Singer Sylvia McNair had spent years performing with esteemed orchestras and opera companies across the US and Europe. She had sung the B Minor Mass in the Vatican for the Pope. She had won an invitation to the White House from an enthusiastic Hillary Clinton.

But the successful singer was at a turning point: She had two stacks of music in front of her on the piano. One was a pile of the more mature opera roles she’d have to master, if she wanted to continue in her draining career as a sought-after classical singer. The other was a collection that embraced the best of the American Songbook, pieces she had always loved and connected with. “The choice was easy,” she laughs. “It was like day and night. It was so obvious.”

She made her choice. She moved into finding deep engagement with the work of greats from Gershwin to Sondheim, repertoire she had always longed to explore. It led to a new blossoming of McNair’s career, including a busy performance schedule, several compelling albums that span everything from Latin standards (“Romance”) to Christmas favorites, and a one-woman show that has all the sass and drama you’d expect from someone who’s been both torch singer and opera star.

Stage presence and vocal chops, while important, are not the only concerns for McNair. For her, telling stories comes first. Whether performing before tens of thousands of admirers at the Hollywood Bowl or in an intimate cabaret space, McNair finds a way to bring songs’ stories home to listeners, sharing the joy, heartache, and humor of some of the last century’s best songs.

McNair came to singing as a young woman in college. She initially wanted to pursue a career as a violinist, until her violin teacher recommended voice lessons as a way to support her playing via breath work. McNair tried them and was smitten. “What drew me to singing were two things. I love words and I love eye contact,” notes McNair.

What followed were several decades of non-stop touring and engagements with some of the world’s best classical ensembles. She won two Grammys, a regional Emmy, and wide-ranging praise from major media outlets. She refused to rest on her laurels, however, and kept pushing herself to master new genres, styles, and ways of working with music. She became a wildly creative performer, who can move from whispered sweet-nothings to belted, soaring revels.

Experience has helped McNair cultivate ever-new ways to use her instrument and to breathe new life into beloved songs. “With time, my voice has dropped a third. Now finally, I sound like a mature woman. I love my low notes. They have gotten rich and strong,” muses McNair. “I’m more comfortable below middle C. When the body is your instrument, that includes mind and spirit and having a free spirit is essential to being able to sing. You sing from some place much deeper than where your vocal cords sit.”

This place enlivens McNair’s performances, makes her storytelling riveting. “There is so much music written about love. Love gone right or wrong,” she says. “Love stories are easier for me to tell wholeheartedly now. I’ve gone through ups and downs and can sing about love with knowledge and experience. I couldn’t have done that 20 years ago.”

McNair’s journey from the concert hall to the cabaret, from the Metropolitan Opera to the Oak Room at the Algonquin, hasn’t always been easy. But McNair has no regrets: “Happiness is priceless. I wouldn’t change a thing, despite some of the unexpected twists and turns. I have kept dreaming. I have so many more ways now of expressing myself and being involved with the music I love. To sing music I love with people I love in places I love --- for me, life doesn't get any better!”