

The lights dim in the smoky room and the chatter subsides. With fanfare, the emcee announces the Cabaret Diva. Radiating lots of attitude, a woman advances toward the small stage. Forget that just two nights ago she was a girl in jeans and curlers, mailing publicity flyers and rehearsing with her musical director. Tonight, she is the lady she has always wanted to be, holding center stage, selling illusion and trading pieces of dreams. "Give me a nickel, and I'll sing for you," she promises, and the audience, anxious to participate in this nocturnal ritual, gives her the thing she prizes most—attention. Anointed and set aside from other cabaret singers by a devoted following, the diva has many faces. She is a carrot-topped clown with liquid eyes; a prayerful naif in a profane setting; an ugly duckling transformed into a glittering vamp; or a polished chick singer dulling the slick edges by "slumming it." She is much more than a singer, however, just as the cabaret is much more than a nightclub. If her fans throw

flowers, if her set is punctuated with fervent cries of "We love you," it is because she *is* a diva, a woman who "carries on" beyond the everyday to create and sustain fantasy. It is a commitment she fulfills not only in her music but through her image. Backlit in dramatic colors, she is a queen of the night, holding court in a shadowy arena of half-lit faces and half-filled cocktail glasses.

Although we've seen her before in previous decades, the present incarnation of the cabaret diva crystallized in the early seventies when a yearning for old-fashioned glamour and elegance sparked the rise of a number of intimate supper clubs in Manhattan. Undeveloped and experimental, fledgling clubs like Reno Sweeney and the Ballroom attracted gifted individuals who were conventional neither in appearance nor in craft. The cabaret became a forum for the unexpected, the unorthodox; a place where raw talents could be refined. As the cabaret grew in importance, scores of would-be stars hopped onto the bandwagon. With press and

## BACKLIT DIVAS AND STARLIT DREAMS

by Patrick Pacheco



Portrait of Holly Woodlawn by Frank Kolleogy.

At left: Portrait of Julie Budd by Marc Raboy. Julie appears at the Rainbow Grill, December 5-17.



show-business executives in the audience, the supper-club circuit became a pivotal stepping stone—so much so that established stars like Barbara Cook, bent on making a comeback through the attendant publicity or just hoping to achieve a more personal style through the experience, began to make appearances.

Throughout the diversification of the past five years, however, the diva has remained the glorified exponent of the scene. At the beginning, she was the torchy, sometimes campy female adored by an audience of gay men. Since then, cabaret has become more eclectic. But the emotional extravagance that struck such a responsive chord among gays is still at the heart of the diva's appeal. In fulfilling the role of the ideal Beatrice for this Dantesque world, the chosen woman becomes a source of wish fulfillment for the audience. Nowhere but in cabaret is the relationship between the audience and the artists as symbiotic. The close atmosphere promotes intimacy, and the audience lays claim to the singer as their personal standard-bearer. Responding with passionate, if sometimes discriminate, loyalty, the fans become active participants in the diva's career, frequently creating a momentum that sends their heroine down the yellow brick road to fame and fortune.

Jane Olivor, Judith Cohen, Julie Budd, and Holly Woodlawn have been familiar names on the cabaret circuit for some time. Each has brought her unique talents to the cabaret and reaped different dividends for her efforts. But they are all divas insofar as they have cultivated a coterie of fans for whom they represent a magic and allure they can find nowhere else. Their involvement with cabaret over the years have brought them to new plateaus in their respective careers.

Taken together, these four performers make up a composite graduating class of an alma mater that is also changing. To take a look at their respective careers and personalities is to celebrate the world that has marked their careers. The cabaret and the diva have grown up together.

