



SPIN MAGAZINE

December, 2008

Record Review

JENN BRADFORD & THE JB'S ***REALITY CHECK*** **Éclat Records**

by Zach Bingham

Here are three things you need to know about the number three:

The third time's a charm.

If there are three coins in a fountain, they're probably all seeking happiness.

And after listening to Jenn Bradford's third record, *Reality Check*, three times, I was forced to accept the fact that it's one-third less interesting than its two predecessors.

You can't pin the blame for the album's tepidness on Bradford's voice which, over the past three years, has improved considerably. Her crooning on her self-titled debut was scratchy and tentative, but that worked in her favor, as it made the entire album feel overtly honest and unpretentiously organic. She came into her own vocally on her remarkable sophomore set, *Guess Who Came at Dinner*, a virtuoso performance in which Bradford flaunted pipes as potent as those of her former collaborator, Naomi Braver.

If you have to point the finger for the record's unevenness anywhere, point it at Bradford's compositions. The tunes on *Reality Check* can be broken up into three categories:

- The Rockin' Stuff
- The Folkie Stuff
- The Jazzy Stuff

Continued on page 51

JENN BRADFORD I almost didn't continue to page 51, but I *had* to, because I'm a musician, and us musicians are hardwired to continue to page 51, even when we know there's a pretty good chance that what we read there is gonna make us want to grab an axe and chop our pianos into firewood.

Continued from page 47

The rockin' stuff is Bradford's meat and potatoes. On the title track, for example, she taps into her inner Chrissie Hynde, and comes up with a new take on New Wave that, had she banged out twelve other cuts like this, would have made *Reality Check* three times as good. The folk-oriented material doesn't work as well as the harder-edged tunes, but it's still pleasant, most notably the acoustic-piano-driven ballad 'Water' and the sweet vocal/bass duo 'Build Me Up'.

And then there's the jazzy stuff.

You watch Jenn Bradford in concert, beating the crap out of her keyboard, red mane flying, body contorting into a myriad of pretzel-like positions, and you might think, 'Okay, this chick wants to be Tori Amos when she grows up'. You'd be wrong. Jenn Bradford wants to be Ella Fitzgerald. Jenn Bradford wants to be Sarah Vaughan. Jenn Bradford wants to be Billie Holiday.

Well, Jenn Bradford is Jenn Bradford, and she should stick to being Jenn Bradford. If she wants to be a jazz singer, be a jazz singer. If she wants to be a rock goddess, be a rock goddess.

Artistic conviction is totally sexy. Fence-straddling totally isn't.

Continued on page 56

JENN BRADFORD Enough is enough. Page 56 can bite me.

Zach Bingham and I met for the first time at the beginning of September 2007, and from day two, he was all about feeling up my bare legs and looking down my shirt. But not from day one. On day one, he was a perfect gentleman, a complete professional, the cute writer guy from *Spin* who came to the recording studio at my house in Brooklyn to interview me about my third album, *Reality Check*. And I have to admit, he did a great job. He gives good interview. He conversed rather than grilled. He didn't ask the usual canned questions like, 'Why aren't you and Naomi playing together any more?' or 'Who are your biggest influences?' or 'How are you gonna follow up *Guess Who Came at Dinner*?' or 'Are those real?'

No, Zach was smoother than that. Somebody told him I was a foodie – probably my manager, Masu Jones, and he asked me about the connection between eating and music. He asked me how I believed the piano fits into a three-piece pop/rock rhythm section. He asked me why I despise synthesizers and sampling so much. He asked me if the thirty-nine Beanie Babies on my mixing board traveled with me to other studios.

Zach, he was being an impartial, thoughtful journalist. Me, I was being a flirty-pinup girl.

Flirty-pinup used to sometimes be my default mode when I'd get around cute writer boys. Flirty-pinup combined with skimpy clothes. How lame is that? I mean, it was likely these guys would've written nice things about me whether I touched their forearms, or crossed my legs in the exact right position, or stared deep down into their

eyes, or did any of the other stupid tricks that constitute superficial flirting. It's not like I needed to get these journalists on my side and try to influence what they wrote about me; I'm a classy broad, and nobody was out to get me. But Zach immediately saw through all my shit. The fifth question he asked me was, 'Is your sex-kitten image contrived, or do you do this Marilyn Monroe thing when you're offstage or away from the press?'

Busted.

For the rest of that day, Zach was treated to the anti-flirty Jenn Bradford which, it turned out, he liked. How did I know? Well, that first day he was dressed to *not* impress: a ratty White Stripes T-shirt, baggy, faded shorts that probably came straight from the Old Navy clearance bin – not that I have problems with Old Navy, I'm actually a big fan, I'm just drawing you a picture – and scuffed Teva flip-flops. When he came back the following day for part two of our little *mano a mano*, he was decked out in a well-worn, but slick vintage leather jacket, jeans with strategic holes situated just below the knees, a pair of clunky Steve Maddens, and a whole bunch of product in his hair. On day one, he looked *cool*. On day two, he looked *hot*. I think I looked pretty okay on day two also, what with my tight pink Stevie Wonder middy T-shirt, and my short blue denim skirt, and an old pair of multi-colored platform flip-flops. My flirty-pinup moves on day two were completely natural and completely unconscious.

We sat down on the red leather sofa in my studio. That afternoon, Zach was the one doing the eye-gazing

and forearm touching, which was disconcerting, because he was making me tingle, and it had been a good eight months since I last tingled, because my boyfriend Kevin and I were in a bit of a, shall we say, slump, meaning that on the rare occasions we made love, there was a lot of going through the motions. But I was a true-blue partner, and wouldn't dream of straying from Kevin, no matter how snoozy things were.

That might not have been the case back in the day, and that's back in the day as in when I was in high school. Oh, I suppose just after high school, too.

This isn't to say I was an easy lay when I was in my teens, but I've always liked touching, and being touched. Actually, in my teens, I was a pretty tactile chick, even more so than I am now, and I liked having all five senses messed with: hearing Luther Vandross, touching my man's smooth back, tasting the perfect tuna tartare, smelling vanilla of any shape or size, seeing a young girl smile at me during one of my shows. But touch and sound were the two biggies. High school for me was all about music and boys, music and boys, music and boys.

