



Becoming Eden

After decades of covering a difficult past with polish and shine, jazz singer Eden Atwood brings it to the surface with a voice that rings brave and true

BY MEGAN AULT REGNERUS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

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ATCHING YOUR PARENTS GET DIVORCED AS A YOUNG CHILD? THAT'S ROUGH. How about discovering you have a rare medical condition — one apparently so shameful that the adults around you lied, put you through controversial surgery, and hid it for fear of what you'd do to yourself if you learned the truth? Or how about transcending a family history of suicide, even after your father adds another page to that story, taking a gun to himself and leaving you to figure it all out at the tender age of 19? Welcome to Eden Atwood's world.

Yes, there are more uplifting things to tell about this 40-year-old musician with a voice that stops anyone in their tracks, jazz fan or not. But those are more recent, and to really appreciate the unique quality behind the voice today, to recognize and call it what it is — honesty — it's important to understand how difficult it is for some people to embrace and become who they are. And what a gift it is when they do.

Music came to Atwood early and was imprinted into the neural pathways of her brain, showing itself by three years old, when she got up in front of customers at a Shakey's Pizza Parlor in Memphis and began singing. Her father, Hub Atwood, wrote and arranged music for legends like Harry James, Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. And even though Atwood moved to Montana with her mother at age 5 after her parents split, she returned to the South over the years to spend time with Hub.

"I never thought I was going to be a jazz singer," Atwood recalls. "I listened to it because of my father, and as a kid, I didn't even know it was unusual that I listened to that kind of music. I heard things that my father heard, heard chord changes that made me go, 'Oh, I love that song.' Not because of the hook, but because of a certain chord that moved me. I got that from my dad."

As a teen, Atwood lived in Butte with her mom, Gus Miller, who is the daughter of author A.B. Guthrie, Jr. She remembers feeling like she never really fit in there, and often hung out with musicians twice her age. But it didn't help when a normal rite of passage for a young woman, menstruation, never happened. She was told not to worry about it but was eventually taken to a doctor.

"I was told I had cancerous, twisted ovaries that had to be removed, with the implication that I could die if they weren't," says Atwood. "That's how they did it. They said, 'You're never going to have children, here take these hormones for the rest of your life. Go have a good life.'"



Atwood sings at a benefit concert in Choteau.

But what was removed from Atwood wasn't ovaries. It was internal testes. Atwood has Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), which means she was born with an X and a Y, or typically male chromosomes, although she is female in outer appearance and identity.

Dr. Charmian Quigley, a pediatric endocrinologist, along with Atwood, humanized AIS last August 2008 by sharing their knowledge of the condition on national television, when they spoke with ABC News. "There are probably about 7,500 people, women, in the U.S. with the condition," said Dr. Quigley. Despite the male chromosomes, Quigley said, women with AIS are just that — women. "They have a vagina, like anybody else's. But it's basically just a pouch, it's not connected to a uterus. There is no uterus. But what they have internally is testes that you would typically find in a male."

For Atwood, the real complications of dealing with AIS came from the fact that she was lied to, and had the truth blurted to her by her stepmother at age 15. "Actually, she told me I was a hermaphrodite, that I was half man, half woman, which isn't accurate," says Atwood. "There are people with complex genetics, and, I'm one of them."

"I've never had any gender identity issues," she continues. "Always a girl's girl. The worst part about it was the lie. That was the hardest to recover from. Everybody was so fearful and afraid that it was so awful that I might want to kill myself. It plants a seed in your brain like, 'Is it so awful? Should I kill myself? Is it that bad?' It's all about how it's dealt with, for sure."

Still, Atwood clarifies that she doesn't blame her mother for what happened. "She took me to the Mayo freakin' clinic and they told her, 'Don't tell her.' That was it. One of the best places in the entire world." Turns out, hiding an AIS patient's condition from them was common medical advice when Atwood was a teen, an approach that has since changed.

What followed for Atwood, especially after the death of her father, was a steady path of success mixed with self-destructiveness. Rather than pursuing music, she enrolled in the drama program at the University of Montana, where her mother and grandfather, A.B. Guthrie Jr., went to college. From there she attended the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago and began singing at Chicago's legendary Gold Star Sardine Bar, leaving for periods of time to model and act in Los Angeles, New York and Paris.

Atwood says that struggles with her self-image led to years of confusion, promiscuity and several marriages that didn't work out. Album covers of her in her 20s show a tall, willowy, sensuous woman with shiny brown hair and bright blue-green eyes. "For a while I was trying so hard to prove my femininity that I'd worked up this va-vavoom package, right? I was very enticing to men, and they were like, 'Yeah!'" she says, now clearly a bit wiser for the years. "I was playing this

game with attraction, and I got really good at it.”

In 1992, Atwood’s television career gained momentum with roles on ABC’s “The Commish” and on the daytime drama “Loving.” She also scored a role on Paramount’s “The Untouchables.” But the possibility of celebrity was more than she could handle with the weightiness of keeping the AIS secret. “During the soap opera I was terrified that I was going to be found out, and it was horrifying. I left the television career to go back to the relative anonymity of jazz,” she says.

