

# Audra McDonald

## Best Performance by an Actress

By Iris Wiener

in a Leading Role in a Play, *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar & Grill*



It came as quite a surprise for Audra McDonald when she found herself contemplating a complete embodiment of Billie Holiday for Lanie Robertson's ode to the singer's tragic story. "I never thought that I could play her, or capture her sound," says McDonald, who is noted for having an impeccable soprano, while Holiday had a low, husky tone. "I knew I could work on it, I'm good at working hard at things, but I just didn't know if I'd be successful."

It's safe to say that McDonald successfully portrays the singer with both compassion and intrigue, which is why she is now on the cusp of a record-breaking sixth Tony win. "I had to make sure I inhabited her spirit and did not just do an imitation," she says of the decision to bring Holiday to Broadway audiences. "Her vocal style is so distinctive and specific. I had to try and attempt *her* voice and not sing it as my voice because trying to interpret her songs with my own voice would be too disconnected." McDonald says that during the rehearsal process there were times when she was only able to channel Holiday's voice, while on others she was only able to find her emotional life. "The challenge was marrying the two."

McDonald is known for choosing roles that inspire and motivate her audiences to show compassion and to contemplate their own worlds. Her portrayals of Bess in *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess* and Ruth in *A Raisin in the Sun* are testaments to that fact. She admires Holiday's story because it too has a viable message for contemporary audiences.

"If you look back during that time there was a style of singing that everybody followed," she says of the late '50s. "Billie Holliday just bucked the trend and said, 'I'm going to sing like me, and nobody else.' *That's* what everybody fell for." McDonald considers the fact that in her own memory, Holiday was the first artist who embraced her personal singularity. "That was what was special about her that nobody else had as an artist and she refused to go mainstream with it."

McDonald can potentially make history as the Tonys' first person to win in all four female acting categories, which is even more of a feat considering the fact that eight times each week she faces two of the most difficult practices in stage work: interacting with the audience and working with a four-legged co-star. However, she repeatedly does it with great class, and speaks very highly of the only actress who could upstage her at Circle in the Square Theatre. "Roxie doesn't give it away, as far as her affection is concerned," says McDonald of the Chihuahua. "You have to earn it with Roxie, so I feel quite honored that I'm in Roxie's circle now." Roxie may be a tough cookie, but she certainly won't be the only one rooting for McDonald on June 8.