I sometimes still can't believe that the city of Brooklyn and the state of New York gave me a diploma, because I *never* did homework. Literally. If I spent eight hours studying over those four years, I'd be surprised. I'm talking eight hours *total*. Between songwriting, and rehearsing, and staying out until four in the morning, and being imprisoned in my bedroom for staying out until four in the morning, who had time to study?

Actually, my eternal best friend Naomi Braver had

time. She was a study nerd. I did what I could to de-nerd her, but she didn't get cool until we actually graduated – her at the top of the class with honors, me at the bottom of the class with shame – and then moved into our infamous one-bedroom box in the East Village. I say 'infamous' because that's where we came up with most of the tunes that made her a rock star, and me a rock star by proximity. This was also around the time she finally started believing what I told her at least once a day – that she wasn't a skinny little runt, that she was a hottie, that she was a killer singer, and that one day, she and I would rule the world.

For a while, we did. Rule the world, that is. We paid our dues, gigging at a café in Manhattan called Beaned for a few years, then at a mid-sized club called Upper East, then our little group got signed by Éclat Records. The label head Mitch Busey made our band change its name from 'I.Q.' to 'Naomi' in order to capitalize on what Mitch thought was Naomi's potential star power, which I had no problem with . . . at first. It took me a good solid eight months before I got all petty, and stupid, and jealous about the whole thing. I'll tell you about my pettiness, and stupidity, and jealousy later. I think I have to work my way up to that.

So almost immediately after our first single 'And Then' came out and blew up, things got big. Big sales. Big concerts. Big money. Big catfights. A big blowout. A big reunion. A big second album. It was all big. At times too big for me, frankly, but at the same time, too confining. Confining artistically, that is. I loved hearing

Naomi sing my songs, but after our second album together ran its course, I split. It wasn't like a Beatles type of break-up. No lawsuits. No arguments. Just love. The day I dropped the bombshell – the day I said to her, 'It's time for me to leave the nest, honey' – we shared approximately 216 bottles of wine, and then cried and hugged for about nineteen straight hours. Or something like that.

The funny thing was that we were probably even closer with each other after we stopped playing together regularly. She produced my first album, I produced her third and played on the fourth, and we showed up in each other's videos. My records were selling well – not as well as Naomi's, but I would never in a million years think of Nay as competition, so that was totally cool – and I had a killer boyfriend, and all the Beanie Babies I could eat. Good times. Even though we were on separate musical paths, Nay couldn't have been happier for me. Hells, *I* couldn't have been happier for me.

But I digress. The first day with Zach was all talk. The second day, when I played him *Reality Check*, it was all listening and touching. High school revisited.

Zach was the first person outside of my inner circle who got to hear the record from start to finish. He sat through the whole thing without saying a word. He stared at the speakers the whole time, which gave me plenty of opportunity to stare at his neck. And his angular face. And his long fingers. But mostly his neck. And he kept listening to the record. Three times through. It was kinda tense. Or maybe *intense*.

After what seemed like six hours, the music finally stopped. A good two minutes after ‘The Ballad of Heat’ closed the album, he put his hand on my knee – and remember I was wearing that denim skirt, so my knees were bare – and said, ‘You must be so proud of this record, Jenn. It’s probably what you’ve been working toward for your entire life. I would think that to you, this is career-making stuff.’ He moved his hand an inch up on my thigh, then an inch down to my shin, then two inches up on my thigh, then two inches down on my shin, all very slowly, all very hotly. I was getting big-time squirmy, and was a millisecond away from thinking about maybe possibly considering doing *something* to him – remember, it’d been a long time since I tingled – when my cell vibrated. It was Naomi.

I backhanded Zach’s hand off of my leg, pressed the talk button, and said hey. Naomi asked, ‘Whatcha doin’?’

I said, ‘I’m playing *Reality Check* for a nice young man from *Spin*.’

Zach said, ‘I’m not that nice.’ I covered the phone’s mouthpiece and told him to zip it.

Naomi said, ‘Does he like it?’

I got up, told Zach I’d be right back, then went into the hallway. ‘I can’t tell if he likes the record, but he *really* likes me.’ She didn’t say anything. Then I said, ‘He’s kind of a hottie. I bet you’d like him. He’s totally your type.’ Actually, she probably *wouldn’t* like him, and he was totally *not* her type. Naomi isn’t into underfed indie rock nerds. She’s into underfed movie nerds e.g. the love of her life a.k.a. my brother Travis.

Naomi said, 'No. No. No no no no no.'

I said, 'No, what?'

She said, 'Didn't you decide you weren't gonna be all flirty-pinup around writers any more?' I told her I had no recollection of saying such a thing. She said, 'Four years ago? Glenn Whatshisface? *LA Weekly*? After our Roxy gig?'

Oh. That. Not one of this classy broad's classier moments. Horrible sex for me and Mr Whatshisface. Horrible concert review for Naomi. Naomi was right. I have a history. And not only with writers. No, I'm not gonna tell you how many guys I've slept with. I'm not embarrassed about it or anything, but I don't want everybody who picks up this book to think I'm a total slut. A *partial* slut, sure, but not a *total* one. Plus it's likely my parents will read this, and yes, they're well aware that I am, as they've put it 'liberated' – although I'm pretty sure that 'liberated' is my mother's nice way of saying 'slutty' – but I think a concrete number would freak them out.

Naomi and I blabbed for a couple more minutes, then after we hung up, I zipped up to my bedroom and grabbed an old, baggy black, hole-filled, paint-splattered Adidas hoodie that hung down past my knees. I figured the looser and uglier my clothes were, the less cute I'd be, and the less cute I was, the easier it would be to send Zach on his merry way, which was most definitely the prudent thing to do.

While I was gone, Zach had made himself at home. He'd taken off his leather jacket and his shoes, and was spread out on the couch, a mellow grin on his face, looking like he owned the joint. I said, 'Um, comfy?'

