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Activist-Singer Nellie McKay Performs at Café Carlyle

Her Sound is 1940s, but her Causes are Modern-Day

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**
 Feb. 17, 2014 9:23 p.m. ET



Nellie McKay in 'Old Hats' at the Pershing Square Signature Center last year; Ms. McKay composed songs for the variety show. *Joan Marcus*

Nellie McKay's sound harks back to the gee-whiz spirit of the 1940s and '50s, with timeless melodies and tributes to the likes of Rosemary Clooney and Doris Day. But her mind, musically and otherwise, finds much in the present to protest.

"There's such a rich history of protest in this country, and such ripe disdain," she said, cheerfully, while holding a sign last week outside the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. She was there, at Madison Square Garden in the cold, with about a dozen others to suggest that breeding dogs is immoral when dogs in shelters go without homes. (Her sign: "Every dog bred is a shelter dog dead.")

On Tuesday, Ms. McKay brings her mission to a setting of a different sort: the cabaret at the Café Carlyle, where she will perform a five-night stand.

The atmosphere may diverge, but the singer has made a habit of recasting her surroundings in her own image.

"Her last two 'cabaret' shows I saw have been jaw-dropping. They both completely subverted the genre," said David Byrne, a fan who enlisted Ms. McKay to sing on his

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concept album "Here Lies Love."

Among Ms. McKay's charms, Mr. Byrne said, are the ways she playfully mixes what he called a "tragic noir vibe" with her "wicked sense of humor."

Ms. McKay, 31 years old, has amassed a body of work that includes celebrated albums ("Get Away From Me," "Pretty Little Head," "Home Sweet Mobile Home") and star turns in theatrical productions such as Broadway's "The Threepenny Opera" and "Old Hats," an off-Broadway show that resurrected the spirit of vaudeville.

Ms. McKay is liable to draw from all that and more at the Carlyle, though she has been slow to decide on a set list.

"I would love to just eat on stage and not do the show, but I don't think they'll let me," she said, with the wry, chirpy sensibility signaled by her show's title: "Nellie With a Z."

Is there a rationale behind the name?

"No," she said. "Things don't need to be rational. There's too much rationality."



Ms. McKay protests outside the Westminster dog show last week. *Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal*

After the protest at the dog show, a night out led to dinner at the Brooklyn restaurant Bliss. Like Ms. McKay, Bliss advocates a vegan diet, with no meat or dairy products on offer.

"Dairy seems more passive and less violent, but in fact those animals suffer more," Ms. McKay said. "As usual, the women suffer more: hooked up to milk machines, stuffed in cages laying eggs. Pigs can't have any intimacy with their piglets. It's awful."

Veganism and feminism are causes dear enough to her that she wrote a foreword for the 20th-anniversary edition of "The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory." They sometimes serve as subjects for her songs, which approach matters of such seriousness through sardonic sleight of hand.

Ms. McKay's song "Mother of Pearl" dresses down allegations that feminists don't have a sense of humor with biting sarcasm, and another, "Unknown Reggae," makes mention of a hypocritical progressive eating a hamburger that was once the mother of a living being.

"She's very brave," said Carol Adams, who wrote "Sexual Politics of Meat." "She's willing to embrace beliefs and talk about what she believes."

Ms. McKay is also exuberant and playful, even when anxious about approaching shows.

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As an appetizer of chips arrived—with meatless chili, vegan cheese and vegan sour cream—she mulled what to perform at the Carlyle.

"Gee, I guess I'll play a variety," she said. "I'll sing an ode to these wonderful nachos."

Talk turned to fracking, fascism and the surveillance state, as well as her favorite ukulele, a vintage treasure from the 1920s give to her by the singer-songwriter Ryan Adams.

As the night went on, Ms. McKay came no closer to knowing what she will perform. But the spirit she will summon is always clear.

"I want to make people happy, but not too happy," Ms. McKay said. "It's a fine line to tread."

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