

BLUES ROCKS

the world

INTERNATIONAL INDEPENDENT MUSIC MAGAZINE

N° 2 • NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2007

COVER STORY: **ROXY PERRY**

Boss Tweed
Melissa Forbes
Suzanne Foschino
Ariel Hyatt
Kelly's Lot
Sheena Metal
Toni Price
Kelly Richey
Madalyn Sklar
Hope Waits



IN THE BEGINNING WAS A WOMAN, AND THAT WOMAN WAS MAMIE SMITH (1883-1946). In August, 1920 she recorded “Crazy Blues” – the first blues record ever. Released on Okeh Records, it sold nearly a million copies in one year and, according to blues researcher Paul Oliver, “paved the way for every other blues artist to come, regardless of style.”

It’s a man’s, man’s, man’s world! A macho-driven one. Even its Creator is Father. Not for everybody, though. Twenty-five years ago, in December 1972, Helen Reddy said in her Grammy Award acceptance speech: “I want to thank everyone at Capitol Records, my husband and manager, Jeff Wald, because he makes my success possible, and God because *She* makes everything possible.” Whew, I love it!

The idea of this special “Women in Blues” issue originates from a wonderful project, The National Women in Blues Festival, founded and headed by Michele Seidman (of Michele & The Midnight Blues band). As I write this, the second Women in Blues festival is being held in Wilmington, North Carolina.

There were many more candidates than the organizers could accept, so I decided, instead of presenting the lucky participants, to virtually enlarge the festival stage by presenting other outstanding ladies whose life is made up of music and who themselves are making up the music world. As you will see, not all of them are singers or musicians, but – all are indispensable actors of the music scene.

This issue also marks an important stage in the magazine development. Here, the focus is less on the music as such and more on the personality of those making great music and those making great music possible.

Paul Bondarovski



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Roxy Perry

Real Deal Blues Queen

By Suzie O'Kane

I FIRST HAD THE PLEASURE OF EXPERIENCING A LIVE ROXY PERRY PERFORMANCE IN 2001 AT THE “Red White and Blues” concert, which was given after the September 11th World Trade Center disaster to raise funds for the widows and children of New York City fallen firefighters. Since then, through various music project collaborations, I’ve had the good fortune of working closely with Roxy. She graciously agreed to share the beginnings and some of the lesser known circumstances of her career leading to her continuing success and recognition as one of the hottest female blues singers today.

Suzie O’Kane: When and how did you get your start in music?

Roxy Perry: I sang in my church and school choirs, and school plays during grammar school through junior high school. My first paying gig was offered when I was just 10 years old! A swing orchestra allowed me to sit in with them at a dinner dance at Glen Island Casino that my parents had brought me to. Some of the musicians had their own jazz trios outside of that orchestra, and hired me to sing at other functions, as well as jazz cabarets and beatnik bars. My father, bless his heart, had to chaperon me!

S. O.: Who do you consider your major musical influences?

Roxy Perry: When I was a girl, rather than playing with dolls, I played records. My influences came from the stack of 78s that my parents had collected over the years; all the swing bands, Ray Charles, Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett, Louie Jordan, Louie Prima and of course, Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson and many other blues, jazz and gospel singers of the 40s and 50s. They were all my teachers and influence my music to this day. I also listened to the radio and watched the Ed Sullivan show religiously.

S. O.: You’ve been involved with music from the start...

Roxy Perry: All my life... When I was about 15, I wanted to be with people my own age, so from there it was one Top 40 band to another, leading up to 1968. At that point I was in a 7-piece soul band called Ivory & Ebony. We played six nights a week, six sets a night, at the famed Peppermint Lounge on 45th Street and Times Square in New York City. Joey Dee, noted for the hit “Peppermint Twist,” was the band’s manager and took me under his wing, so to speak. He gave me my first experience in a recording studio. I was hooked.

S. O.: When did you do your first recording?

Roxy Perry: In late 1968, Frankie Paris was playing at The Wagon Wheel, which was down the street from Peppermint Lounge. We would trade band members occasionally just for laughs. Little did I know that this relationship would have a great impact on the next three years of my life. Frankie Paris gave me a call to go out on the road as a part of the band Dawn which had the current hits “Candida” and “Knock Three Times.”

S. O.: I remember those as being songs by Tony Orlando.

Roxy Perry: Tony Orlando had recorded the



Roxy Perry in 1998.

PHOTOGRAPHY © ROXY PERRY.
INTERVIEW © SUSAN O’KANE, 2007.



