrew Gilbert
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While Melody Gardot writes quiet, jazzy ache-filled songs about loss and longing, there's something exhilarating about listening to her ravishing debut album, "Worrisome Heart" (Universal/Verve).

Accompanying herself on guitar and piano, she unfurls each line at a languorous pace, her small, supple voice revealing a world-weary sensibility that seems out of step with her 23 years. The stripped-down arrangements mesh perfectly with her carefully tended melodies, which are shorn of all superfluous notes.

"I think there's something nice about a distilled sound," says Gardot, who makes her Seattle debut on Monday at Jazz Alley, with her quartet featuring trumpeter Patrick Hughes, bassist Ken Pendergast and drummer Chuck Staab III. "There's something that human beings understand inherently about simplicity in design. Louis Armstrong was about playing with soul and emotion, not about showing how technically brilliant he was."

A quick-witted conversationalist with a playful sense of humor, the Philadelphia-raised Gardot doesn't use her music to wallow in misery. Taking a page from the best American Songbook composers, her tunes reflect a wry self-consciousness, so that her laments never sound whiny. She ends her long list of liner-note acknowledgments with a cheeky kiss off: "And finally, to all the men who broke my heart and left me with material for this album, thank you."

Gardot didn't plan on becoming a musician. While she started playing in piano bars at 16 to earn income, painting was her primary creative outlet. The victim of a devastating car accident at 19, she spent months in recovery, and music became a source of solace and therapeutic treatment.

"I couldn't walk," says Gardot, who's still dealing with medical issues from the crash. "I was writing while I was still recovering, so performing wasn't something I even thought about. I tripped and landed on a song in a way. I was learning guitar and humming, and a song popped out. It happened in about 15 minutes, and once that started a bunch of other things followed."

A private person who wasn't inclined to seek out an audience, she continued to write for herself as she recuperated. Her music only became public because a friend posted a track on a MySpace page that he launched under her name in an effort to convince Gardot that she was creating something worth sharing. The dismay she felt when he revealed the site quickly took on a more complicated cast, as she read the positive feedback from people who had found her music.

"I had been a hermit, barely even doing e-mail," Gardot says. "When my friend showed me the Web site, I was torn. He said, 'Look what everyone's saying, all these supportive words.' Then someone e-mailed me and asked me to play a gig, a benefit show. A DJ asked if I had a CD, and things took off from there."

Gardot seems to have turned every potential setback into a creative victory. She's the first to acknowledge that she's still very much a work in progress. One wonders what she'll make good fortune sound like.

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