He straightened up. 'I don't know what it is about this place, but it's real easy to get comfy.'

Looking at him being all hip and happening, I admitted to myself that if I was Kevin-less, I likely would've gotten comfy with him. Even though those indie rock boys – those pale, gaunt, funky boys – generally weren't my first choice, Zach could've swayed me. Maybe it was because he had a brain. Maybe we just clicked. Maybe it was his neck.

But maybe it was a bad idea to even entertain that kind of thinking. No, *definitely* it was a bad idea. See, he was writing about my third album, and by the time you get to your third album, you shouldn't be doing *any* flirting with writers, whether or not you're spoken for. The first album, sure. The second album, maybe. But by the third one, you should act like a grown-up. At least a little bit.

I told him in a very professional sort of way that he could ask me three more questions, then I had to take a phone meeting. He caught my tone, sat up even straighter and kicked back into journalist mode. Like I said, he's a smarty pants. He asked his three more questions, then handed me his business card and said, 'Give me a buzz if you have something you'd like to add to the story,' then he left.

ZACH BINGHAM It's exactly like I say in the *Spin* article. The first time through *Reality Check*, I dig it a lot. Second time, I dig it less. After the third time, I decide I have zero desire to hear it ever again. I end up selling the copy that Éclat sent me at one of the used record stores on St

Mark's Place, along with another fifty promo CDs I have zero urge to keep. That's a regular thing for me, selling promo CDs on St Mark's. Hey, a guy's gotta eat.

I'd like to get it on the record that my two-and-a-half star review has nothing to do with Jenn not going for my totally lame, awkward, uninvited advances. I cringe at the thought that I caressed Jenn Bradford's leg on the second day I met her. Uncool and unprofessional. Not to mention embarrassing. Never behaved like that with an interview subject before. Haven't done it since. Wait, I take that back, there was one other time. I'm sure Jenn told you about it. She hasn't? Hunh. Well, I guarantee you'll find out about it later.

Even people who despise me and my writing – and there were plenty of them, even at that point, believe me, although it got worse later – will acknowledge that when it comes to criticism, constructive or otherwise, I'm a professional. Extra-musical factors do not impact my reviews or features, ever. For example, I gave one of Madonna's recent records two-and-a-half stars, which is the same thing I would have given it even if we'd hooked up. Not that Madonna would hook up with me, but you get what I'm saying.

Anyhow, the *Spin* with my review hits the stands about three months after my meeting with Jenn, and I assume that when she reads it, she'll hate me, and I don't consider contacting her, because why would she wanna talk to me after I trashed her record? I assume I'll never speak with Jenn Bradford again – which is unfortunate, because the fact of the matter is, after the interview, I

developed a major thing for her, and word on the street is that she's single again. It's totally unoriginal of me to have a crush on Jenn Bradford, but whatever.

Luckily for me – and somewhat shockingly – I assumed wrong about her not contacting me. She calls me a couple days after the magazine comes out and says, 'Nice review, numb nuts. But shouldn't you have given the album three stars for symmetry's sake?'

Funny girl. Smart girl. You see why I want to make babies with her?

JENN BRADFORD I didn't think about Zach much until Masu sent me the issue of *Spin* with his article – an article which, by the way, didn't include a single quote from our two-day interview session. I'm just saying.

I called him immediately after I read his piece and yelled at him for about ten minutes. After I finally ran out of gas, he asked me to meet him for dinner that night. It wasn't a date. It was just dinner.

ZACH BINGHAM After she calls me 'numb nuts', she yells at me for about ten minutes, then she asks me out on a date. It's not just dinner. It's a date.

JENN BRADFORD For our dinner-that-wasn't-really-a-date – which, by the way, was the first time I'd been out with a boy since The Kevin Incident – I decided I should wear an outfit that said, *I might be interested in messing around with you someday even though I probably shouldn't, because us artist-types shouldn't mess around*

with you writer-types, especially coming right off of a yucky break-up, but if you play your cards right, and treat me the way I deserve to be treated, and stop writing crappy reviews of my records, maybe – just maybe – you'll get to kiss me, but only for, like, six seconds, and you won't be allowed to touch me anywhere between my neck and my knees until I give you the go-ahead, and that could be a while, because I've been hurt, so keep it in your pants, buddy. That outfit, of course, was a solid black scoop-neck long-sleeved Armani T-shirt and seven-year-old low-riding faded Lucky jeans that showed off an itty bit of my nice black lace Barelythere thong.

ZACH BINGHAM She shows up at the restaurant thirty-five minutes late. I generally allow for a forty-five-minute cushion, so I'm ten minutes away from taking off, but when she floats through the door, I'm tremendously glad I waited.

Even though she's wearing kick-around clothes, she looks amazing. If she'd dressed up for real, I might've proposed on the spot. But I don't gush at her, no way. I'm sure everybody gushes at Jenn Bradford. I think that by not saying anything about her appearance, I'm being different than everybody else she goes out with. Then I think that by not saying anything about her appearance, I'm being the same as every guy she goes out with, because every guy she goes out with wants to be different, so they don't say anything about her appearance. Then I think I'm being an idiot, and I stand up and give her a kiss on the cheek.

JENN BRADFORD Zach didn't say anything about how I looked. Virtually every guy I've gone out with said something about how I look. That was . . . different.

As for Zach, his outfit was a snooze. Indie Boy 101. Thriftstore chic. But his sideburns were trimmed perfectly, and his neck looked nice, so it was all good.

ZACH BINGHAM I don't put together a game plan for our date – and possible impending relationship, fingers crossed – but I intuitively realize that if I'm gonna snare her, I do indeed have to be different. I can't fawn, or patronize, or gawk. I have to be chill. Totally one hundred per cent chill, unlike I was on the second day in her studio, when I felt up her leg and far too obviously stared at her chest. Man, that was most definitely *not* chill.

The cheek kiss I give her is dry and impersonal. I say angrily, 'You're late.'

She says, 'I know. I got stuck on the phone with my manager. She's having problems with one of the guys in the band who shall remain nameless—'

I ask, 'Is it Stewart? I've met your bass player. He's kind of a strange cat.'

