

DEIDRE McCALLA

Interviewed by Toni L. Armstrong

HOT WIRE: HAVE YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A PERFORMER?

DEIDRE: I've always focused on being a performer. I've been sifting through stuff my mother has been storing for me--stuff she'd *really* like me to throw away, because she's tired of storing it for me--and I found my essay application to the National Theater Institute from late 1971, my sophomore year in college. I went there in the spring of '73. It was interesting to read it. You have to justify why you think you should be admitted, and basically what my essay said was that I had always wanted to be a performer; that's what I felt I was put on this earth to do. It said that I wanted to go to this school so that I would challenge myself, and learn, and get the skills to do the work that I think I was meant to do. It was interesting to see that through the years what I've always said about why I do this--which is I love performing--has been true from the very beginning.

DID YOU START YOUR CAREER AS A MUSICIAN?

In high school [at Mary Immaculate School for Girls of Eagle Park, Ossining, New York] I started doing glee club, and I had a folk trio called Friendship, me and my best friends Geralyn and Sue. We played school functions and Red Cross benefits and senior citizen homes. During the last two or three years of high school, my school got involved in doing musicals, which I thoroughly loved. I formed and directed the drama club. We put together a school program that was centered around anti-war protesting; we put together scenes from *Antigone*, *Joan of Arc*, and *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, and in between we used protest songs of the '60s to kind of connect things and give time for set changes.

So for a long time my focus was actually theater. Because most of my school's effort was into musicals--and I guess every high school focuses on that--the emphasis in high school was definite-

ly musical theater. But it was acting that primarily interested me. When I went to college at Vassar I majored in theater, and at the same time was still always playing the guitar.

I finished college and didn't want to go to school any more. I decided I needed more training in acting if I was going to continue in that. Vassar's theater department, I had come to the conclusion, had been severely lacking in a lot of things. I knew I could either pursue the theater or pursue the music. And because I was tired of going to school, I didn't want to pursue the theater. I knew I needed more training, and I wasn't in the mood. I felt that musicians can learn things from records, from being with other musicians, just hanging out or watching someone play; acting is a lot more difficult to pick up. I knew I could learn the music things on my own to a certain extent. As it turned out, about two or three years after college I decided to go back to school because I didn't know enough about music, and my inability to do certain things, to understand certain musical concepts, was really limiting my songwriting. I only write what I play; the guitar generally has to be there, so my songwriting is limited by what I can technically pull off on the instrument. I decided I needed to learn more.

HOW DID YOU PURSUE YOUR MUSIC AT THAT POINT?

I moved to Milwaukee in '77 or '78, and attended the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music. It was around then--after being in Milwaukee for awhile and going back and forth to Chicago--that I met Llena dela Madrugada. I met her through Ginni Clemmons. We had a show together at Truman Community College in Chicago, and this woman was playing with Ginni. I thought she was absolutely incredible. I told her if she ever had some time to kill and just wanted to come over and play, I'd really love it. She did that, and we had a remarkable musical kinship. We worked together as a duo called Gypsy for about

three years. She lived in Chicago, and then for the last year or so moved up to Milwaukee. Also during that time, I started working with a band in Milwaukee called Breakwater that had been around for a few years. I actually started doing more with Breakwater work than Gypsy.

Then after about two and a half years I realized I'd gotten all that I thought was useful out of school. They had a jazz department and a classical department; my focus was jazz guitar. The jazz people, besides studying jazz theory, had to also study classical theory. Which I never thought was fair because they never made the classical people study jazz theory. Anyway, after two years of jazz and classical theory, I had once again had enough of school, and around that time I felt Breakwater had developed as far as it--in that configuration--was probably going to develop. I decided it was time to take things back to New York.

WHY NEW YORK?

I had spent five or six years noodling around the Midwest. I felt, at the time, I needed to get to New York to find out if all my noodling was *worth* anything. And also to be in a more creative environment. That's not to say that the Midwest isn't creative; but I think in an urban center where a lot of people are actively striving to invent themselves and to make whatever is their art work...even if you don't directly contact those people, there's energy in the air--and that's what I felt was missing when I was living in the Midwest. There just wasn't that energy in the air. So I went back in '80 or '81, and of course got very wrapped up in a day job because it's very expensive to live and work in New York.

SPEAKING OF YOUR NEW YORK DAYS, IRENE YOUNG AND YOU GO WAY BACK. HOW DOES SHE FIT INTO THE PICTURE OF YOU AND MUSIC AND OLIVIA RECORDS?

