

The Popdose Interview: Marti Jones

Monday, March 9th, 2009 by Jon Cummings

Last week Marti Jones was back in Washington, DC – the city where she and I had our greatest moments together during her career in pop music. (Actually, she was always on a stage with a band and her husband, while I was in the audience with my wife, but whatever – we’ll always have DC, Marti.) This time she wasn’t in town for a concert; she was preparing for the display of several of her paintings as “ambiance” (her word) on the set of a new play, *After the Garden: Edith Beale Live at Reno Sweeney*. The play re-creates a series of cabaret-style performances given in 1978 by the eccentric Beale – whom you might remember as “Little Edie,” the younger half of the peculiar mother-daughter duo portrayed in the 1975 documentary and 2006 Broadway musical *Grey Gardens*. Jones, serendipitously, had chosen the Beales as subject matter for her painting a couple years ago, and as a result she’s now receiving some of her biggest exposure to date as a visual artist.

It’s been a long time – nearly 20 years — since Jones had a major-label record deal, and nearly as long since she and Don Dixon ceased being regulars on the touring circuit. Over the last couple weeks Popdose has cast a spotlight on her music career, including a review of her recorded output last week and a recollection of her tours with Dixon the week before. Jones recently agreed to rehash her career during a phone interview, while sitting around her home outside Canton, Ohio. Perhaps because far too few music writers have sought her out recently – or perhaps because she (like Dixon, who’s also been quite generous to Popdose in recent months) is simply a terrific human being — our conversation resembled a reunion between old friends more than a run-of-the-mill interview.

Popdose: Are you in your studio today?

Marti Jones: No, but later I’m heading off to a recording studio. Dixon roped me into putting a generic female voice on a recording of our friend Jim Wann’s new play – it’s called *The Great Unknown*. [Wann is a longtime colleague of Dixon’s – the two performed with Bland Simpson as the Coastal Cohorts in their musical *King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running*.] I have to sing a song about climbing Mount Everest in my high-button shoes! His songs are always fun to sing, and this one’s great – Dixon keeps singing it to me as he dances around the room. And I’m getting paid – this time – which is nice.

Painting takes much more of your time than music these days. How did you go from pop star to painter?

My whole life, I wanted to be a painter. My grandmother was a painter, and my parents would always encourage me to take after her. I majored in art at Kent State, but meantime I had also started singing in clubs, and I did that for a livelihood through college. Then, you know, the music thing happened, and I had to put off the painting. I was actually very frustrated by it, and I would think all the time about picking it back up. But when I’d come home from a tour I would only be in one place for a couple days, and it was hard to grab onto anything and stick with it.

I tapered off performing and making records after I got dumped from RCA in early '91, and at that point Dixon and I were already talking about having a family. I told him, if we're going to have a kid, we'd better have one now. So we wound up having our daughter Shane that year, and that immediately became a full-time job. [Shane has Asperger Syndrome, a condition similar to high-functioning autism.] Once she began to become a bit more independent, when she was 13 or 14, I found I had time to paint. Then a couple years ago, I found a woman who was looking for someone to share her studio in downtown Canton, so now I can go there and be undistracted.

How would you characterize the painting at this point? Do you see it as a moneymaker, or more as a hobby?

I view it more or less as a therapeutic release. Occasionally I'll start getting motivated to sell stuff, and Dixon will say, "Stop that – just paint!" He's incredibly supportive, and he frees up time whenever he can so I can be in the studio all day. I am selling stuff, though. I just opened a show at a little gallery in Silver Spring, Maryland [outside DC], that is still up. If I can sell my work, I'm thrilled, because occasionally I'll go for long stretches without getting rid of anything and our house will be filled to the brim.

Let's go back to your departure from RCA. It had always been my impression that you made the choice to come off the road and start a family.

Well, I *kinda* did. The whole time that we were touring and making records – riding that wave we rode for awhile – I was always worried, because everyone knows it doesn't last forever. I always wondered, what's gonna happen when this is over, will I be able to get through a day without applause? I'm not the most secure person in the world, and when you do what we were doing long enough, you find that you kinda *need* that approval.

