

SHERVIN LAINEZ



# DIDA PELLED

## DOWN FOR THE RIDE

BY SOPHIA VALERA HEINECKE

Tel Aviv-born, Brooklyn-based Dida Pelled is known for her smoky vocal tone, highly personal guitar work and aptitude at wrangling a multiplicity of genres with the spirit of a rodeo rider. Discovered by Italian trumpeter and producer Fabio Morgera, she has since built a catalog spanning jazz, Americana and vintage pop and has toured extensively across the US and Europe. Pelled also relishes sharing her musicianship in community, leading a choir and hosting a show on Radio Free Brooklyn, in addition to her monthly residency at Brooklyn's Ornithology, now entering its third year. Her unapologetically blues-drenched, newly-released album is *I Wish You Would*, which gets its NYC album release concert this month at Joe's Pub.

**THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD:** There is such a wholeness to the way you balance singing with the voice of your guitar.

**DIDA PELLED:** I really love singers who play an instrument, and instrumentalists who sing—Nina Simone, Blossom Dearie, Shirley Horn, Chet Baker, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Kenny Dorham. There's something really special that can only happen when the same person accompanies themselves. I love the intimacy in that connection. I think I've worked on it mostly by just doing it A LOT, playing guitar and singing. It also helps to really work on each one separately. With the guitar, I try to sing everything I play. I transcribe a lot, and everything I transcribe, I sing first. I slow things down and really learn the phrasing. It sharpens my ear and makes every idea that comes to me translate quickly and effortlessly to the guitar. When it works, it's like my guitar is singing. With singing, I learned a lot preparing for my new record, *I Wish You Would* (La Reserve). I went back to lessons with my teacher, Sam Yahel. I told him I wanted to get ready for the recording. Sam responded, "Then we work on your vocals. Your guitar will be great, but if you're singing, that comes first. We want every word to come across." So I started shedding. I transcribed singers Billie Holiday, Carmen McRae, even Prince. Slowing things down, literally observing the waveforms of their vocals, learning the different devices, slides, dynamics, the way they end a word. The smallest details really make it. I wanted to expand my sonic vocabulary with more tools for how I sing, but at the end of the day it was an emotional practice of putting myself out there without the guitar. Sam had me go to jam sessions and friends' gigs and sit in without a guitar. Even on my own shows, singing one song without the guitar. Just dealing with being a singer for a second.

**NYCJR:** Your dual voices are channeled through this whole ecosystem of sound you create in your radio show. How do you approach that?

**PELLED:** Having a radio show was actually a childhood dream. I used to sit with headphones and

pretend I was hosting, introducing songs, talking into nothing. A few years ago, after some interviews around my album *Love of the Tiger*, I was invited to Radio Free Brooklyn. I loved it immediately. The host helped me make a show proposal, and it was accepted! I wasn't in the best place personally at the time, with heartbreaks and life transitions, so the show was like an escape. I could invite my biggest musical crushes and step into a different world with them. I realized pretty quickly how much I enjoy talking to people like that, very unedited, that what gives me energy is having other people around. Asking questions, listening, being in it with someone for an hour. The show gives me that every week. It's also the opposite of making records. Albums take years. The show is immediate and live. That's what keeps it fun.

**NYCJR:** I wonder how improvisation plays into your practice, your sessions with your band, or in your live shows. Where does that come through for you?

**PELLED:** It was through a process of experimentation and play that we got *I Wish You Would* to feel so fresh. The songs are written, but there's plenty of room for interpretation. I've been playing some of them for over 15 years; they go way back, so there has to be a lot of freedom inside the tunes. Otherwise, it just gets stale. I was lucky to record with musicians who have the best taste in the world: Sullivan Fortner (piano, Rhodes), Tony Scherr (bass, guitar) and Kenny Wollesen (drums, percussion). Everything they played was exactly what the music needed. They really know how to make every moment feel alive. The producer, Matt Pierson, and I made sure there wouldn't be a rehearsal before the session, so the first time we played together as a group was captured. We knew that was going to be magic.

**NYCJR:** When you were young, just at the beginning of becoming the musician you are, where and how did you discover new music?

**PELLED:** It was old music, but where did I discover new old music? When I got into Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts [just outside Tel-Aviv]. It was Amit Golan, who has passed on now, but taught jazz history for the first-year students. He was amazing, not only for what he taught, but also for teaching us to love the music so much. He made so many students become musicians for the rest of their lives, and we're all grateful to him for that. Amit would play bebop, hard bop and talk about what's going on in New York. Then, every time my dad went abroad, I would ask him, "Please bring me Grant Green, Peter Bernstein, Wes Montgomery, Thelonious Monk."

