

# An Encore for Nancy LaMott

By Terry Teachout

New York

The best cabaret singer I ever heard never quite managed to become a celebrity—though she should have, and almost did.

Everything was going Nancy LaMott's way in 1995. She was appearing regularly at Manhattan's fanciest nightspots, from the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel on down. Her heartfelt, irresistibly appealing versions of such standards as "How Deep Is the Ocean" and "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" had started to catch the media's ear. She made her Carnegie Hall debut and recorded her first album with an orchestra, "Listen to My Heart."

She even sang at the White House. Then the clock ran out. Nancy died of uterine cancer that December, leaving behind a quarter of a million dollars' worth of bookings she didn't live to fulfill, six records that quickly went out of print and a grieving husband whom she married in her hospital room, an hour and a half before she died. She was just 43 years old.

It's a tale almost too sad to tell—but now, at long last, it has something like a happy ending. Just in time for Valentine's Day, Midder Music, Nancy's record label, has brought out "Live at Tavern on the Green," her first CD to be released since 1997, and reissued her earlier albums, which became caught up in a legal dispute shortly after her death and have since been unavailable.

"Live at Tavern on the Green" is the only recording of any of Nancy's live shows to have been released commercially. It was taped at her final public performance. She was wearing a wig, having lost her bottle-blond hair to chemotherapy. Seven weeks later, she was dead. Yet her sweetly husky mezzo-so-

prano voice had somehow remained untouched by the terrible disease that would soon take her away from all the things for which she'd longed, and she sang as if she knew she'd never have another chance. When she was done, the Chestnut Room of New York's Tavern on the Green exploded in rapturous applause. That's how I remember it, anyway, and I was there.

Only a handful of people who came to the Chestnut Room on that crisp October night in 1995 knew how sick Nancy was. I was one of them. I had been among the first journalists to write about her for a national magazine, and we became friends after my piece came out. A year and a half later, I watched her perform for the last time, wondering whether she'd make it to the end of the show.

She did, of course—Nancy was a trouper, never more so than on that night—and my memory has assured me ever since that she sang her best the whole evening long. But memories can sometimes tell you only what you want to hear, and I felt a strange fluttering of nerves as I put the CD on the stereo. I didn't need to worry. The voice on "Live at Tavern on the Green" is the same one I heard countless times in 1994 and 1995, warm, soulful and easy to love.

I won't pretend to be objective about Nancy—we were too close for that—but I was hardly the only critic to know her for what she was. John Simon, one of the toughest customers in New York, said that "she fully fathoms what a song is about, and then, rather than merely singing it, lives it." Stephen Holden put it a different way in her New York Times obituary: "She brought to everything she sang a clean, clear sense of line, impeccable enunciation and a deep understanding of how a good song could convey a lifetime's experience." All this is on "Live at Tavern on the Green," along with a special quality I tried to put in words when I wrote in the New York Daily News that she sounded "sincere and sensuous at the same time,

as if the girl next door had snuck out at two a.m. to make a little whoopee with her steady boyfriend."

I've often tried to imagine what might have happened to Nancy had she lived even a little longer. A few months after her death, the listening public discovered Diana Krall's equally appealing way with a standard, and she began her fast climb to well-deserved fame. Would Nancy have caught the same wave of nostalgia for the romantic ballads of yesteryear, and become a full-fledged star? I think so, and with the release of "Live at Tavern on the Green" and the reissue of her other albums (my favorite of which is "Come Rain or Come Shine: The Songs of Johnny Mercer"), she has a second, posthumous chance to reach all the people who might have fallen in love with her singing a decade ago if they'd only known about it.

At the end of Nancy's shows, she would leave the bandstand for a moment, then come straight back, grin at the audience and tell them, "Relax, this is cabaret—there's always an encore." She trots out that surefire line at the end of "Live at Tavern on the Green," and it tugged at my heart to hear her speak those well-remembered words again. Now, nine years later, Nancy LaMott has finally come back for an encore. It's about time.

Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, blogs about theater and the other arts at [www.terryteachout.com](http://www.terryteachout.com).



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