Roxy Perry in 1985.

songs “Candida” and “Knock Three Times,” but had no intention of going out on the road to represent them. So, Bell Records designated us to go out on tour representing the band Dawn, which was truly a studio group. We headlined huge concerts in every major arena in the U.S. and Canada for three years. We shared the billing with the Carpenters, Kenny Rogers and the First Edition, Rare Earth, Iron Butterfly, Badfinger, Three Dog Night, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Mike Nesmith (The Monkees), Mark Lindsay (Paul Revere & the Raiders), David

Cassidy and many other Top 10 artists of the time. We were on all the American Bandstand-type T.V. shows across the U.S. and Canada. We did hundreds of radio interviews, television interviews, appeared in teen magazines and so on.

Bell Records called us back to New York. Then, Tony Orlando decided it was time for him to reap the benefits of the success of songs that we had promoted between 1969 and 1971. He also decided that rather than have a band back him up, he would simply tour with two female vocalists. I don’t know how he pulled this off with the media to this day. We walked into the studio as stars – literally – where people mobbed us every-

where we went... And we walked out of the studio unemployed. Bell Records gave us no compensation other than enough studio time to make a two-song demo. We took that two-song demo, to a division of Polydor Records which was run by James Brown. His manager heard the record and just went crazy! When I got home that night, my mother said that someone had called me from Africa, but she couldn’t understand what he was saying. I knew immediately that the caller was James Brown himself! We were contacted the next day by James’ lawyer saying he wanted to sign Frankie and I as a duo.

S.O.: And...?

Roxy Perry: Honestly, I can’t remember, but for some reason, the deal with Polydor never went down.

S. O.: So, what happened next?

Roxy Perry: At this point, we were already working locally again. Frankie and I were doing a duo act, sort of like Marvin Gaye & Tammi Terell, but not quite as laid back as that. We were playing at Trudy Heller’s on 11th Street, which was the hang out of the “ultra hip” in Greenwich Village, people like Monti Rock III. (*Laughing.*) Don Cornelius from Soul Train and many other celebrities showed up there regularly.

At Trudy Heller’s, we alternated shows with a jazz trio that had the famous bebop improviser, Anita O’Day, who sang in the bands of jazz greats, Gene Krupa, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, etc. Whenever she was under the weather, I would sit in. She would give me advice... I learned a lot from her.

S. O.: When did the blues catch your attention?

Roxy Perry: Want to hear a true story?

S. O.: Sure, go for it...

Roxy Perry: The music biz had me feeling really burned out and confused. One day, I just took off and headed south in my VW Beetle. I eventually found my way to a tiny, cinder block, Pentecostal church out in the

“The song made the Top 20 on the Billboard Disco charts. I was mortified! I refused to represent the record... Silly me. Musical integrity is a dangerous thing...”



“New York Blues Queen”
in 1997.



In 1999, at Manny's Car Wash.

farmlands of North Augusta, Georgia. The congregation was in a full pitched frenzy when I inexplicably felt an urge to go outside. It was like I was drawn by some unseen force! I got into my car and it wouldn't start.

"...An old man played a piano, which was undoubtedly missing a few keys. Another man was playing a well-worn guitar and singing blues like I'd never heard before..."

Looking out at the cut down cornfield before me, once again, I just felt compelled to cross it.

The moon was full and I made my way through the field up to the dirt road. Looking in each direction, I could see a light in the distance to my right and started walking. As I got nearer to the light, I heard music. I got closer and could see that it was an abandoned gas station turned roadhouse.

I stood at the door and peered inside the room filled with black folks seated on anything that would suffice for a chair, drinking clear liquid from assorted vessels, jars, etc. They were raucously participating in the music that came from an old man playing a piano, which was undoubtedly missing a few keys! Another man was playing a well-worn acoustic guitar and singing blues like I'd never heard before.

I didn't go in immediately. It was, after all "the south," where black people were just as nervous about white people as white people were nervous about blacks. I respectfully stayed outside until two women sitting by the door hailed me in. Their names were Ruby and Pearl... I'll never forget them. They were in from Chicago visiting their cousins. They immediately extracted all the facts as to who I was and how I ended up there.

As the room filled with down home blues, a couple of the folks came over and offered me some of that clear liquid, better known as white lightning, moonshine, corn liquor. I was welcomed and felt comfortable and at home... and I realized, through the strange events of that evening, it seems I had become an initiate in the genuine, real-deal blues scene.