**NYCJR:** Did the moment when you started teaching change the way you learn new techniques?

**PELLED:** It definitely makes me a better learner. When

you have to explain something, you end up learning it really well. You have to break it down into steps, go slowly and explain it more than once. I get better at the things I'm teaching, and I also learn to be really patient and clear. Once you do that for students, you start doing it for yourself too. I try to teach my students how to listen to themselves and comment on recordings in a productive way, but still leave room for possibility, like, "maybe I can try this." If you practice that, you get better at doing it with yourself. Being less judgmental, more curious and taking notes that actually move you forward.

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**BAR BAYEUX** → 1066 Nostrand Ave. Brooklyn, NY 11225 [www.barbayeux.com](http://www.barbayeux.com)

**JUNE 2026 JAZZ CALENDAR**

<b>TUESDAYS 8-11 PM</b> Weekly Jam Session House Band: Diego Voglino with guests	<b>WEDNESDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> John Hébert Quartet (6/3) Blimp Band w/Julian Shore (6/10) Sebastian de Urquiza Quartet (6/17) Jaleel Shaw Trio (6/24)
<b>THURSDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Marc Copland (6/4), Yayoi Ikawa (6/11) Bruce Barth (6/18) Fab 4 Tribute with Jacob Sacks (6/25)	<b>NO COVER ONE DRINK MINIMUM</b>
<b>FRIDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Caleb Wheeler Curtis (6/5) Tomoko Umura (6/12) Kayla Williams (6/19) Maria Grand (6/26)	
<b>SATURDAYS 6 - 7:30 PM DUET SET(S), followed by 8 &amp; 9:30 PM sets:</b> Michael Sarin w/Leo Traversa, Fima Ephron, Jerome Harris, Michael Blake (6/6), TBA (6/13), Aubrey Johnson (6/20) Chris Van Voorst van Beest (6/27)	

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[www.villagevanguard.com](http://www.villagevanguard.com)

**\*JUNE 2 - JUNE 7\***  
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MARK TURNER - AARON GOLDBERG  
JOE MARTIN - JEFF "TAIN" WATTS

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**\*JUNE 9 - JUNE 14\***  
**RENEE ROSNES QUARTET**  
CHRIS POTTER - JOHN PATITUCCI  
SAVANNAH HARRIS

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**\*JUNE 16 - JUNE 21\***  
**FRED HERSCH - DREW GRESS**  
PETER ERSKINE

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**\*JUNE 23 - JUNE 28\***  
**TERELL STAFFORD QUINTET**  
TIM WARFIELD - BRUCE BARTH  
DAVID WONG - JOHNATHAN BLAKE

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**COMING IN JULY**  
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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

**NYCJR:** Can you tell me more about *The Lost Women of Song*, the live show that you developed over the years?

**PELLED:** It started at a time in my life when I got obsessed with these women who wrote or made music that was way ahead of their time. Some of them made one record and then disappeared. Some never even recorded, and demos of their songs were found years after they passed and released posthumously. I learned their songs, arranged them and performed the project monthly at Brooklyn's Barbès in Park Slope. At the shows I would also tell their stories, or whatever I could find about them. Some of them are very mysterious, and it was hard to find information.

These women are a huge influence on me, and I want to honor them when I play. They are also a little depressing. The music is so good, but heavy, and at some point I got tired of telling these stories. Maybe I was scared I was becoming a lost woman myself. But they still find their way into my records. "Rosa Mae" by Mary Lou Williams made it onto this blues record, and it's one of my favorite tracks, even though she's not really a "lost woman." *Love of the Tiger* had one song from this project, the only cover on the record, "Smooth Talking Con Man" by Mistress Mary. Following *I Wish You Would*, I'm releasing a more Americana, singer-songwriter-leaning record with the same band. There's a song on it that I learned from Tia Blake, "I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again". She recorded one album at 19 while living in Paris, and later stopped making music and became a writer.

**NYCJR:** There's something so simultaneous about the way you work. You're clearly someone who lives in the moment, and yet you're also drawing from these really moving artistic bodies of the past. How do you hold both of those things at once?