**Jane Olivor: The Joan of Arc of Pop Music**

There is a reverential hush in Carnegie Hall, where an overflow crowd is spilling into the aisles. A woman with marionette-like features, dressed in a simple black pantsuit, sits on the edge of the stage and talks about a girlhood fantasy. "See," says Jane Olivor with a sweep of her hand, "dreams *do* come true." The audience applauds with evangelical fervor. This is why they have come—to be a part of a Cinderella story that has taken a waifish Jewish girl out of Brooklyn, onto the threshold of fame. Many of those who are shouting "bravo" are part of the faithful corps who have followed Jane during her many appearances at the Ballroom, Reno Sweeney, and the Grand Finale. Anxious to discover a successor to Barbra Streisand and

*Opposite page:*

*Portrait of Jane Olivor by Sigrid Estrada; hair by Anthony, makeup by Sophie of Pierre Michel.*

Bette Midler, they found a likely candidate in a singer who brazenly assumed "Some Enchanted Evening" as her anthem, dressed and acted like a helpless orphan, and sang as if she were on the verge of levitation.

Although cynics were quick to point out that it was a bit too precious for them, the true believers, in increasing numbers, continued to plunk down their hard-earned dollars in order to worship in pagan chapels at the feet of their madonna. Tonight, their faith is being vindicated. They have been right all along. They have chosen well.

The week following her Carnegie Hall triumph, Jane Olivor demurely greets a guest at her high-rise apartment on Manhattan's East Side. The white living room is ascetically bare, dominated by a large trunk and venetian blinds on large picture windows that afford a commanding view of the city. Jane has had little time to work on her apartment because of her incredibly busy schedule, a fact that is underscored on this rainy afternoon by the constantly busy telephone being answered by a tape machine so that one can hear the messages that are being left. One young man calls to leave a breathless message of praise for Jane's new album, *Chasing Rainbows*, concluding with a vocal smack of the lips; another person calls with an invitation to a Philharmonic concert the following night; and Mickey Eicher, the Columbia Records executive who signed Jane to her contract, calls from California to inform her that Robert Hillburn, the music critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, has just given the new album a rave review. Jane greets the news with a happy gleam and clomps into the kitchen to prepare tea. As she chatters away about her career, the brassy Brooklynese that seeps through the kitchen door contradicts the onstage vulnerability that has always spurred audiences to root for her.

"No matter how old we get, we're still children," notes Jane, explaining her appeal, "and we need to be told stories. That's what my music is all about. It's full of wonderment. Today, people are paying three dollars to see a lot of sex and guts spilled on the screen; stuff they could see in real life. They don't want *that*. People are crying out for a change from all this sophistication. We know too many facts and have no wisdom. It's useless sophistication." Gesticulating to emphasize her cliché-ridden conversation, Jane is the suburban Jewish hausfrau bemoaning the state of the world; the instinctual woman who dismisses anything to which she cannot personally relate. There is an anti-intellectualism in her style that brings everything down to its simplest level. Although she has managed to woo the critics in every other major city, the majority of New York pop writers have attacked this quality as a freezing monotone of lacrimosity. Jane's eyes flash with fire when talking about those members of the press "who feel so insignificant as people that the only way they can feel important is by walking out on a performer. They don't like people to break the rules around here," she says with barely suppressed anger. "When you don't join in

some of the games they have had to play, they punish you. Does it hurt my career? No. Does it hurt my feelings? Sometimes. But that's all behind me because I have a star I believe in, and I keep my eye on that star," she concludes with emotion.

Though she deals simply with her material, she does it with such intensity that it jars people, especially the viscerally oriented individuals who jammed the cabarets where it all began for her. It is this angst-filled stance that has moved many to hail her as the new Piaf, though her dulcet, cello-like tones have none of the earthiness that characterized Piaf's raucous melodies. The desperate unhappiness of a childhood spent in a broken home may account for the sad-eyed emoting; her initial involvement with folk music and art songs may point to the cold purity of her style. But the driving power appears to stem from an iron-fisted determination and individuality that found the perfect outlet in cabaret. "People would laugh when I started to sing 'Some Enchanted Evening,' but I didn't mind. I was never intimidated. I did it because I *knew* that it was right. Halfway through the song, people stopped laughing and started listening."

That's more or less the way it's been ever since through countless supper-club engagements around the country and two top-selling albums. "I'm reaching people. That's the important thing," Jane explains. "I recently appeared at the Greek Theatre with my idol, Johnny Mathis. Five thousand people showed up—a lot of them came to see me. I got better reviews than he did, and that hurt me. I wish we both could have gotten rave reviews. But it shows that people want romance and imagination. Look," she says, picking up a beautifully cut red rose from a vase, "the French know how to live. Americans want to *win*. They want to tear everything down. But the European can look at a rose and know that it's the most important thing in the world. That's what I sing about. *L'importante, C'est la rose.*"

The guest takes the rose and sniffs. There is no scent. It's synthetic.