But it turned out to be a seamless transition. I was so happy not to have to think about myself anymore. Once I became a parent, it was completely different – it was all about Shane, and then it was all about the people I come into contact with when I'm *with* her. I actually had some trouble at first, fitting in with the parents at Shane's school, who didn't know who I was or what I did. That was a little difficult for me, mostly because I didn't know who *I* was with *them*, either. But gradually I made friends, and it was always funny when they would find out what I used to do. Suddenly people would go, 'Wow, you're a rock star!' But we never bring it up ourselves. We're not really famous around here, and usually I feel like that's just as well.

How did you decide to settle in Ohio, right near your hometown? That surprised me – I figured you'd gravitate toward a music-industry hub, or that Don would want to settle in North Carolina.

No, he wanted to be here! He said he'd spent enough time in the South, and didn't want to live down there. We chose to live here because of its location — you can drive pretty quickly to anywhere on the East Coast or Midwest from here. It's also very inexpensive, which lets us avoid the pressure of needing to work harder than we want to, just to pay the bills. By the same token, it's probably been a big obstacle for our careers, because we're not out hobnobbing and we don't run into people the way we would if we were in L.A. or New York.

Well, you did wind up using those sorts of connections, in the Akron-Canton era, to hook up with Color Me Gone back in the early '80s. That story's not very well known. For

example, why didn't it last for more than the one EP?

It fell apart when I got slugged in the head by the guitar player! He [former Dead Boy George Cabaniss] and I had a disagreement in a hotel room in Athens, Georgia, in the middle of a tour. There may have been a *tiny* bit of alcohol involved. He punched me – not that I didn't fight back, I did – but that's why I left the band. I called my parents and asked them to wire me some money, because I couldn't stay on that tour one more day. Somebody was going to *die* if I stayed, and it wasn't gonna be me.

Very rock 'n' roll.

Yeah ... but it was because of the band that I met Dixon, so it's hard to feel too bad about it.

How did that happen?

Well, we had recorded the EP, and the guys in the band didn't like the sound of it, which was really stupid politically. I mean, the *A&R guy* from the label [David Anderle] had co-produced the thing, and *you* want to have someone *else* come in? But they really wanted to redo the record, so we talked to a number of producers. One of them was Dixon, who had just [co-produced R.E.M.'s debut album] *Murmur*, and I fucking *loved* that record.

So we met with him, and the first thing out of his mouth was, "I don't know why you'd want to redo this record." I thought, Oh my god, this is how it's supposed to be! I couldn't believe somebody could be that fun and positive and casual in the music business. Everything he said was the truth – he wasn't trying to be hip and cool, or anything like that.

So, Don didn't end up remixing the EP. How did you end up working together once you'd gone solo?

For a while after I left the band, the label kept trying to talk me into going back, but I finally said, "I don't care if I'm throwing a career away here – it's too painful working with those guys." A couple days later, I got the call that they wanted to keep me as a solo artist — but that they didn't know yet what they wanted to do with me.

Dixon and I had stayed in touch, mostly sending each other postcards, and he sent me one saying, "I heard you quit the combo." Then, at some point after that, Dixon met up with my A&R person, Nancy Jefferies, about some other band in Chapel Hill, and he brought my name up. He said, "What are you going to do with her?" and Nancy said, "Why, do you want to do something?" They gave us some money to get started, and we began working on *Unsophisticated Time* ... and the rest is history.

(from *Unsophisticated Time*)

It's amazing to me that that album has never been re-issued.

People have wanted to license that record and re-release it over the years, but A&M never wanted to waste the time. To them it was just a small record, I guess. It's too bad, though. That record was the most fun of them all to make – it was the happiest time of my life.

And it features what must be your best-remembered song, "Follow You All Over the World." Don brought that to you, right?

Yeah. Bland Simpson had written it, and the two of them have been close forever. If that's the

song I'm remembered for, I can certainly live with that. Of course, my mother always says, "Why didn't you just record 'Walk Like an Egyptian'?"

What was the story with that?

