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A Second Career In Song

By THOMAS STAUDTER (NYT)

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IT was a gig just blocks from her home and the partisan audience included her husband and two children, so she did not have any "mommy guilt," but Joan Crowe was still paying her dues.

A moderately successful theater and television actress while in her 20's and early 30's, Ms. Crowe, 45, has been pursuing a singing career for the past seven years, first as a cabaret performer in Manhattan, where she has performed an award-winning show at Don't Tell Mama, and now as a jazz artist with a humorous touch. To help pay the costs in making her transition into jazz she formed a wedding band, High Society Rhythm, in 2003, and has been seeking opportunities to polish her craft and widen her popularity.

One such opportunity occurs monthly when Ms. Crowe is featured at Coyote Flaco, a Mexican restaurant in the middle of downtown here, and on a recent Friday night she was working hard to make an impression on the dinnertime patrons.

In the hierarchy of jazz gigs, restaurant engagements are ranked pretty low by the musicians because most of the guests are eating, drinking and socializing while the music is playing.

"You have to pull out all the stops to get people to listen at places like Coyote Flaco, but I enjoy working there because it allows me to try out a lot of new material," Ms. Crowe said.

To get her audience's attention at Coyote Flaco, Ms. Crowe, who stands nearly six feet tall, ventured away from her three musicians on the bandstand to sing to the diners at their tables. During the instrumental solos on "Pennies From Heaven," she tried unsuccessfully to get a few gentlemen up to dance before her husband, Rob Pruitt, gamely stood up for a short whirl. She brought her neighbor, Rick Berry, up to the bandstand and serenaded him, appropriately enough, with a song called "I Want Them Bald," and turned "You're So Vain" into an audience participation number.

A ballad Ms. Crowe performed was effectively drowned out with ambient noise, though. Then, a 6-year-old from New Rochelle, Nicholas Townley, dining with his parents, requested a song Ms. Crowe did not know. She sang a blues number for him anyway, and when he later requested "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," she relinquished the microphone to her daughter Marie, 8, who belted out the song with enthusiasm, for the biggest applause of the night.

Although Ms. Crowe sang in musicals at her Indianapolis high school and also at the two colleges in Indiana she attended, her focus was on drama when she arrived at the Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training at Florida State University in Sarasota for graduate work. She moved to Manhattan in 1985, and was producing a showcase night in New York City for Asolo alumni when she met her husband, also an actor. The next year, Ms. Crowe landed a recurring role on the soap opera "All My Children," which she kept until 1992, when she left to raise a family.

With her husband's steady work as an actor and in voice-over roles in television advertising, Ms. Crowe was able to stay at home with her son Robbie, now 13, and daughter. But eight years ago she had an epiphany.

"I pretended I was 80, and asked myself if I had to do it all over again, what would I have done differently," Ms. Crowe said. "And I thought, golly, I should have sung more. I was just turning 38 in a few weeks, and the idea that I did have my whole life to do over -- still -- made me very emotional. The next day I found a voice teacher and started taking singing lessons."

Feeling that it would be best to combine her singing with her acting skills, Ms. Crowe decided initially to pursue work in cabaret.

"I like being able to take the audience on a journey," she said.

In 1999, she mounted her first show at Don't Tell Mama, and followed with it with three more original shows. Her 2001 production, "The Devil in Miss Joan," won the award for best female musical comedy from the Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs in April 2002.

In 2003, she completed her fourth cabaret show, "Women of Note." But then she decided to switch gears. The shows cost more than \$6,000 of her own money to produce, and while the last show made a few thousand dollars, "it didn't justify all the time I spent away from my family," she said.

So Ms. Crowe started to find bookings for High Society Rhythm, which plays weddings and private parties. With her earnings, she has recorded a CD, "Bird on a Wire."

Using her CD as a calling card, Ms. Crowe has been booked for a one-night engagement in October at the Iridium Jazz Club in Manhattan. And on Monday nights, she can usually be found at Birdland, another Midtown nightspot, participating in Jim Caruso's Cast Party, a talent show of sorts for entertainers and singers.

"This past month I've been out a lot and experiencing serious mommy guilt," she said, "which my kids really know how to work."

Joan Crowe will perform on July 28 at the "Jazz on the Green" series at the New Rochelle Public Library. For information, call (914)576-5332.

Photos: Joan Crowe with her husband, Rob Pruitt, above, and with her neighbor Rick Berry at Coyote Flaco, a New Rochelle restaurant. (Photographs by Susan Farley for The New York Times)