She says, 'No comment. Anyhow, I'm really, really sorry.'

On the surface, I don't accept her apology. I don't tell her it was okay that she left me sitting there by myself for over half an hour. I don't tell her how good she looks. That's what anybody would've done. What I *do* do is say, 'Woman, next time we go out, be on time.'

JENN BRADFORD Zach. Can. Be. Such. A. Cocky. Son-of-a-bitch.

ZACH BINGHAM Dinner's sort of weird, and sort of strange, and sort of fun. She eats almost an entire basket of bread, then orders a ton of food, far more than I do. She gets a Caesar salad, a large bowl of pasta fagiole, and chicken parmesan with a side of pasta marinara, and three or four glasses of wine, and tiramisu. I ask her, 'Do you exercise like a madwoman, or do you have crazy metabolism?' I don't understand her answer, because she sometimes talks with her mouth full, which you wouldn't expect from somebody as classy as Jenn Bradford.

After some conversational stumbling around, we hit on the one topic that offers us a level playing field: music. Jenn talks about music and the music industry with sincere passion, and she clearly knows her stuff. And I know she knows her stuff because *I* know *my* stuff, and she's right with me every step of the way. You can tell she's not only listened to and absorbed all kinds of records in all kinds of genres, but she's done her homework, she's read history books, she's pored over liner notes. I try to trip her up with a random trivia question about Liz Phair – What TV show theme song did La Liz cover? – and right away, Jenn says, '*Banana Splits*. Duh.'

JENNIFER BRADFORD He started trying to trip me up with music dork trivia. Didn't work. But how could he have possibly known that from the time I was, I dunno, nine-ish or something, I obsessively listened to the radio and

watched MTV and VH-1, and incessantly read music books and magazines and liner notes, and spent all of my allowance money on CDs, and at least two nights a month, I'd climb out of my bedroom windows and take the train into Manhattan all by myself, then flirt my way into whatever club I could, no matter who was giggling, just so I could see what it was that enabled whatever band I was seeing to land a gig in the first place.

You know what? You should ask Zach if he was pissed off that he couldn't trip me with his dorkitude that night. I'll bet you a dollar he uses some sort of tennis metaphor.

ZACH BINGHAM I'm kind of irked that she volleys back all of my musical serves, so I decide to change the subject. Once our chat drifts away from music – once it stops being a semi-stilted chat between writer and subject and starts being an open dialogue between guy-and-girl-on-date – the conversation begins to move back and forth between depth and surface, surface and depth. We talk about our families – mine's semi-fucked up and constantly disappointed in me, where hers is semi-normal and supportive. Lucky her. We talk about goals – mine's to write books full-time for a living, specifically rock bios, and hers is either to gig regularly with a jazz trio or, so she claims, run for President. And then we briefly touch on past loves. Or at least I think it'll be brief. I think it'll only garner a sentence or three, but out of nowhere, Jenn gives me the full account of why she called it quits with McAllister. I listen politely and attentively, even though I'd already heard the salient points of what happened between them.

How did I find out about the McAllister thing? None of your damn business. I've gotta protect my sources.

[And now we take you away from the restaurant, away from the dinner-that-wasn't-a-date, on a trip back through the tendrils of time, to the final week of September 2007, a mere six days after Zach first interviewed Jenn. Be sure to fasten your seatbelt because this, dear reader, is going to be a bumpy ride.]

JENN BRADFORD First of all, none of the crap that was written in any of the music rags about our break-up was true. Kevin didn't fly to the Caribbean with Mariah Carey. He didn't whip it out in front of one of the Éclat Records interns at a label listening party at the Plaza Hotel. He didn't go down on one of my backup singers after a gig in Dallas. He didn't go down on one of my backup singers *during* a gig in Dallas. Until right now, until right this very second, right as I'm telling you this, nobody ever knew exactly what happened except me, and Naomi, and my brother Travis, and my manager Masu, and Zach. And Kevin. And those two little skanks, whose names I never caught.

Kevin and I started out great. We met during Naomi's first big tour. His band, The Hoohah Johnson Experience, was opening for us, and Naomi and I were having that massive, stupid fight that I briefly mentioned earlier, a fight that almost killed our partnership. In retrospect, I realize that if we hadn't kissed and made up, it would have killed me altogether. Naomi too, probably.

It's possible that I let myself fall in love with Kevin so quickly in order to keep myself from falling apart over Naomi. But at the time – and still even now – I felt like Kevin and I probably would've fallen in love eventually anyhow, so I went with it. Our relationship took a natural progression, or at least as natural as it could have been between two people who spent a good portion of their adult lives on the road, playing music: we met, we toured, we talked, we toured, we laughed, we toured, we vibed, we toured, we kissed, we toured, we did lots of foreplay-type stuff, we toured, we consummated, we toured, we declared love, we toured, we moved in together, we toured, we discussed marriage.

Kevin and I made a most excellent couple. Physically speaking, we were on the same plane. We weren't one of those couples where people say, 'What's this hot dude doing with that ugly girl?' or 'How did that greasy guy haul in this total catch?' Like we looked totally cute walking down the red carpet together both times we went to the Grammy Awards with Naomi. Stuff like that made both of us feel good. Sure, it's shallow, but you take your victories where you can get them. We had a good verbal and spiritual thing going on, too – we had similar senses of humor, we both talked really fast, and we always had something to say to each other, most of which was interesting. People liked us together which, in retrospect, I think was part of the reason that *we* liked us together. The fact that we needed that sort of validation should've raised a red flag, but love will make you ignore or disregard that kind of thing.

After three years together, things stopped being great. As time progressed, our relationship evolved from the dictionary definition of solid and fun to the dictionary definition of mediocre and uninspired. Nothing was awful, but a good portion of the magic had definitely faded. I chalked it up to the fact that we'd been together for a while – thirty-six-ish months, which is about thirty-two-ish months longer than I'd ever been committed to one guy, and thirty-five-ish months longer than Kevin had stuck with one girl. Naomi told me that her and my brother's relationship calmed down after a couple of years, but the way she described how she and my brother calmed down didn't sound like my and Kevin's calm-down. Naomi and Travis had edged into comfort, while Kevin and I had edged into staidness.

