

Candid Canty dishes on new collaboration

By: Dave Coffey | September 15, 2010

Amidst the rising popularity of Lady Gaga and the club-pop archetype of female musicians, singer-songwriter Caitlin Canty recently recorded and released her second full-length album, a seven-track folk-pop offering entitled “Neon Streets.” The sparse but sincere album is a first for the Vermont-born singer-songwriter, as its creation was the result of collaboration between the songstress and Northampton-based string-rock group Darlingside.

While Canty quickly acknowledges that her largely acoustic and vintage sound contrasts starkly with the average popular female musician’s, she wouldn’t have it any other way. She prefers the intimate vibe of strumming her music out in smaller venues such as coffee shops and bars to selling out stadiums any day. Similarly, as opposed to many of her more poppy contemporaries, Canty says she is more inclined to write stripped down, personal songs instead of the average glossy pop tune.

“I think of the Gaga’s more as actresses than musicians of my ilk,” says Canty. “It’s less about the music and more the persona.”

According to Canty, the family of her childhood best friend, Liza, originally influenced her organic approach to making and performing music. Liza, as well as her parents and brother, were all musicians, which inspired Canty to take trombone in the fourth grade. Canty says she picked the trombone because she noticed all the other girls were playing either flute or clarinet, and she didn’t want to be “girly.”

Canty played and sang music as much as she possibly could throughout her childhood and adolescence. Through music classes in high school, she met several music teachers who further fostered her love for music. They also helped her into performing at state and regional festivals for trombone and voice, an experience she recounts as, “eye-opening for a hick from Vermont.”

In her senior year of high school, Canty says her parents gave her an acoustic guitar as a birthday present. After essentially teaching herself how to play guitar, she played in the stairwells of her dorm and at open mic nights and began experimenting with songwriting. While she admits to sometimes regretting never taking any formal guitar lessons, she ultimately believes her self-taught methods are potentially a blessing more than a curse.

“I sometimes wish I had taken real lessons so my technique wouldn’t be so god-awful,” says Canty, “but I also think it can be beneficial that I haven’t learned rules that I might be hesitant to break.”

Heavily influenced by classic rock legends such as Led Zeppelin, CCR and Tom Petty, as well as a diverse array of singer-songwriters from Paul Simon and Johnny Cash to Joni Mitchell and Ani DiFranco. Canty developed a taste for trying to write songs that combine the stirring and rhythmic movement of rock n’ roll with the clever and thoughtful nature of vintage singer-songwriter material. However, she admits that the genre of music that she tends to fit in with best – acoustic singer-songwriter – has its shortcomings that she feels she needs to transcend as an artist.

“I don’t like middling singer-songwriter dribble at all, it makes me feel ill ... And I can recognize some of the dribble in my music,” says Canty. “I want to get better at writing and performing music that has movement to it.”

For Canty, her latest album, “Neon Streets,” is a step in that musical direction. While Canty wrote all of the songs, sings all lead vocals and plays acoustic guitar on the record, the accompaniment in each song is provided by Noho-based quintet Darlingside. In addition to providing an instrumental backline for Canty on the record, the string-rockers also took care of producing, engineering and mixing the record. The result of the collaboration, according to Canty, was an entirely new sense of depth and dimension taken on by her songs.

“This album takes me out of my almost completely solo apartment recordings of [Canty’s self-produced 1997 full-length debut] ‘Green’ ...and opened my music up to collaborators with different strengths and opinions,” she says. “It felt like moving from black and white to color.”

Don Mitchell, guitarist/vocalist for Darlingside, not only lent his singing and playing skills to “Neon Streets,” but also had a heavy hand in engineering the record. Despite tight deadlines and newly treaded water on Canty’s part, Mitchell said Canty’s growth as a musician and songwriter was readily apparent during the recording sessions.

“It’s hard to perceive a maturity shift on a short timescale, but Caitlin certainly adapted over the course of this project according to our initial rehearsals and first recordings,” Mitchell says.

Mitchell also specifically praises Canty’s vocal abilities, calling her a “natural vocalist.” Noting that she has had little to no formal training, he alleges, she succeeds where other folk and pop female vocalists tend to fall short.

“She can somehow pull off runs and turns that sound forced to me on many successful female pop artists,” says Mitchell. “And she has a knack for making the standard folk lines very much her own.”

As a result of Canty’s overwhelming satisfaction with the direction of “Neon Streets,” she plans on working with Darlingside again in the near future if at all possible. In addition, Canty is also eager to explore collaborations with other musical artists in the form of future recording work.

“I’d love to see what happens when I find my musical soul mate, my Lennon or Page,” Canty says wistfully.

For the time being, however, she is content to taking her show on the road, promoting “Neon Streets” in intimate venues across the country. Though she does not have any solid plans for exactly who her next collaborators will be or the direction in which her next album will take her, Canty is merely content to keep one goal in mind: “All I know is I want to make music that moves people.”

To find out more about Caitlin Canty’s upcoming shows and how to purchase “Neon Streets,” visit Caitlincanty.com. For information on Darlingside and their self-titled debut EP out now, visit Darlingside.com.

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