

ARTS

BODY & SOUL

Opera baritone Nathan Gunn ventures into the pop and jazz idioms—just don't call it a crossover album.

BY DAVID COTE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM FRANCO

NOT TOO MANY CELEBRITIES BRING THEIR FATHERS ALONG FOR a photo shoot, but Nathan Gunn's dad, Walter, seems to be part of a package deal. Earlier in the week, father and son shared a drive to New York from Urbana-Champaign, where the opera superstar and his wife, Julie, teach at the University of Illinois. Walter, a lean, bearded retiree who radiates quiet pride, hovers on the periphery of the studio set as his amiable son strikes poses in the morning light. "Tell him to take his shirt off," he suggests, chuckling.

Clearly Walter understands his son's career, which has been built on an amazing set of baritone pipes, but also on Gunn's chiseled physique and matinee-idol looks. In more than one production at the Metropolitan Opera and other venues around the country, the 38-year-old singer has been encouraged to emphasize the beefcake.

His shirtless 1997 turn in *Iphigénie en Tauride* at Glimmerglass Opera won him an ardent following (and more than one breathless Web site). He followed it up with an acclaimed (and no less hunky) turn in *Billy Budd* at Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2001. Budd is becoming Gunn's signature role: He recorded the Benjamin Britten opera with the London Symphony Orchestra in December.

The singer's career reflects a canny selection of standard opera repertoire, such as new works like Tobias Picker and Gene Scheer's *An American Tragedy* (based on the Theodore Dreiser novel), performed in 2005, and Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, which was inventively staged in 2006. The former went for the simple, bare-chested look; the latter, directed by *The Lion King*'s Julie Taymor, had him leaping around in a skintight green suit accessorized with birdcages.

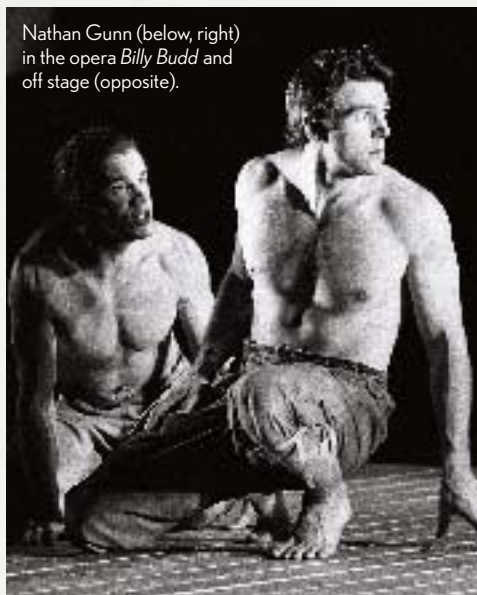
Now Gunn has taken his vocal stylings beyond the opera house with *Just Before Sunrise*, a collection of new songs and pop covers. The album

features an eclectic lineup: There are classy, brooding numbers by living composers such as Scheer and John Bucchino; lyrics drawn from literary giants W.H. Auden, James Joyce, and W.B. Yeats; and covers of pop songs by Tom Waits, Billy Joel, and Sting.

That may sound like a strange mix, but Gunn makes it cohere with his velvety baritone. Often, when an opera singer ventures into pop or jazz territory, the results are stiff, even laughable, but Gunn has pulled back on the volume and intensity and rendered a series of finely etched vocal portraits in miniature. His cover of "Innocent When You Dream" carries no trace of Waits' gravel-and-whiskey growl, instead emphasizing the tender, melancholy side of that dirge-like tune. Similarly, Gunn's version of the Sting ditty "The Secret Marriage" brings a level of gravitas and even holiness to what was merely pretty on the album *Nothing Like the Sun*. Then there are new songs, such as Bucchino's urbane, bouncy duet "It Feels Like Home." For that track, Gunn enlisted the comic soprano and stage star Kristin Chenoweth, known for her work in Broadway's *Wicked* and the TV sitcom *Pushing Daisies*. The album's arrangements are mostly simple but effective, and the overall mood is autumnal, wistful, and romantic.

The album was inspired, Gunn says, by the peculiarly hopeful-yet-melancholy quality he finds in the predawn light during his early morning jogs. "It's privately beautiful," he says, and searches for an apt metaphor. "It's like watching your kid play a cello recital for the first time. A little bit of peace in the chaotic world we live in."

The term *crossover album* bothers him, though. "I always thought of crossover artists as singing stuff they really shouldn't," Gunn says with a chuckle. "Sounds like trespassing." □



Nathan Gunn (below, right) in the opera *Billy Budd* and off stage (opposite).

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The melancholy stylings from Nathan Gunn's new album, *Just Before Sunrise*, were inspired by the singer's solitary early morning jogs.