I have to shoulder probably more than fifty per cent of the blame. What with all the demands on my time – touring, recording, interviews, photo sessions, remixes, guest appearances, blah blah blah blah – I wasn't the most attentive girlfriend. But Kevin wasn't setting the boyfriend world on fire, either. Sometimes he was all about buying me flowers, and playing me Miles Davis records, and giving me long-ass backrubs, then the next day, he'd be rude and cold. Not exactly the recipe for a long-lasting relationship.

But we did love each other, and we're both stubborn as hell, so neither of us would admit that there was anything wrong. I was determined to make him The One. I didn't realize then that you shouldn't have to *make*

somebody The One. He should just *be* The One.

The Kevin Incident went down on Monday night, 23 September 2007, a date which shall live in fucking infamy. Naomi was sharing a bill with Sheryl Crow at Madison Square Garden. They were playing in Jersey the next night, then Philly a couple days after that, then one more show back at the Garden. She invited me to come along with them for their East Coast swing, and as I wasn't doing anything in particular that week, I threw some clothes and my makeup bag into a suitcase, hopped a cab from Brooklyn to Manhattan, and met up with Nay.

During Naomi's set – which kicked Madison Square Garden's ass – Masu texted me that Norah Jones wanted to bring me into the studio with her that Friday to cut a duo version of 'A-Tisket, A-Tasket' for her Ella Fitzgerald tribute album. Even though I thought that Norah was just okay, I couldn't pass up the chance to be recorded singing some actual, honest-to-goodness jazz. People needed to know that I did that sort of thing, that I was more than a rocker chick.

After Naomi came offstage, I told her about Norah, and she was so psyched for me that she literally carried me out of the Garden – which I have to admit was impressive, because I outweigh her by a good twenty pounds – tossed me into a taxi and said, 'I'm so proud of you, honey. Go screw your boyfriend' – she knew about Kevin's and my dwindling sex life – 'then rest up for a few days, then blow Norah away.' I swear to God, up until, I dunno, three or four years ago, Naomi was the biggest prude. Even today, it still surprises me when she

says stuff like, *Go screw your boyfriend*. But it also makes me proud, because that's the kind of thing I'd say. I love being a bad influence.

It was still early when I got home, just after eleven, and I knew Kevin would be awake, so I threw open the front door and yelled, 'Baby, Norah Jones, Ella Fitzgerald, blah blah blah blah blah.' Nothing. No response, which was a bummer. I wanted Kevin to be the first important person in my life to find out. Okay, he would've been the third person – Masu knew first, then Naomi – but had I not been hanging out with Nay, Kevin would've been number two.

But there was no Kevin around to celebrate with. No hugs, no kisses, no laughs. Just me, myself, and I.

[Now, please enjoy this bit of digressive commentary from Jenn's blabbermouthed bass player and feisty manager.]

T.J. STEWART Me and Kev grew up on the same block in New York, in the LI. What's the LI? That's Long Island, baby. Anyhow, Kev's and my bass-and-drum hook-up on stage is tight because we've been playing together forever. Same like Jenny-Jenn and Naomi, you dig? Plus Kev's my cousin, and it's easy to share a groove when you share blood.

I have *much* love for the dude, but I don't have *any* love for how he hangs with the honeys. With his boys, he's chill, twenty-four seven, three-six-five. With the girls, he's straight-up schizo. One day he's all like buying 'em flowers, playing Miles Davis records and giving 'em

long-ass backrubs, then the next day, he's rude and cold. And the longer he was with Jenny-Jenn, the worse it got.

And that shit he pulled on her at the end? *Daaaayyyymmmmmnnn*. The Teej can be a skeez, but even The Teej wouldn't do nothin' that bad.

Who's The Teej? That's me, dude. *Everybody* calls me The Teej.

MASUHARA JONES Nobody calls him The Teej. At least, God knows I don't.

Whenever we hit the road with Jenn, T.J. comes up to me at least once a week and is like, 'Yo, Shorty' – he always calls me Shorty, which I pretend to hate, but I think is pretty sweet – 'tell peeps in your press releases to call me The Teej. Your boy's trying to create an image for himself.'

JENN BRADFORD Annnnyway . . . I had no place to channel all my nervous energy. I had to do something to cool out, so I thought it would be a good idea to take a trip to my quiet place a.k.a. the tub. I decided a coconut-lime bubble bath accompanied by a flock of vanilla-scented candles was the way to go. I dragged my suitcase up the stairs and into the bedroom, and what do I walk in on?

Kevin. And some skanky chick. And some other skanky chick. My boyfriend, and two girls. All naked. All cuddling. Stains all over the sheets. No, check that – stains all over *my* bedsheets. My beautiful maroon 650-thread-count bedsheets that I'd bought at Bloomingdale's

almost six years before – in my pre-Kevin days, I should note – and were finally worn and faded to perfection.

So what's the first thing that pops out of my mouth? '*You ruined my sheets!*' Not one of my brain's finer performances, but considering the situation, you can't expect your synapses to be firing on all cylinders.

But after that, I believe I handled things very well. I kept my voice down. I didn't throw anything. I didn't hit or slap anybody. I didn't brandish any weapons – at least right away. I calmly told the girls to please put on their clothes and get out – they were gone in, like, six seconds – then I pointed at Kevin and ordered him to stay the fuck put. He obeyed. I think my deadly quiet tone scared him into submission.

I grabbed a pair of scissors from my office, went over to Kevin's closet and proceeded to cut every single piece of clothing he owned into at least two pieces. And when I say everything, I mean everything: T-shirts, jeans, suits, shorts, Nikes, boxers, socks, *everything*. Whenever he made like he was about to get off the bed, I snipped the scissors in the direction of his tiny, frightened, shrinking pile of junk.

After I finished cutting everything – which took about thirty minutes, although it seemed more like two hours at the time, I suppose because catharsis sometimes moves in slow motion – I walked over to the bed, rested the tip of the scissors right over his heart, and whispered, 'If you're not out of here in two minutes, I promise I'll use these somewhere you don't want them used.' His junk shrunk some more.