Apart from the Olivia connection, Irene

remains my most constant barometer of quality. From the first that Irene started doing photography, she had a very high insistence on the level of quality and professionalism in her own work. [See "Behind The Scenes," page 51.] The fact that someone whose work I respected so much was always there behind me in my more insecure down times...I would tell myself, "God, if Irene likes it, there's gotta be something here. If I just keep working to get better, maybe I'll feel it too." So on a level of just Irene being there for my music, she's really been a very important friend and patron.



Carolyn Hankett

In terms of Olivia, Irene and I were roommates when I moved back to New York, and I guess she'd started doing a little bit of work for Olivia. People come very soon to trust Irene's musical ear. That's how Lucie Blue got to the label,

too. There was a time period when she would fly back and forth between California and New York. Judy [Dlugacz] would ask Irene, "What have you heard, what do you like?" and Irene would always give her something that I was working on. But it was always more like a fly in front of Judy's face; like "OH! Not this again! Everytime I ask you something, you bring up Deidre." I found out later that the tapes would stay in the office, and the people working in the warehouse would play them—which is not true for all tapes received by the record company. I started to do homework

Irene, I could do my own album!" When I was doing homework on what it would take to pull off a project like that, it was around the time of the Carnegie Hall concert [November 1982], and Judy was in town. She was very giving of information about what to look for in a producer, some suggestions of names, just helping me gather information on what it takes to do an album—but always being very non-committal about Olivia's involvement. I had the sense if I totally did it myself—including manufacturing—I could probably go to Judy and she might distribute it. Irene had been throwing my name about for awhile, but it took Judy time to perceive me as a serious contender. That perception changed when I hired Teresa to do *Don't Doubt It*; it was then that Judy kind of looked up and went, "Oh, you're really going to do this." Also, I moved out to California, so seeing me bit by bit pulling the pieces together, it became more of a reality.

WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS WORKING WITH OLIVIA RECORDS MADE IN YOUR CAREER?

I know that there were some clubs and producers that booked me in basically because I was on Olivia, because Olivia has established a certain level of quality. They trusted the relationship they had already established with Olivia artists, and they decided to take a chance—whereas it might have taken a lot more talking with some places if I wasn't on a label with whom they were familiar. So definitely being associated with Olivia is a plus because it opens some doors. It has also made a difference to women who are not familiar with my music. If they see "Olivia recording artist," if they know Meg, if they know Cris, then they will check out the show, because they know at the very least it's going to be feminist—hopefully lesbian feminist. It gives people who know Olivia's history a reason to come to the show, rather than buying a pig in a poke.

Also, distribution [of my record] would have been a pain in the butt without Olivia. And in terms of career growth, there's definitely a difference between having a record out and *not* having a record out. I essentially did *Don't Doubt It* because it was impossible to book myself nationally without a record.

WHY WAS HAVING THE ALBUM SO ESSENTIAL?

Because people needed proof that I was a real musician. Even if the producers didn't

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around what it took to do my own album—and the reason *that* happened was because for a year Irene had said to me, "Deidre, you could do your own album; Deidre, you could do your own album" and finally after a year I went, "You know,

personally need it, they needed some way to prove to their communities that I was real. Especially since this is very much a word-of-mouth network; it takes people having an album and being excited about it, and then playing the record for their friends and getting *them* excited about it, too...just playing it for other people in order to create an audience. It's very hard to create an audience without having a record that you can send ahead and leave behind.

YOU'VE TRAVELED JUST ABOUT EVERYWHERE ON YOUR TOURS. DO YOU SEE ANY DIFFERENCES IN WOMEN'S MUSIC COMMUNITIES IN THE VARIOUS GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS OF THE COUNTRY?

Except for the Bay Area, the smaller the town, the closer the community. New York has a tremendous—in terms of numbers—women's community, but it's not a very *tight* women's community. And I find that in very urban and large cities they just don't realize—as women in small towns in, say, the South do—that they need each other. So although the concerts are smaller in smaller communities, I would say that they almost appreciate the event happening *more*, because it's a reason for the community to see each other. I definitely don't have that sense in a lot of larger cities. But my whole involvement in women's music is as a touring artist on a national level, sort of dropping in, so it's hard to say what's *really* happening in each community.

WHO IN THE WOMEN'S CULTURAL NETWORK DO YOU FIND INSPIRING?

