

Pop Music

A late bloomer in full flower

After finding her voice, she finds her father's too

By Andrew Gilbert
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

POINT RICHMOND, Calif. — On a singer-songwriter scene overflowing with bright young things wise beyond their years, Claudia Russell stands out as a late-blooming artist who has taken her own time finding her voice.

Before releasing her 2000 debut "Song Food," which led local folk station WUMB-FM to name her the year's best new artist, Russell spent decades paying dues in Los Angeles, singing western swing, Manhattan transfer-style harmonies, roots rock, and background vocals for a variety of indie musicians.

"Song Food" immediately established Russell as a folkie songwriter with a deceptively light touch and a gift for blending old-time Americana styles. But she and her husband, multi-instrumentalist Bruce Kaplan, didn't start to document her original songs until she overcame persistent self-doubt.

"I call Claudia the reluctant diva," said Kaplan, a string expert who accompanies Russell on guitar and mandolin.

"I had these beautiful creative friends writing amazing songs, and I wanted to find that part of myself," said Russell, who performs on June 30 at Johnny D's and on July 3-4 at the New Bedford Summerfest. "I always loved to play guitar, but I used to say some mean things to myself, like I don't really have anything interesting to say."

Her long, winding journey from all-purpose vocalist to singer-songwriter included a stint studying with lyricist Jack Segal, who wrote "When Sunny Gets Blue" and "Scarlet Ribbons." While pursuing songwriting in secrecy, she left composing to her bandmates until she was selected as a finalist in the 1998 Kerrville New Folk songwriting competition.

After "Song Food" made a splash, Russell didn't rush back into the studio. By the time she released 2005's "Ready to Receive," she and Kaplan had forged a more contemporary sound, employing some electric instruments and a wider palette of timbres. Her 2006 album "Live Band Tonight" captured her with a revolving cast of musicians, also known as the Folk Unlimited Orchestra, on a program of playful originals and incisive interpretations of songs by Kyle Johnson, Jeff Talmadge, and Bob Dylan.

"I get hundreds of CDs, but Claudia's music always stands



ERIC PETREL

Claudia Russell with husband Bruce Kaplan. "I call Claudia the reluctant diva," says Kaplan, a string expert who accompanies Russell on guitar and mandolin.

CLAUDIA RUSSELL

At Johnny D's Tuesday night at 8:30. Tickets are \$10 at 617-766-2004 or www.johnnyds.com.

out," says Roz Larman, longtime radio host of "FolkScene," which airs on WUMB-FM (91.9) on Sundays at midnight. "You put the CD on and her voice envelops you, and then you realize how good the lyrics are as well."

Russell's latest project with Kaplan isn't a new session of her own songs. Rather, they've rescued her father, Val Rosing, from obscurity. Growing up in an artistic home in Los Angeles, she knew her father as Gilbert Russell, a British ex-pat who had moved to Hollywood in the mid-1930s and ended up working as a music teacher and vocal coach to such stars as Natalie Wood, Beau Bridges, and Shirley Jones.

It wasn't until a British collector of 1920s and '30s dance-band records contacted her looking for information about Rosing that Russell discovered her father's previous life as "England's supreme singer of sentimental

songs." Recording as Rosing, he scored a million-selling hit with "Teddy Bears' Picnic," and introduced the standard "Try a Little Tenderness" with Ray Noble.

"We thought it was an Otis Redding song," Kaplan said.

"He came to America and reinvented himself, and he kept that part of his life totally quiet," Russell said. "When the guy from England sent me this cassette of his recordings, I was just startled by how my voice sounds like my dad."

The sun-splashed living room of Russell and Kaplan's house, perched on the northeastern edge of the San Francisco Bay, is filled with vintage postcards and View-Master reels. In much the same way that they collect artifacts, the couple named their label Radio Rhythm Records after Rosing's band, the Radio Rhythm Rascals, and gleaned the logo from a photo of him singing on NBC. She owes her love of music to her father, and maybe a streak of insecurity too.

"He bought me my first guitar and showed me three chords," Russell said. "I have this memory that he told me, 'Make sure you know how to type.'"

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