He said, 'You cut up all my shit. I don't have anything to wear.'

I said, 'You seemed pretty comfortable being naked in front of those two skanks. Go be naked in front of Brooklyn.' So he grabbed his wallet and left, one hundred per cent bare assed.

After Kevin slammed the front door, any toughness I felt evaporated, and I cried like a hurricane for a million years.

When I finally stopped hyperventilating, I decided to stick with my original plan which, if you'll recall, was to take refuge in my quiet place, that being our oversized Jacuzzi. No, wait, I mean *my* oversized Jacuzzi. The second that Kevin McAllister nakedly left the house, he lost ownership of everything. Except his drum sets. I'd let him have those back – a decision with which my manager strenuously disagreed.

MASUHARA JONES Yeah, Jenn's right, I wanted her to burn every single piece of percussion in that house. She wouldn't do it. But she's a much nicer person than I am, plus I don't think she has it in her to destroy a musical instrument. Her priorities are all screwed up.

JENN BRADFORD Anyhow, I did the same thing I always did when I took a bath at home: got my wine, lit my candles, dumped in too much bubble bath. How was I able to coherently keep my routine right after walking in on what I walked in on? No clue. Habit, I guess. My mind wasn't working particularly well, but my body

knew what I needed. And yes, the wine and candles did help. But just a little bit. A *very* little bit.

While I was drying myself, I noticed the framed picture of me and Kevin on the vanity that Naomi snapped during a barbecue in our backyard last year, and it dawned on me that I had to get the heck out of Dodge. I couldn't be in that house any more, period. *Couldn't*. Everything in the place reminded me of us. Like I couldn't look at the Picasso print in the hallway without picturing us wandering through the Art Institute in Chicago a couple years ago. Or I couldn't look at the loofah hanging in the shower without remembering the way we used to cover ourselves in fruit-scented shower gel – pineapple's my fave, his was peach – and slowly wipe each other down. And then there was all the random crap we bought together: the cereal bowls, the toothpaste holder, the fax machine, the bedside lamp, the welcome mat. Virtually everything in the house reminded me of couplehood.

So yeah, I had to move, as soon as was humanly possible, and I decided then and there I was gonna downsize my living quarters. What I had then was a bit too much house for a little red-haired, broken-hearted pianist who was crying too damn much. But to paraphrase James Brown, the original J.B., the thought of condo-hunting right then made me break out in a cold sweat, so I finished drying myself off, threw on some clothes, grabbed my previously-packed suitcase, called a taxi and told the driver to take me to Manhattan and drop me at 201 Park Avenue South in Union Square.

It took all of eighteen minutes for my super-fancy suite at the super-fancy W Hotel to become a not-so-fancy used Kleenex repository.

MASUHARA JONES Jenn was a wreck, but I wasn't gonna let her miss the recording session with Norah Jones, so that Friday morning, I took the R train over the W to grab her, and my girl was not looking good. Her nose was all pink, and her eyes were all bloodshot, and her makeup was a streaky disaster, and her hair was sticking up about five inches, and I was all like, 'Honey, you look like the love child of Amy Winehouse and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.'

She ran to the bathroom and goes, 'Shit! You're right!' and came out ten minutes later looking a little more like the Jenn I know and love. Not perfect, but good enough to be seen in public. I go, 'You're gorgeous. You ready to sing?'

She was like, 'Hells, no.' She practically yelled it.

I go, 'But you will be. Won't you?'

She whispered, 'Hells, yeah.' I'd never heard her whisper *hells yeah* before. She always yells it. It's her catchphrase, but she said it then like she'd gotten hit in the stomach. I wanted to hug her, but her body language was all, *Don't touch me*.

So we get to the studio, and there's Norah, and she's all nice and sweet and pretty and professional and cool, and she runs up to Jenn, gives her a hug and goes, 'It's so great to meet you, and I'm honored to have you on my record, and I think you'll love the

arrangement my musical director did, and I'm so sorry about what happened with you and your man.' I thought, *Damn, news travels quick in the music industry. Not even a week, and Norah Jones knows the deal.*

Jenn got all tense, then pulls away and was like, 'What do you mean, what happened with me and my man?'

Norah goes, 'Didn't he fly to the Caribbean with Mariah Carey?'

Jenn relaxed and smiled a little bit – no teeth, but it was at least something. She was like, 'Yeah, that's close enough.' Then she took a really deep and shaky breath. I thought she was gonna start crying again, but she just goes, 'What say we do some singing?'

Then Jenn and Norah go into the recording room, and they talk about the arrangement for a few minutes, then they run down the song with the rhythm section a couple times, then they roll tape, and three passes later, they get a perfect take. We were out of there in less than two hours.

JENN BRADFORD That session with Norah was the most fun I'd had in the studio since Naomi and I cut our first album at this place in Park Slope, which it so happens was right around the corner from where we both grew up. We were practically children then, me and Naomi, total nobodies, and we were so happy to be in that studio – in *any* studio, really. Nay was on fire, and she belted out her vocals like she was Janis Joplin or something. My brother Travis was playing some stellar bass, all while

madly crushing on Naomi, which I've gotta say was pretty impressive. And our drummer Frank Craft was also so, so, so amazing.

Me? Well, it was heaven. It was the happiest I'd ever been before, and probably since. Hells, I was playing piano with my friends and family – how could I not have been ecstatic? Plus nobody was putting any pressure on us to do anything other than make kick-ass music. Come to think of it, if anybody was pressurizing our little group, it was me, because being in that studio was what my entire childhood had led up to, and I didn't want us to blow it. And we didn't.