**The Blossoming of Julie Budd**

Julie Budd is something of a show-business phenomenon. At age twelve, she was hanging out with the gang on the corner, eating pizza and smoking dope. At fourteen, she was crossing the continent to appear in virtually every prime-time television variety and talk show (which were all taped live at the time). At fifteen, she left behind a boyfriend and went on the road, appearing in major nightclubs with Bill Cosby, Frank Sinatra, Jim Nabors, and Danny Thomas. By age eighteen, she had cut three albums, all of which sold rather well, considering the number of blue-haired ladies and contemporaries she had managed to enlist in her fan club due to her appearances on television. Two years ago, Julie appeared at the Grand Finale. Those who went expecting to see a mini Eydie Gorme whispering cute asides to the front tables were surprised to encounter an accomplished entertainer with an infectious charm.

"It was Herb's decision to go that route," explains Julie in her comfortable apartment in a lavish building in the Lincoln Center area. "He felt that it would help me achieve a more personal style." Herb Bernstein has been Julie's manager since the day he discovered the thirteen-year-old dynamo buzzing around Tamarack Lodge, a resort in the Borscht Belt. She hustled him to catch her act at the Saturday night talent contest, at which time she tossed off a couple of tunes, shrewdly calculating that she would bring the audience to their feet with a stirring rendition of an old Yiddish favorite. Ten years later, cabaret audiences were less predictable, so while Herbie gnawed his nails to the nubs on opening night, Julie summoned up all her cool and delivered.

It's always been a question of "delivering" for Julie, even at the very beginning. She never hid behind her age, nor were her mentors ever patronizing. "I was a kid, but that didn't mean shit to them," she says with a tarty toughness that sounds incongruous coming from a girl with delicate features. "I not only had to be good, I had to be great, because they were putting their reputations on the line, giving me opportunities they were denying to someone else. It was a lot of pressure for a young girl to handle, but I was fearless. I knew I wanted to make it in show business, even if I had to jump off the Empire State Building." Julie admits that she considered the first couple of years in the business something of a lark. It was only when she became old enough to realize how much she had to lose did the tensions begin to creep in. She did not regret missing out on an average adolescence.

"What did I miss?" she asks with palms outstretched. "Acne? A boyfriend named Irving? No. If I would have wanted that, I would have had it. Nobody was pushing me into a career. I was pushing myself. I am lucky that I have a very good family. It wasn't the Judy Garland story at all. My mother was no stage mother—she was just glad I wasn't hanging out on the streets being arrested. And my father was very protective. I've seen an awful lot of crap in this business, and the bottom line is that nobody, *nobody* gives a shit about you except your family."

Julie maintains that she was too busy to become jaded by the events that whizzed around her during the formative years. If working with veterans like Sinatra taught her anything, it was that she had a lot to learn. She resolved early that everything would take a back seat to her professional career, and life has been a series of crash courses ever since. Her appearances in cabaret stemmed from her desire to learn everything she could about the business. She claims that the experience has helped in her big-room engagements. "I realized that I didn't have to play it so big," she notes. "I brought it down a couple of notches and it's better. I also learned about lighting, sound, and a lot of the technical bullshit that I never even thought about before."

Sharp and inquisitive, Julie's mind, always going in ten different directions at once,

appears to act as a blotter. She can size up a room in no time, telling one the overhead and potential profits that the place probably realizes in a week's time. Unlike Judith Cohen and Jane Olivor, who reach their audience with a childlike tug at the heartstrings, Julie, for obvious reasons, is very much the woman onstage. Her childhood stardom may have given her a head start, but it has also undermined her reputation as a serious artist. Her maturity is now putting any doubts to rest, but the persistent problem is the frequent comparison with the other Jewish girl from Brooklyn with the prominent nose and predilection for Yiddish slang. Julie recalls that the problem became acute when Roslyn Kind, Streisand's half sister, first came on the scene. Aware that Barbra Streisand had a sister in show business and noting the physical similarities, people began to assume that it was Julie. Frustrated, she would half-jokingly begin her act with the admission, "No, I am *not* her sister." Julie disavows the fact that she was influenced by Streisand, although it seems clear that a whole new flock of female singers have all been affected by the Streisand sound, just as the male singers of the thirties and forties were influenced by Bing Crosby and Russ Colombo.