The sun rose, we all said our fond good-byes, and went our own ways. I felt the cool Georgia clay beneath my feet on the road that led me there. As I headed back across the corn field, midway I was asking God, "What now? I'm lost. Lead me." A sudden downpour made me run for the shelter of my car. I turned the key again and it miraculously

started. I headed back to New York with that rich experience on my mind.

S. O.: That's quite a story! So this launched you headlong into a career singing blues?

Roxy Perry: Not yet. When I got back to New York, a letter was waiting for me from my old boy friend, who was just getting out of the Marine Corps. To make a long story short, six months later we were married! Bob Fusco has been my husband and bass player in the band for the past thirty years. Anyway, we moved to South Carolina (don't ask me why!), lived and played there for four years. We returned to New York and within two months were involved in an original hard rock band. We had one bad record deal after another. 1985 I actually ended up doing a remake of "Gimme Gimme Good Lovin'" for Personal Records, written and produced by Richie Cordell. Richie was Joan Jet's manager at the time. This song was originally recorded by Crazy Elephant. To my utter embarrassment, the song was produced as a dance single and made the Top 20 on the Billboard Disco charts. I was mortified!! I refused to represent the record and had to "sit still" for the duration of the contract. Silly me. Musical integrity is a dangerous thing.

S. O.: You must have been discouraged.

Roxy Perry: I had pretty much convinced myself it was time to quit singing. One day, I ended up at Dan Lynch's on Second Avenue and 14th Street in New York City. Frankie Paris was running a blues jam there. I met many wonderful players and made a lot of great friends there, and began to regain some of the enthusiasm that the bad business deals had dampened over the years. Popa Chubby, The Holmes Brothers, Michael Hill, Bill Perry, Bill Sims, Crusher Green, Dave Keyes, Joe Taino, and just about everybody on the New York blues scene eventually showed up there. I accompanied them to other jams in town – Bobby Nathan's jam uptown, Big Ed Sullivan's jam, and so on. One Sunday night, I went to Popa Chubby's



Back in Bluesville, 2005.

jam at Manny's Car Wash and was called to the stage by him mid-song. The crowd loved it. Popa got me my first gig there and I played at Manny's regularly until it closed.

S. O.: What blues recordings have you done?

Roxy Perry: In the first year, 1995, when I returned to the New York scene, I got a record deal with an indie label, Monad Records.



Harpin' her heart away
at Montreux Jazz Festival,
July 2007.

They released my first blues album, *Hi Heel Blues*, in 1996, then folded right after the release. However, this CD was a great introduction for me in blues radio internationally.

In the meantime, Tri-State Blues Magazine published a "Women In Blues" issue in 1997 and put my picture on the cover, titling it "Roxy Perry, New York Blues Queen." Boy, was I surprised!! I released a new CD a year later in 1998 using that title, *Roxy Perry New York Blues Queen*, on my own label,

Blueberry Hill, just for laughs. I had no idea how well received this album would become. All the major blues magazines gave it glowing reviews. National Public Radio (NPR) blues radio shows all over the world played the hell out of it and the general blues public really enjoyed it too. I am surprised to hear it's still played occasionally on these stations to this day! Several songs from this CD were also included on a number of compilation albums in past years.

We did a version of "House of the Rising Sun" for producer Joe Ferry's compilation album, *Public Domain*, on Purchase Records in 2000, which received a Grammy nomination in 2001. This song has been a continuing favorite of my audiences.

Through the late 90s I appeared on several blues releases as a backup vocalist. Also during that time, I did a number of com-

"In winter 2007, I received an e-mail invitation from the Montreux Jazz Festival, which was written in French. I almost deleted it, thinking it was spam!"

mercials and voiceovers, and continue doing this presently. I really enjoy recording as well as performing.

S. O.: What artists have you shared the bill with over the years?

Roxy Perry: Rod Piazza, Shemekia Copeland, Popa Chubby, The Holmes Brothers, John Mayall, Sapphire, Buck Wheat Zydeco, Bill Perry, Leon Russell, Peter Karp, Koko Taylor and many others.

S. O.: Tell us about your *Back In Bluesville* album, which was awarded Best Self-Produced CD 2006 at the International Blues Challenge in Memphis, Tennessee.

Roxy Perry: I was both surprised and pleased that the Blues Foundation recognized *Back In Bluesville*. I believed in the CD and felt it was my best work. Since this new release was so long-awaited, I put my heart and soul into every detail. There were several points in its creation and even after its release and success, that the CD was abandoned by others involved. But my faith in it, focus on finishing, releasing and representing it never wavered, to date. To a great extent receiving the award from the Blues Foundation vindicated my belief and determination that the material on *Bluesville* was worth all the heartache and pain. Having a baby would be a cinch next to this!