Teresa Trull—she really exemplifies a well-rounded musician who is constantly challenging herself and requiring that she grow. Her songwriting, and the way she works with different writers....If you listen from *Unexpected* to my album, you can hear how Teresa has learned more about producing with each project. It's just incredible. She's a performer whose shows I never tire of. Even if I've seen her do a particular set a certain way, there is always something new and fresh about what she does. I just go home filled with awe. Teresa to me is a very strong source of inspiration because she's developed herself on so many different levels; I think that's the key to survival as a musician. Some people develop their teaching; I feel I've put all my eggs into the performing basket, and if something happened so that I wasn't able to travel, my career

would really be seriously hurt. Whereas someone like Teresa, if she can't travel then there will still be some outlet for her to get her songs out. I have told Teresa a number of times, I am her biggest fan; I'd be president of her fan club in a minute.

I also admire the poetry of Adrienne Rich; she has a way of clarifying an image in the most succinct way possible. Clarifying an image and a concept; there are no wasted words. Her images and metaphors splice immediately to the core of an idea, and because it goes on such a direct line, there's a very pure sense of integrity that I feel in her work. That clarity of image in my own way is what I try to achieve lyrically.

exceptional song for me. A sense of, "I didn't write it, dammit, so the next best thing to do is to sing the hell out of it." It's more when a song calls to me.

OF ALL THE SONGS YOU'VE WRITTEN OVER THE YEARS, WHICH IS YOUR PERSONAL FAVORITE? I KNOW THERE ARE DIFFERENT ONES FOR DIFFERENT REASONS, BUT IF YOU HAD TO PICK JUST ONE SPECIAL ONE...?

One reason it's hard to pick *one* is because a lot of times it's the one that's the freshest in your memory. I would say at this hour in my life, it would probably be "Too



Irene Young

"I would tell myself, 'If Irene likes it, there's gotta be something here'." (Deldre and Irene on their way to a potluck.)

WHEN YOU DO SONGS BY OTHER PEOPLE, LIKE ILENE WEISS FOR EXAMPLE, HOW DO YOU PICK THEM?

I sing songs I wish I'd written. People send me a lot of material, and I hear a lot of stuff. I don't solicit, mainly because it puts too much of a weird responsibility on me. A lot of times women want to send me things, and they want feedback—and to a very large extent they put too much weight on what's said by someone who's done a few albums. It makes me feel weird, and I don't like feeling that I have that kind of power with someone. Occasionally, though, I hear songs that just stop me in my tracks, and touch me. I hear a lot of songs both on record and live from people that are really good, and there is something in some songs that just strikes a certain chord in me as a really

Few And Far Between," because each verse in that song actually relates to a different time period in my life, so it's like a little memory board in that sense. And I think overall it sums up my general philosophy of living, especially the last verse.

WHAT DO YOU DO TO DEVELOP YOUR MUSICKERSHIP THESE DAYS?

I need to work more on my guitar playing. The problem is I'm not home a lot. I had actually hoped during last spring to focus more on that. I've looked into video guitar lessons—you know, something I can do in my own time. Sometimes I'll be with other musicians in music stores, and they'll say, "Why are you picking up this book? It's too beginning for you," and I'll say, "But look at this page here; I've never done this, I don't know how to do that..."

No matter how simple it is, if you can learn something from it, then it's worth the five or six bucks that you put into it. I think my songwriting grows in relation to my guitar playing, so I definitely am feeling the need to learn to do more on the guitar. I need to find a way to do that given how much I'm not home and can't do anything with full concentration.

AT THIS POINT IN TIME, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE THE GOOD-NEWS AND BAD-NEWS ASPECTS OF YOUR CAREER?

Well, I'd say the up side is that for the last three or four years, since *Don't Doubt It* came out, I've been making a living as a fulltime musician. And that to me is a real special blessing; it is something that I remind myself every day is a treasure. One major goal I have is to continue working to pay off the first album. Women (primarily) were very generous with me around donations and loans for the album. I have a primary commitment to paying back those women who lent me some of their funds, because I know how hard money is to come by. So that's looking at another year and a half minimum of touring. *Don't Doubt It* is probably going to be paid for by the end of this year; it's taken three years, but on the other hand a lot of albums don't ever do that. Sales on *Don't Doubt It* are a little more than 11,000 over the last three years.

The down side is, I still need--in an economic sense--for my situation to change. Because at this point, I can at the most look down the road about three or four months and know that yes, I'll be fine. I would like to have a lot more security around me--and wouldn't we all! So the good news is I'm making a living, and the bad news is it's only enough to sustain me for a few months at a time. For the past three years I've looked in the paper at what the fall jobs are--I've always worried, Oh God, the next tour's not going to happen....blah, blah, blah. So far the tours *have* happened, but I always have the sense that I'm pushing my luck.