Anyone hoping to find neurotic scars from a childhood spent in hotel rooms and late-night parties will be hard pressed. "Look, I wish I could have some Piaf anguish in me, but I don't. Except for the fact that I went through a series of boyfriends who I picked for the very reason that they would treat me rough—which is only natural for a Jewish girl, *anyway*—I'm a very normal person. I'm lucky that I have a good family and that includes Herbie. All I want to do is become the best singer I can. Maybe make a few bucks and star in a picture at the end of which I sing the title song."

Maybe *The Way We Weren't*?

**Judith Cohen: Glad-Rag Doll**

People have a tendency to gasp when they first see Judith Cohen onstage. With a slightly chubby figure, a face that has a mind of its own, and a smoky colored voice that spits out notes, she is hardly the airbrushed portrait of a diva. Yet Judith grabs the spotlight with such conviction that, like Holly Woodlawn, she makes one believe that she deserves the spotlight. Though Judith has recently been studying with Cissy Houston, which has notably improved her voice, she is still foremost an actress with a hypnotic appeal. Focusing her liquid blue eyes on the audience, she convinces them that she is the beautiful girl she has always wanted to be. Pushing out notes with gusto, she affects a voice that is much richer and more developed than it actually is. "Dreams do come true," but only because Judith, in the face of serious limitations, has refused to be intimidated. She has almost forced them into existence. The audience, recognizing her daring—and overwhelmed by it—is anxious to vindicate it by giving her warm acceptance. By doing so, they make the dream possible for themselves.

Like Jane Olivor, a phenomenon like Judith Cohen could only have happened in cabaret. In the beginning, only off-off-Broadway was as creative and experimental. When she first came to cabaret, she relied more on her acting abilities to put across her songs, all of which were highly dramatic in content. Judith took songs like "Rubber Ducky," "Lullaby of Broadway," and "Pieces of Dreams," and built three-act plays around them. Having been a buff of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland films during her painfully shy youth, she took her prevailing style from them. Punctuating her set with icky-poo patter, Judith played for the audience's sympathy in the finest Garland tradition of "If you feel sorry for me, I will love you." She was the little girl crawling into daddy's lap, and the audience lapped it up.

Recently, however, there has been a distinct change in Judith's approach. She has lost weight; she has dropped many of the heart-throbbing Broadway show tunes in favor of the more contemporary "Land of Make Believe" and "Never Gonna See the Rain Again"; and she has killed off the "little girl" routine, or at least shunted her aside in favor of a more mature woman that is more attractive. "There will always be that little girl in me who loves Teddy Bears, I suppose," she muses while taking a break during a rehearsal at Reno Sweeney. "But the California experience with Norman Lear's 'A Year at the Top' gave me such confidence, even though I was let go from the series. When I came back to New York, I was so petrified that it just fired me to keep growing and to keep improving. I'm lucky to have good people around me, too—Joan Hyler, my agent at ICM, Keith Avedon, my musical director, and David, my lover. He's the one who has made me feel beautiful, the one who has made me feel like a woman."

Judith has been so definite in her approach that she has tended to polarize those who have seen her into opposite camps. She dismisses criticism with a shrug. "I need constructive criticism so I can learn. But when people get nasty just to get nasty, well, you can't think about it too much, because the bitterness will start to creep in and negative energy never gets you anywhere. One of the wonderful things about cabaret is that people are always rooting for you—they want you to make it because you would be the hometown girl who made it big. But sometime people don't want you to make it, because it somehow diminishes them. That's dumb. There's plenty of room in this business for everyone to make it. But I know one thing—I know I am going to make it. It's an obsession with me."

