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Jennifer Lopez's career: J. lows and highs

By Frank Lovece - Newsday (MCT)

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Dancer-singer-actress Jennifer Lopez hadn't danced, sung or acted much since taking time off to have kids — though since People reportedly paid her and husband Marc Anthony \$4 million to \$6 million in 2008 to parade them on a magazine cover, it's ironically the most successful thing she's done in years. Before her hiatus, she had a string of flop movies, a single that didn't crack the Billboard Top 10, and an American Music Award downshift from favorite pop/rock female artist in 2003 to the more niche favorite Latin artist in 2007. Oh, and her record label just dropped her.

Now the 40-year-old star is calibrating a comeback that has included guest appearances on "How I Met Your Mother," "Saturday Night Live" and reportedly an upcoming episode of "Glee," all to support her romantic comedy "The Back-Up Plan," opening Friday.

And in the meantime, with businesses encompassing everything from music to movies to a clothing line to a Cuban restaurant, she's the ninth-richest woman in entertainment, says Forbes magazine, which in 2007 estimated her net worth at \$110 million.

So, shed no tears for her career. Dancer-singer-actress or waitress-writer-dog walker, we all have our highs and lows. Here are hers:

_Fledgling 1986-1993

After her film debut as a teen in the 1986 indie drama "My Little Girl," she went on to gain a toehold as a professional dancer. Joining the Fly Girls troupe on the sketch-comedy series "In Living Color" in 1991, she left after two seasons to dance in Janet Jackson and Puff Daddy videos, and play a prominent role in the 1993 TV movie "Nurses on the Line: The Crash of Flight 7." At this point, she's just another fresh face — but clearly a performer driven to succeed in more than one field.

_Up-and-Comer 1993-95

Lopez quickly got cast in the short-lived CBS drama "Second Chances," becoming one of only two of the ensemble to transition to its brief revamp as "Hotel Malibu." After three episodes of the Fox drama "South Central," she gained attention and an Independent Spirit Award nomination in 1995 for her role in Gregory Nava's "My Family." That same year, her first big studio film, the Woody Harrelson-Wesley Snipes actioner "Money Train," flopped — but showcased her as the next hot young ingenue.

_Big Break 1996-1997

Next-hot-young ingenues get opportunities. Following Francis Ford Coppola's "Jack" (1996) and Bob Rafelson's "Blood and Wine" (1997) came the explosion: "Selena," Nava's 1997 biopic of the murdered Tejano singer, did modest box office but made Lopez a star. The horror hit "Anaconda," starring Lopez's tight, sweaty T-shirt, swiftly brought more attention. Not even the flop "U Turn," her third film that year, could tamp down her rise.

_Big Time 1998-2001

Lopez scored great reviews for her out-of-the-box performance as a federal marshal in Steven Soderbergh's "Out of Sight" (1998), opposite George Clooney. She scored a No. 1 single, "If You Had My Love," in 1999, and her debut album, "On the 6," went all the way to No. 8. Now she was riding high as a movie star, with the successful "The Cell" (2000) and "The Wedding Planner" (2001), plus a No. 1 album (2001's "J.Lo") that spawned two chart-topping singles ("I'm Real" and "Ain't It Funny," both featuring Ja Rule).

Cruising Along 2001-03

Two movies tanked in a row (2001's "Angel Eyes," 2002's "Enough"), though "Maid in Manhattan" proved a hit. And her album "J to Tha L-O!: The Remixes" made it to No. 1. But her next, "This Is Me ... Then," peaked at No. 2. Her signature single, "Jenny From the Block," stalled at No. 3 in late 2002. Her next, "All I Have," featuring LL Cool J, did hit the top a couple of months later. It was her last single to even come close.

Jenny From the Flop 2003-07

Following media saturation of "Bennifer" — Jennifer and fiance Ben Affleck — the couple's movie "Gigli" (2003) was a critical and commercial dud, becoming the first movie to sweep all six major categories of the Razzie Awards. She got mostly cut out of Kevin Smith's "Jersey Girl" (2004), and "Shall We Dance" did great internationally but flopped here. "Monster-in-Law" was a modest hit, but as University at Buffalo American Studies professor Elayne Rapping, author of several books on popular culture, notes, "That was a Jane Fonda movie. Jennifer Lopez could have been anybody."

The prestige drama "An Unfinished Life" (2005) sank big time, as did "El Cantante" (2007), the biopic of salsa pioneer Hector Lavoe, which she produced and co-starred in with husband Marc Anthony. Her album "Rebirth" (2005) peaked at No. 2, and both "Brave" and her Spanish-language "Como Ama una Mujer" (both 2007) reached No. 12.

Comeback? 2009-10

Hard to say. Falling during a dance routine at the American Music Awards in November didn't help. Neither did that much-derided catsuit she wore on "Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve." Plus, Epic Records dropped her in February, putting her album "Love?" in limbo. And as for romantic comedies, Rapping wonders about that choice. "She's incredibly sexy, and her sexuality has always been a big part of her identity," Rapping says. "That's not typical of women in romantic comedies, who tend more to be cute." Yet, after "The Back-Up Plan," Lopez has another romantic comedy, "The Governess," in the works.

Still, you never know. Jenny's been around the block, and she's confounded expectations before. We may just find ourselves high on J.Lo all over again.

J.LO HAS A NEW LEADING MAN AND A 'PLAN'

For her comeback vehicle, Jennifer Lopez returns to the genre of her highest-grossing film, the romantic comedy "Maid in Manhattan" (2002), which took in \$94 million. Only now, instead of playing a maid who falls for a rich guy played by a big star (Ralph Fiennes), she plays a rich gal who falls for a guy played by a perfectly fine lesser-known (Alex O'Loughlin).

The romantic-obstacle twist? Lopez's character, single and desperate for a baby, meets the possible man

of her dreams immediately upon leaving a fertility clinic. You've heard the term complicated pregnancy? This is wacky-complicated pregnancy.

"It's not like comedies are something I've done a lot of," says O'Loughlin, 33, who starred in CBS' "Moonlight" and "Three Rivers" and plays Steve McGarrett in the network's upcoming "Hawaii Five-O" revival. "I've trained more in drama, and though I understand comedy, I did find it challenging at times," he says of the new film. "The thing with comedy, you've just got to play it straight; that's what makes it funny. And the bigger it is, the straighter you play it and the funnier it is."

He and Lopez, who he met at her home during the casting process, "got on very well straight away. She's a great gal, very grounded and professional, so off we went."

And smoothly, as director Alan Poul remembers. "I think she was maybe particularly excited and invigorated because she was going back to work and doing something she loved after having taken time off to have the twins. If anything, it made things easier."

And judging from Lopez's savvy, we're sure whatever happens, she has a back-up plan.