WHAT ARE THE BEST AND THE HARDEST THINGS FOR YOU ABOUT TOURING?

The best thing is that I am developing an audience. I am able to do on a fulltime basis what I feel I do best. My goal is to do 100 shows a year; I really feel that as a working musician one should work. Especially when you read about country acts in the mainstream that do 200 or 300 dates a year, my goal doesn't seem like so

much. What's hard is definitely touring on the economic shoestring that I have to...I probably don't have the amenities that a country artist in the mainstream has. There's no big Greyhound touring bus--I'm driving alone with my road manager Theresa McCraw. There's a lot of work--in terms of loading, unloading, dealing with people, and selling the records--that's done by me and now also by Theresa. It's very draining for any artist who has to do all that AND do the show. Not to mention I'm somewhat of a Cancer anyway, and a homebody, so this is a strange profession for me to be in.

WHAT DO YOU MOST ENJOY ABOUT BEING A WORKING MUSICIAN?

The shows. Being up on stage. Hearing, seeing, feeling people being touched, and my being touched by their reaction to the music. That's the rush. I feel I do 95 percent of business nonsense so I can have five percent of ecstasy. I'm sure other people experience this in whatever their creative activity--it manifests in more than just the visual and performing arts. Someone who tears a '57 Chevy apart and puts it back together, their mode of satisfaction is turning the key and hearing the engine hum.

AND PEOPLE LOVE YOU, WHICH CAN'T FEEL BAD. I'VE BEEN AT SHOWS WHERE IT'S LIKE DEIDREMANIA.

Oh, it feels real good. It's saner [in women's music audiences] than some other places, though. I was at the New York Music Awards this year, and we were a little taken aback at how much Beatle-type mania was going on there. There were big performers who were performing and presenting and receiving awards--like Debbie Gibson and Suzanne Vega. 3,000 people attended this show, and the people in the upper rafters, which were the "cheap seats"--and only in New York would \$25 seats be considered the "cheap seats"--they're hanging over the balcony screaming, "Debbie! Debbie! DEBBIE!" We were like, God, women would never be that blatant at a Cris Williamson concert! It was kind of a shock. Our audiences are a lot cooler than that.

DON'T DOUBT IT WAS UP IN 1985 FOR TWO NEW YORK MUSIC AWARDS--WAS WITH A LITTLE LUCK NOMINATED THIS YEAR?

Yes. *Don't Doubt It* was nominated for Best Independent Album and Best Song

on an Independent Album ("This Part of the World" by Ilene Weiss). This year, *With a Little Luck* was also nominated for two awards--Best Independent Album and Best Vocalist on an Independent Label. I did not get them, but given the way that the New York Music Awards and the Bammies and other types of regional awards are decided, it actually means more to me to be nominated than to actually win it. I would love to win, because it would give me some more promotional things in terms of pitching the album to reviewers and getting concerts reviewed; it would be wonderful to win it. But the way winning happens with those awards is that a significant portion of the voting is done by fans, and in New York they run ballots in the Post for a week, and you can also pick up ballots at Tower Records and at clubs. Essentially it means that someone who is in New York can pick up as many ballots as they want--that's the game, and I'm sure that's what people do. If I were there I would do it also, but I'm at a decided disadvantage not living in New York anymore. But the nominating is done from a smaller pool of critics, and what it means to be nominated is that I have made a professional impression on people. [See "Moving Into The Mainstream: Deidre McCalla's *Don't Doubt It*," March '86.] So that's significant, and it's significant that the New York Music Awards people are really committed to recognizing the independent labels. *With a Little Luck* didn't win in New York, but it received the San Francisco Cable Car Award this year, which is a recognition for contributions to the lesbian and gay community. I tied with Holly Near's *Don't Hold Back*.

You know, the honors are exciting, but the things people say to me at the record table, and the letters I get in the mail, really mean something to me--because the music touches people. It has made some women's lives--whatever they're going through, whenever they hear it--if not easier then at least it's a soundtrack through the experience. They say they appreciate that there's a sensitivity and an integrity in the music that seems real to them, and that they can keep with them in their heart; it means what I'm doing is working. Usually it's "I was going through a really rough time..." or "I just broke up with my girlfriend..." or "it was just a down time in my life..."

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ABOUT THE WRITER: Toni Armstrong watches the fish in her aquarium and is currently compiling an anthology of writings about female vampires.