I know I sound like I'm lusting after the past. Maybe I am. Yeah, I truly still love the entire process of music – composing, recording, mixing, et cetera. Thing is, now it's more of a grind, more like a job, more expectations, more money, blah blah blah blah blah. Don't get me wrong – there's nothing I like more than writing and laying down a killer track, but it's not the same as it was. Back in the day, my songs were coming from a completely organic, almost innocent place, and the older I've gotten, the harder it's been to tap into that part of myself. Whenever I write a tune, there's all this baggage involved, like, *Will this song work as a single?* or, *If it does work as a single, what kind of video can we make for it?* or, *What kind of budget will the label give me for the video?* It's hardly ever, *Great jam, I can't wait to play it for an audience.* Intellectually, I knew that that was an unhealthy and slightly depressing way to go about the business of making music, but I couldn't snap out of it.

I dunno, maybe when you get closer to thirty, and you're stuck in a high-visibility business that demands results on top of results on top of results, there's a part of you that gets cynical, and hard, and self-protective. It's that annoying loss of innocence, you know? So to all you musician-types reading this, here's a piece of advice: if you ever manage to land a record deal, enjoy the hell out of your first studio sessions, because trust me, it'll never be that much fun again.

Anyhow, Naomi and I cut almost forty songs during our maiden studio voyage, some of which we'd been rehearsing or performing since our sophomore year in high school. Now *that* was catharsis. A healthy catharsis. And the reason I say that is because that's what it was like with Norah – the best catharsis imaginable. Nailing 'A-Tisket, A-Tasket' made me feel almost human again, made me feel strong, like I could at least start attempting to get past The Kevin Incident.

Yeah, I know I shouldn't let something semi-superficial like a good recording session validate me, but I'm kind of a validation junkie. Sometimes it feels like I *always* need validation which, considering what I've accomplished in my professional life, is kinda pathetic. I've actually spent a fair amount of time trying to figure out why I crave acceptance so much, and the only concrete thing I've come up with is that when you're an artist and you're attractive – and I feel arrogant for referring to myself as attractive, but there it is – you're not always taken as seriously as you'd like or may even deserve. There's always that whole, *You got signed*

because you have big boobs thing, and it drives me nuts when somebody insinuates something like that, because I worked my butt off – Naomi and I *both* worked our butts off – to make this happen. It means way way *way* more to me if a guy or girl comes up to me after a show, or on the street, or at the mall and says, ‘Jenn, I love your voice’, instead of ‘Jenn, I love your ass’. Not that I don’t sometimes appreciate a *nice ass* compliment from the right person – what woman doesn’t? – but confirmation from a random somebody that I have some semblance of musical talent is a really good thing.

MASUHARA JONES After the Norah thing, Jenn went back to her hotel and I went home. My cell rang the second I got in the door. It was Jenn, and she sounded good. Really good. Right away, she started talking about how she was gonna start looking for a new place to live, which is how I knew she was getting back to normal. I asked her if all of Kevin’s stuff was outta the house, and she told me he sent her a text saying he’d taken everything of his except for two of his older drum kits, which he’d be back for soon.

I was like, ‘Burn ’em! Burn ’em *all!*’ She wouldn’t do it, then she asked me if I was becoming a pyromaniac. I was like, ‘Ha, ha, ha.’

It’s as I said – that girl’s priorities are all messed up; it’s all music, music, music. To her, instruments are like people. If a guy pulls the kind of shit on me that Kevin pulled on Jenn, I’m hitting him where it hurts.

Or kicking him where it hurts. That’s the way I roll.

What do I mean, ‘kicking him’? Okay, well, as Jenn’s manager, I’ve gotta have her back, and sometimes that means throwing down. Like, I never told her this, but this one time in Memphis during the first tour after The Incident, I went to Kevin’s hotel room after a show and kicked him in the nuts with my nut-kicking purple suede Pumas, then I was like, ‘If you say anything to Jenn about this, I’ll do it again . . . and next time with my steel-toed Puma boots.’

It was awesome.

Anyhow, I go to Jenn, ‘Okay, fine, don’t torch his shit, but you have to promise to make it so you’ll never see his scummy face again. Set up a time for him to come by the house and get his stupid drums, and make sure you’re not there. Me and T.J. will hang out and see he doesn’t steal your plasma, or your laptop, or whatever.’

She was like, ‘That’s fine. Except for the seeing his scummy face part. I still want him in the band.’

I threw my cell against the wall, and it broke into a thousand pieces. But she’ll probably tell you I totally hung up on her.

JENN BRADFORD Ooh, Masu was pissed. She totally hung up on me.

MASUHARA JONES So I cabbéd it over to the W and let myself into her room – she’d given me a ‘just in case’ key – and found her in the bathtub, covered in bubbles, candles everywhere, looking as chill as I’d seen her in years. Not happy, necessarily. Just chill.

I was like, 'That dildo is not staying in the band. Seriously, Jenn, I won't be able to stop myself from messing him up. Badly.'

She goes, 'He's staying in. He's a brilliant drummer. Except for Frank Craft, I've never played with anybody as good. I'm a professional, and he's a professional . . .'

I was like, 'Yeah, a professional dildo.'

' . . . and *you're* a professional, and the band comes first.'

Like I said, music, music, music. I go, 'Why don't you call Frank?'

She goes, 'The tour starts in January, and Frank gigs so much that he won't have time to get the material down, and the band sounds great the way it is, and you know it, and Kevin's staying with us, and you're gonna deal with it, and that's it, end of story.'

Once Jenn Bradford makes up her mind about something, it's not changing, so I was like, 'Fine, but the first chance I get, I'm kicking him in the nuts.' Which, as you know, is exactly what I awesomely did.

[Now we take you back to the restaurant, where Zach and Jenn are still enjoying their dinner-that-wasn't-a-date.]

ZACH BINGHAM Jenn finishes telling me about the McAllister thing over dessert, a glass of port, and three espressos, filling in some details that I hadn't heard about, and I think, what the hell am I supposed to do with this? Do I track the man down and smack him around? Do I pitch the story to *Rolling Stone*?

None of the above. What I do is say, ‘Jenn, if you ever dated me, I promise I’d never have a threesome in your bed. A foursome, absolutely, but a threesome? No way.’

JENN BRADFORD I never in a million years thought I’d be able to laugh about The Kevin Incident at any level. I thought that when it came to my pal Kev, the laughter had died, or was at the very least in the intensive care unit. But laugh I did. Well played, Mr Zachary Bingham. Well played indeed.