Next was years of singing, more albums and playing venues around the world. Until recently, she was the youngest artist ever signed to the Concord record label. Asked about a 1997 interview on the NBC program “Talkin’ Jazz” which can be seen on YouTube, Atwood says, “It’s very mannered, isn’t it? Like we’ve just had cognac and retired. I look at that and I’m like, ‘Hello? Who are you?’ Because I was all persona, and no person.”

Today, Atwood, still striking but less willowy, looks like a more relaxed version of her younger self. The steps from persona to person included moving to Missoula and adopting a baby with her partner, Bruce Anderson. Atwood and Anderson are no longer married, but share parenting duties and remain close friends. Another step has been writing a memoir and giving words to the pains of her past, loosening their grip on her. And a decade ago, she began to actively deal with her AIS.

“The first time I met another AIS woman was after the dawn of the internet,” Atwood recalls. “I didn’t even know another person existed like me, never saw another person like me. How could I even begin the process of accepting myself if I was the only one?”

“I started the first email group, and in the beginning when we first found each other there were hundreds of emails a day — back and forth, back and forth. Still, we wouldn’t even tell each other our real names. Then finally we got together, and I spoke about what it means to find your tribe. The first time I gave that speech we cried.”

Ten years passed between Atwood’s sharing her story with support groups, to sharing it on national news. Beneath the old NBC interview on YouTube of Atwood, a viewer has posted the comment: “I have AIS too. Eden is an inspiration.”

Asked if this is her intention, to help others avoid the shame and isolation that she had to wrestle with, Atwood says, “After my television career I always said I am *not* going to be the poster girl for AIS. Hell. No. Uh-uh. But as I got older I started to feel that I wanted my life to mean something — and I suppose everybody feels that way — but in the end, I don’t think everybody gets the opportunity to do something great,

by circumstance. Sometimes doing something great involves something you don’t want to do, but you do it anyway because it could help more people than save you some embarrassment.”

Also, Atwood is quick to state that being a mother to 5-year-old Ben has helped her become who she wants to be in the world. “My son is black. He lives in a white area. I’m going to tell my son, ‘Hold your head high. Be proud of your heritage, embrace who you are,’ and it goes back to setting an example. I can hide, I can take a great big pass (about having AIS), if you will. But if I do that, then I’m totally full of shit.”

How has this process of shedding layers affected her music? Perhaps not surprisingly, there are direct correlations between Atwood’s coming to terms with her personal world



Atwood cuddles with her son, Ben, on the front porch of their Missoula home.

and her evolution as a jazz singer. Today, her days are divided between teaching music at a Missoula school where Ben attends preschool, giving private voice lessons, and scraping out time for her own music.

Her latest album, “Turn Me Loose,” will be available in Montana in June. But because this work is being released on a Japanese label, only 1,000 signed and numbered copies will be available. One particularly memorable track, “True North,” was written and composed by Atwood.

Of this latest work, Atwood reflects, “I don’t really feel like I began to make honest recording work — although there was still talent there — until about six years ago.” Asked if that is true of this upcoming album, she says, “None more so

than this one because this record is me after a vocal surgery, me after a mastoidectomy — I'm deaf in my left ear — this is more me than I've ever been. And in a way, that is wonderful."

David Morgenroth is a classical and jazz pianist who has performed and collaborated with Atwood for the past five years, who shares a similar view of "Turn Me Loose."

"Having the cyst removed from her vocal chord has pushed Eden to make adjustments to how she sings. She's discovered some grit in her voice, some changes in range. The beauty of it is that she's been able to work with that and forge a much more personal style."

"I don't want to be constrained any more by 'it has to be this genre, or it has to be that theme, or I have to do an album cover that looks like a hot jazz singer, like Michelle Pfeiffer on a piano,'" says Atwood. "I'm going to do it the way I want to do it now."

"We're both kind of at the stage of our lives where we don't care as much about what people think, and that's very freeing," adds Morgenroth. "No more placing internal restraints due to external factors. It's nice to be older and play music from the heart and not be restrained by what people might think, and

to go in whatever direction you want to go."

Ultimately, both Atwood and Morgenroth agree that the music is all the better from that place of frankly deciding not to care about commercial success so much, getting back to the origins of music inside oneself.

"When you choose a career in music you're not choosing it because there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow," says Morgenroth. "You choose it because there's something in it that gives you internal fulfillment."

Right now, Atwood is pretty clear about staying true to what gives her internal fulfillment, and what's still on her future "to do list."

"Really, what matters to me is seeing my son through childhood with his sense of self intact, that he doesn't see himself as separate from others. I want to raise a boy who cares about other people . . . and, I want to sing," she says.

"It's been a very slow progression trying to be more human, less afraid, coming at life from a more courageous place," she adds.

But as she says this, one senses that in a wholly unique, jazzy sort of way, life has never been better for Eden Atwood. Truth be told, her most sincere work has just taken the stage. ■

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