S. O.: Radio and Internet station support for *Back in Bluesville* were also strong, and the album got lots of attention in the press, notably Blues Revue and Downbeat, among others...

Roxy Perry: I really am grateful for the reception the CD received, and am drawing on that inspiration to move closer to the completion of my current project.

S. O.: You were also recognized by the Westchester Arts Council (NY) this year, being awarded the Council's most prestigious 2007 Artist of the Year Award.

Roxy Perry: Yes, the award has been presented annually for the past 27 years, and I was humbled and honored to be chosen this year.



Roxy Perry in Montreux, Switzerland. July 2007.

S. O.: The list of past recipients is impressive! Among them, Renata Scotta, Roy Neuberger, Roberta Peters, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis... I'd say you are in very good company!

Roxy Perry: I still can't believe it!

S. O.: OK, a final question. In July 2007, you participated in the 41st Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. It's a legendary, super-gig that any artist would envy being offered. How did you get there, and how was the experience?

Roxy Perry: In fact, this was my second invitation to perform at Montreux. My first invitation came after the release of *New York Blues Queen*, way back in 1999. Miscommunication happened on both sides of the pond because of language barriers between the coordinator of MJF and my then manager. MJF thought we refused and sent me a blistering letter that I sadly kept all these

On April 2007, Roxy Perry has received the Artist of the Year 2007 Award from Westchester Arts Council.





The Roxy Perry Band live at Montreux Jazz Festival, July 2007.

Mike Ventimiglia (keyboards), Bob Fusco (bass), Linda Geiger (drums), Roxy Perry and Chris Vitarello (guitar).

years. I attempted to apologize, but it didn't work. I never expected to hear from them again. Then suddenly, in winter 2007, I received an e-mail invitation from MJF, which was written in French. I almost deleted it, thinking it was spam! It wasn't until after having it translated by several French speaking friends, that I realized the good news that we were once again invited! Of course, I replied with a big YES immediately!

Two days later, I was given yet another invitation for a second stage, starting a chain of more letters, documents, emails and con-

tracts, all written in French. We really had our hands full of paperwork, travel details and passports right up to the day we left!

By the time we had all the arrangements in place, it was too late to book other gigs around the Montreux dates to make the trip economically feasible. I must mention that friends and fans of the band helped us raise funds to cover our travel expense by throwing a benefit jam hosted by our great supporters at the Georgetown Saloon in Connecticut!

When we all got on the plane to Geneva,



“Friends and fans helped us raise funds to cover our travel expense by throwing a benefit jam hosted by our great supporters at the Georgetown Saloon in Connecticut...”

bands. The boat traversed Lake Geneva, packed from stem to stern with Blues loving passengers, for a three hour cruise. We played a fantastic show that got a very enthusiastic response from the international audience aboard. We had the slot that B.B. King had last year on this Blues Cruise and were the only band aboard to get billing. The cruise was sold out even before the 21-day festival began! I was very surprised to meet so many fans of ours from so many countries, on board that day. I was both proud and appreciative of the respect afforded by Montreux’s international audience to American music and musicians.

Our second performance on July 9th was at 10:00 p.m. on the Park Vernex Stage strategically located between the two main concert halls. This headlining spot was timed perfectly to meet the crowds exiting the two venues. Despite the chilly temperature and light rain, the crowd was greatly receptive and more than willing to bear the elements for some all American Blues! The band captured them! My guitarist, Chris Vitarello, was wailing! When he played downstage, he had the girls going absolutely wild! Mike Ventimiglia got cheers, during his boogie piano solos. Our drummer Linda Geiger and bass player Bob Fusco got very enthusiastic ovations on their solos as well.

The band members were great fun to be with. They were an outstandingly supportive team. I love them and I’m looking forward to more adventures with them when we see what next year will bring!

Website: www.roxyperry.com

ROXY PERRY DISCOGRAPHY



Back in Bluesville (2005, Blueperry Hill).



New York Blues Queen (1998, Blueperry Hill).



Hi Heel Blues (1996, Monad Records).

I breathed a sigh of relief! We arrived in Switzerland to a warm welcome by our driver Claude, who took us to Montreux and our mountain residence overlooking France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. We were also greeted by antique villages and fields of sunflowers all along the way. The scenery was breathtaking!

S. O.: Now, with all the planning and an eight-hour flight behind you, you were finally ready to hit the stage.

Roxy Perry: Our first performance, July 8th, was on a 3-deck party boat with four other