I laughed for a good long while. More catharsis.

ZACH BINGHAM After she cracks up at my crap joke, that’s when I think it becomes a real date to her, so I suggest we go and do one of the things I like to do on real dates when I’m in Brooklyn, which is take a walk in Prospect Park. To me, Prospect is the best park in the five boroughs. It’s like Central Park, except smaller, and without the ducks and the hippies.

She agrees, so I pay the check then lead her down one of those gorgeous brownstone-filled sidestreets, and we’re moving along kind of slowly, and it’s kind of cold, and we do that thing where you accidentally-on-purpose make body contact – you know, rub an arm against an arm, or bump a shoulder. At least *I’m* doing it accidentally-on-purpose. I dunno, she might be a little drunk.

JENN BRADFORD We got to Prospect Park, and the stars were out, and I had a nice little buzz on, and I was freezing my ass off, and I was waiting for him to hold my

hand, or put an arm around my shoulders, or hug me to keep me warm, or *something*, but all he was doing was talking about music and brushing up against me. Finally I stopped walking, and I took his arms, put them around my waist, threw my arms around his neck, and looked him in the eye. I liked what I thought I saw there – kindness, and interest, and sincerity – and decided it was officially time to start chasing away the Kevin ghost, so I said, ‘Hi there. My name is Jennifer. I’d like you to kiss me.’

ZACH BINGHAM So we make out in the park for a while – and I hadn’t made out in a park since high school, so it’s pretty damn cool – then we go back to her big-ass house, and she drags me into the studio where I interviewed her, and we have sex on her piano.

That was a first for me, messing around on a musical instrument. And the whole time I’m thinking, *I can’t wait to do this again.*

JENN BRADFORD No way was I gonna mess around with Zach in a bed that I’d had sex with Kevin McAllister in, so we went into my studio and did it on the piano. And that was, like, the sixty-sixth time I’ve done it on the piano, and it is *so* not gonna happen again. I’ve had enough keyboard imprints on my ass to last a lifetime.

[And now, dear reader, we’re pleased to introduce you to Jenn’s sort-of-guardian-angel, the protector of all that is musical, the spirit who’s been watching over our piano-playing friend since birth, the lovely, the talented . . .]

BILLIE HOLIDAY'S GHOST Ahh, I too have had some sex-related backside imprints in my time. I've made love *everywhere*, including on musical instruments of all shapes and sizes. We're talking on pianos, and on kick drums, and surrounded by an entire arsenal of saxophones, and even once on an acoustic bass. I have no idea how I was able to pull that one off, but I did, by golly, and my behind hurt for three weeks afterward, plus I had the imprint of a G-string on the small of my back for days, and I don't mean a G-string like the panties all the girls are wearing these days, but a G-string like the top string on the bass. So I sympathize with my stubborn little redheaded white girl, my spiritual progeny, a lady who, had we lived in the same era, would have been my partner-in-crime.

And I say 'lady', because that's what Jennifer Bradford is. A true lady.

Why am I so concerned with Jennifer's piano escapades, you ask? Well, I watch over 514 of the world's finest girl singers. I'm not their guardian angel, exactly. My power is quite limited. I can gently nudge my girls into what I believe to be the best direction possible for them to make the best music possible. It doesn't always work, but I keep trying. Why? Well, somebody has to make sure these ladies stay in line. We can't have an army of Billie Holidays out there, all drinking and drugging and screwing around, and not utilizing their talent properly. Female vocalists with that magical combination of talent, heart, and inner and outer beauty are few and far between, and I have to ensure that

there's always good music for us to download here in the afterworld. After all, the Big Guy likes His iTunes.

Anyhow, I'm not supposed to play favorites, but I do, and Jennifer's always been my number one girl; I hoped the writer was a solid choice to be her first lover after Mr McAllister. It seemed to me that Mr Bingham would be hip. The cat had a big ol' brain in his skull, and it looked like some decent moral standards, too. On the downside, he was reminding me of the chorus from a song I often performed live, but unfortunately never got to record. It's called 'I Fall in Love Too Easily'. 'All of Me' I recorded twenty-plus times, and 'Billie's Blues' almost thirty, but 'I Fall in Love Too Easily', *zero*. In retrospect, I could've chosen some better fellas to produce my records, but I often wasn't in the soberest state of mind to make good decisions. I can't quote you the lyrics here – the copyright laws up here are stringent like you wouldn't believe – but track them down and you'll understand what I'm talking about.

Do you see what I'm saying? It was too simple, too quick. I wasn't comfortable with how Mr Bingham went from being a probing, nonbiased writer, to a sex-and-love-crazed man-on-the-make. The quicker he fell for Jennifer, the less likely it would be that their lovemaking would have any lasting depth, and one of the many things I wanted for my best girl was to enjoy as much deep, meaningful lovemaking as possible.

Why? That's obvious. It would've fulfilled her, and fulfillment almost always makes for better music. Pain often makes for good music too, but after Mr

McAllister's performance, I figured Jennifer had suffered enough pain to last her a lifetime.

I was a little upset to see the two of them jump into bed – or on to the piano, more accurately – on their date-that-wasn't-a-date. She could've kept it cool for a month or so, and everybody would've been fine. But on the other hand, I couldn't get *too* angry with my girl, because I can relate. Just like me, my Jennifer is a sensualist. Except without the incessant booze intake and the heroin addiction.

Now Mr Bingham wasn't in love with Jennifer at that point, but the potential certainly was there – she had that effect on men. I imagined it was only a matter of time before she owned his heart. Jennifer moved quite speedily that night, and when Jennifer moves speedily, well, she's a heart thief.

Still, I tried to keep an open mind. Like I said, I wasn't allowed to interfere that much – they have some pretty strict rules up here in the music afterworld – but I could hope for the best outcome, and I knew hoping would help. I hoped that Mr Bingham would be good for her. I hoped he could help take her to the next romantic plane in her life – or at least get her through this one as unscathed as possible. I hoped he could help heal her heart.

I hoped, I hoped, I hoped.