

Famiglia TERRITORY

by Lou Carlozo

Lena Prima and her beloved father, Louis, share more than a last name and a pronounced sense of humor. After all, you have to laugh if you're going to sing your father's foodie hits that celebrate bananas and capocola. But where dad's stage act took him the route of the ridiculous, Lena plays things much more sublime. As it was for John Lennon's son Julian and the late Frank Sinatra Jr., riding on the coattails of a famous father can be risky business,

"I get asked whether it's a burden, but because I'm a female, I never had that comparison," says Prima, who has a new album out, "Prima la Famiglia" (see review). "If I had a female star for a parent, it might've been the kind of thing where I was in the shadow. But it's never been my issue ever. I've always done my own thing."

Has she ever. Early in her career, Lena played hard rock and heavy metal before transitioning to lounge singing, which brought steady work and pay. Now six albums into her career, she continues to hone a sound that plays to sensuous, feminine sensibilities, often sealed with a kick.

For "Famiglia," roughly a year of preparation boiled down to three adrenalized days, where a dedicated team that included arranger Lawrence Sieberth and co-producer Scott Williamson sought to capture the sizzle of a live show. Prima took the run-up seriously, enlisting a vocal coach for three months to capture the ideal feel for each song, whether it demanded lullaby softness or breathy comic stealth.



Nor was she afraid to change what some might consider Louis Prima's sacred texts. Her dad's version of "Come On A My House" is roughly a minute and a half; hers is twice as long, easily half the speed and reflects some thoughtful re-arranging: "It needed a form with more of a chorus and verse arrangement."

She adds: "I put it on my album because it's very important for Italians." She mentions all the food in the lyrics and breaks out laughing.

To be certain, "Famiglia" owes much of its panache to Las Vegas, where Prima graduated high school. "I wanted to make it feel like you were at a Sinatra show, listening to Nelson Riddle or Count Basie," Lena says. But you can also hear hints of New Orleans, the city she calls home.

"I definitely grew up with this New Orleans feeling and have always felt strong connections here," Prima says. "This album, the music and the meaning behind it represent a part of music culture that is my family history and New Orleans history."

Perhaps the only issue with interviewing Prima is that she spends much more time crediting her team members — and naming them — than she does herself. When she does share, though, her positivity and gratitude shine through.

"It was an absolute joy to work on this project — the musicians and even the engineers were really into it," Prima says. "And having such a great dad and his legacy of music, I am so grateful."



"PRIMA LA FAMIGLIA"

Lena Prima
Basin Street Records

Smoothly orchestrated, "Prima la Famiglia" doesn't go over the top the way the elder Prima did — nor does it aspire to. Compared to Louis' jittery, jump-jive version of "Come On A My House," Lena's big-band version more recalls "Sinatra at the Sands." Her vocal, slow and smoky, glistens with just the right touch of whimsy.

Overall, "Famiglia" plays more like a live set than a high-gloss studio effort, and Prima's voice has an almost conversational intimacy, as though she's confiding sly secrets. She can go heartbreakingly soft, as on the piano intro to "Oh Marie," sung in Italian to piano and sublime swells of strings. But you'll need to hang on tight, baby, as she segues into English and a strutting, brass-driven beat.

Prima plays it straight on "Pensate Amore," a love song that could fit easily into Dean Martin's catalogue, and the joyous "See That You're Born Italian" parades the red, white and green with pride. She sings: "What produced the greatest signers? Frank Sinatra, Louis Prima and Caruso?" We know that Sinatra's daughter Nancy certainly carved her own path, and on "Prima La Famiglia," Lena does as well in a way that would do her legendary papa proud.