**PELLED:** I think it's related to my past in some intuitive way. When I wrote the song "Love of the Tiger", I thought about my Thai grandmother, who I barely knew. She passed away when I was two years old. She was born in Bangkok, raised there, married my Iraqi grandfather, and they later lived in Switzerland, where my mom grew up. At the time, I was thinking about what kind of songs I wanted to write, exploring different parts of myself. I was also listening to psychedelic Thai music from the '60s, and that led me to writing kind of a Thai love song I imagined my grandmother would sing. There's something about the women in my life that haunts me. I keep looking for more. In the song, it feels like I'm channeling my family's emotions...my grandmother, my mom. I got this role in my family. They're lovely, but not very expressive emotionally, it's just not the way they learned to be in the world. I feel like I had to learn that on my own. And because of that, I'm kind of carrying it for them.

**NYCJR:** That's something that could be so heavy as a child, to feel like you are the translator of emotions, but also, I feel confident in saying that's probably part of what has made you such an extraordinarily evocative singer and musician.

**PELLED:** Totally, I think that's what makes me want to sing. When I sing, I don't mind it at all. I feel like if it connects with people and makes them feel something, that's the best thing that can happen. Dealing with these emotions and passing them around the room, and everyone just thinks about themselves in a good way, you know? Someone who wants to sing needs to be down for the ride of exploring these emotions. It's not for everyone. If you're a singer, that's what you have to work with. If you want to go on stage, you want to bring all this stuff, you know? That's why I tend to find myself with crazy girlfriends, and now

a totally unhinged wife. I take the drama, and I sing with it. It's okay, they know they're wild.

**NYCJR:** Probably, they love every minute of it. We need a place to put those emotions. I wonder if you've ever had an experience, maybe it's every experience, where you're at the front of a room delivering a song, and you can feel everyone giving emotional energy back? What is that like for you as the absorber of all of the emotions?

**PELLED:** That's the best thing that can happen. When you feel that coming back from the room, that's when you know it's working! That's my job, to make people feel something, to wake them up in that way.

For more info visit [didamusic.com](http://didamusic.com). *Pelled* is at *Ornithology* Jun. 4 and *Joe's Pub* Jun. 17. See *Calendar*.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Dida Pelled—*Plays and Sings* (Red, 2010)
- Dida Pelled—*Modern Love Songs* (s/r, 2013)
- Dida Pelled—*A Missing Shade of Blue* (Red, 2014)
- Dida Pelled—*Love of the Tiger* (Husky Pants, 2020)
- Dida Pelled—*I Wish You Would* (La Reserve, 2024)

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

at the wheel, struck a slow-moving truck, causing the car to roll over, leaving Smith with catastrophic injuries, including a nearly severed arm. Dr. Hugh Smith, a surgeon from Memphis, coming upon the accident, stopped to give assistance. Eventually, two ambulances arrived—one from the local white hospital and one from the Black G. T. Thomas Hospital where Smith was taken, dying later that morning without regaining consciousness.

Shortly after Smith's death, music critic John Hammond wrote in *DownBeat* that she had been refused admission to a "whites-only" hospital and subsequently bled to death due to racial discrimination. It was an albeit believable narrative that stuck for decades, despite evidence to the contrary. Regardless of that now firmly rectified fiction, Smith's legacy is brighter than ever. Jazz royalty, vocalist Catherine Russell—the daughter of Carline Ray (the pioneering bassist-guitarist and member of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm) and Luis Russell (the legendary pianist-bandleader and longtime Louis Armstrong music director)—sums it up eloquently: "Of all the Blues women of the 1920s, Bessie Smith is my favorite. I believe every word she sang because her intention was always clear. Every story she told came straight from her heart. There was no separation between her strong, beautiful voice and the story she was telling. There was pain inside her joy and joy inside her pain. Her voice and spirit sound as fresh today as I'm sure they always did. Bessie is still teaching us how to sing the blues one hundred years later."

For more info visit [nmaahc.si.edu/lgbtq/bessie-smith](http://nmaahc.si.edu/lgbtq/bessie-smith). A *Bessie Smith* tribute is at *Flushing Town Hall* Jun. 10. See *Calendar*.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 1* (Columbia-Legacy, 1923-33)
- Bessie Smith (with Louis Armstrong)—*The Bessie Smith Story, Vol. 1* (Columbia, 1923/25)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 2* (Columbia-Legacy, 1924-25)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 3* (Columbia-Legacy, 1925-28)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 4* (Columbia-Legacy, 1928-31)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 5* (Columbia-Legacy, 1931-33)

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