I sang the demo, and the Bangles *totally* copied it! It was while I was doing a bunch of demos and other stuff with Liam Sternberg, back around the summer of '83. Liam was from Akron, and he was hot shit at the time — he had produced a record [*Fool Around*] for Rachel Sweet and done a bunch of stuff with Stiff Records. On this occasion, Liam had written a couple songs, and one of them was specifically for the Bangles. It was called "Fall to Innocence," I think — it was a great song. But then he had another song which was targeted at Toni Basil, who at that time was coming off "Mickey." He gave it to me and told me, "I know it's a total bullshit song, but it's the kind of thing that could work for somebody like her." I told him it was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard in my life, but we put it down anyway. He made all this noise with a drum machine, and he used a stainless-steel bowl to get that clanging effect.

We did it in an afternoon, and I didn't think another thing of it. Then — what was it, three years later? — I was sitting in a friend's house in Canton and she put on the new Bangles record. And there it was! And I was like, "Son of a — they did the demo *exactly*! They even used the stainless-steel bowl!"

It seemed you were finally going to get a big commercial breakthrough anyway, when *Used Guitars* came out in '88.

Everything that surrounded that album was fun. Dixon was really smart — he had the idea to kick off the tour for that album with these shows at the Bottom Line [in New York], where we invited all the songwriters to come onstage with us. Allan Pepper [the legendary club's owner] is a good, good man, and he was very supportive. So we did four sold-out shows there during New Music Seminar, and that got the record noticed — and then, at the end of that, we got invited to be on David Letterman's show. We did the show, and then we flew home in time to watch it in our living room.

With all that, I've always found it extraordinary that *Used Guitars* wasn't more successful.

Well, it all comes down to promotion, promotion, promotion. I finally asked to leave A&M after that. It was a real tearful parting, but I felt like I had to do it because A&M's promotion guy, Charlie Minor, hated my records and never pushed them. [Minor was something of a legend in the promotion business] He was always a real ass to me. He was really gruff — I was actually scared of him. He wound up getting shot by his [former] girlfriend, you know — they even did a show about it on E!

(from *Used Guitars*)

So, within three years of the Letterman appearance you were without a major-label contract, had started a family, and had basically jumped off the music-business train. You never really got back on. Any regrets?

Not really. I never really think about it, but I've always figured there was a reason that didn't happen. Dixon and I are such kindred spirits, and I think we both came to realize that we just

didn't care about being any more famous than we got. We touched it just enough to know what an imposition it is on your life, and then we backed away from it.

Well, you always seemed to be having a great time.

I think that's because we are who we are – we're accessible people, and we never felt like we needed to separate our real selves from the people we were in public. It's a fine line you have to walk, and eventually you're bound to become *that person*, that celebrity person. I remember when we were playing the Bottom Line, Allan told us he appreciated working with us because we were friendly and didn't treat people like jerks. I was kinda taken aback, because I had no idea that more people in the industry weren't nice to each other. People would say, "God, you're so nice," and I would say, "Isn't everybody?" It makes it more fun when you're nice — people don't expect it.

Can you envision doing any more of that kind of touring?

I've been trying to analyze what it is I hate so much about touring — the logistics, and the cars breaking down, and it's so expensive.

I did have a lot of fun on the "Cynical Girls" tour with [singer/songwriter and fellow Ohioan] Amy Rigby [in 2005]. We would start the shows with the Marshall Crenshaw song playing on a record player. Amy is incredibly talented and funny – she's like a parody of herself. The West Coast dates were the most fun, because Kelley [Ryan, of the astroPuppees] was with us. It was three girls in an orange Cadillac – it was like *Thelma and Louise* and *Louise*.

We went to a bunch of places where Amy had just played a few months before. Amy tours all the time, so she had a big following, chanting "Amy, Amy." And then we'd be selling our CDs after the show, and Amy would come back all excited because she'd sold a bunch of stuff, and they'd be like, "Marti, what did you sell?" And I felt like Charlie Brown on Halloween, 'cause I didn't sell much – it was like, "I got a *rock*."

Bummer! Maybe it just wasn't your time.

Yeah, well, I get that. I re-connected with [producer and A&M exec] David Anderle recently after 20 years – he's a painter, too, and I helped him get some of his paintings exhibited at a gallery in L.A. Back in the early '90s he had gotten Sheryl Crow signed to A&M, and when I saw David after all those years I said, "So, David! Why does Sheryl Crow have my career?" And he said, "Because you left too soon!"