Judith's new approach represents not so much a mellowing of spirit as it does a harnessing of the energy that used to fling itself across the room with breathless abandon. More importantly, her new confidence has given her impetus to take chances, try different material that may be beyond her reach. "I know I have to keep daring myself, otherwise I'll never learn anything. Cabaret can get very comfortable



Portrait of Judith Cohen

once you've developed a following, but you can't allow yourself to rest on your laurels." Otherwise, it's like falling asleep in the poppy field. Then one'll never get to the Emerald City.

**Holly Woodlawn: The New Bionic Woman**  
Holly, like Barbra Streisand, is the ultimate diva, the real bionic woman and the idealization of what every female on the cabaret circuit hopes to be. Forget that Holly's real name is Harold Eisenberg, that he's half-Jewish and half-Puerto Rican and that he moved to New York ten years ago from Miami. ("My moon was definitely not over Miami," he quips.) All one really needs to know is that as early as Holly can remember, he wanted to be Lana Turner in *The Prodigal*. So when he was getting his nightclub act together a couple of years ago, he bought the dress Lana Turner wore in *The Prodigal* at an auction, and yes, Virginia . . .

Holly fell into cabaret while realizing yet another of his fantasies—to be a backup singer. "Oh, yes, darling," he husks. "I mean I was just crazy for all those black ladies doo-ahhing and shoob-dooob-a-dooing. So that when my roommate, who was going with one of the New York Dolls at the time, asked me to sing backup at the time. . . well, I just jumped at the chance to be Patti Labelle." When the group performed at Reno Sweeney, owner Lewis Friedman dismissed them, but asked Holly to come back. "I was, of course, thrilled. Playing Reno's was like playing the Palace. At first, all the 'girls' came. They

saved up their welfare checks and sat ringside to cheer the diva on. But Reno's is *not* Smiler's, so later on my audience began to change and now it's composed of quite a few straight couples."

Although Holly is always acting, playing that "all-walking, all-talking, all-crawling, all-bruta lush lady up there," he has a natural and real quality that is at the core of his talent. He is a satire, but one that is mixed with equal parts of put-on and honesty. In order to fully appreciate Holly, one must take him seriously. Like Bea Lillie, he has the knack of leading his audience on a heavy dramatic trip and then, just when he's got them in the palm of his hand, hitting them with a zinger that busts the mood wide open. Ask Holly about the lean years, and he chides, "Oh, you mean when it got cold and I needed furs? When the limo ran out of gas? Well, I just looked in the mirror and said, 'Mira, eh?' " Though he is cynical, Holly is out to have fun, to entertain—nobody ever gets hurt. If performing is therapy for the diva, then Holly's particular form of gestalt group encounter is the salutary release.

Last year, Holly attempted to do an act as a boy. He soon returned to gowns and jewels and paint because his public demanded it. He had to present his alter ego in public, however, if he was ever going to separate his public from his private self. They co-exist quite peacefully now, he concedes, one playing the glittering vamp, while the other stays home, resting in the villa.

"Being with Holly is like being at day school with everybody's paints," notes Lennie Dean, Holly's co-everything and colleague. Together they come up with the comedy for the act that's derived from the everyday life of being half-Puerto Rican ("Just being Puerto Rican is a musical event in itself, darling"), half-Jewish with a burning desire to be all madness. Lennie and Holly feel like they've finally graduated with the present act at Reno Sweeney. In the course of it, Holly vamps through "Treat Me Rough," husks a stirring version of "Black Market," and dances across the stage in Leonard Bernstein's "Island Magic."

The act is a high-risk venture, filled with pitfalls and egg-shell thin material, but he pulls it off. Like a cat flung around by wanton boys, Holly always manages to land on his feet. Through the Warhol films and the myriad nightclub appearances, he has always been true to himself. He is the Quentin Crisp of cabaret, the individual who has followed through. In the process, he has fashioned an existence that knows few limitations or boundaries, and his imagination remains boundless. When asked, "What next? Without hesitation he replies, "The airport." Alighting from the top of the Concorde, dressed as Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean, Holly should be the ultimate cocktail for the last cabaret.