

One Stage at a Time

Retro Cowgirl works their way up the live music scene and on to bigger dreams

By Christina Lopez

Deep sea blue and Prince purple hues color the Hole in the Wall stage as a modern day Aphrodite directs the crowd in a chant. Bass drum booms and guitar scratches pack a punch with each word. Dozens of audience members raise their beers and shout.

“Retro!” Bang! “Motherfuckin’!” Crash! “Cowgirl!”

Retro Cowgirl recharges the crowd while the lead singer hoists a sparkly “DANCE BITCH!” sign above her head. Between sips of tequila and sultry dances, her Angel Olsen-esque alto reverberates through the speakers. The five-piece band’s bluesy riffs, jazzy vocals and rock beats flow through the iconic bar, commanding the listeners to hear, watch and remember them.

Beginnings

Born in Ohio and raised in the Bay Area, vocalist Julia “Lucky” Steele grew up surrounded by music, thanks to her opera singer mother. The Californian grew up listening to classical music and classic rock. As she entered her teenage years, that switched to shoegaze and alternative indie-rock, including St. Vincent and The Strokes.

Steele’s parents issued an ultimatum: choose sports or music. She chose the clarinet, transitioned to saxophone and honked her way through her youth. She said her mother surrounding her with music allowed her to gain a deeper appreciation for music.

“I think that she did influence me a lot to have a love and appreciation for music. I’m very grateful for her putting that in my life.”

Lead guitarist Luis Fiallos, born and raised in Nicaragua, grew up listening to “mostly the Beatles” and took piano lessons as a child but switched to guitar. His school’s music teacher taught him the basics but he taught himself the rest. As a teenager, the Nicaraguan fell in love with blues music.

“That’s when the music started getting a little more serious. I’m still trying to learn how to work the music thing going on,” Fiallos said in a Zoom meeting.

The pair crossed paths in California in the late 2010s and stuck together ever since. The former banker eventually moved to Texas and Steele followed. Steele visited the Central

American in McAllen and participated in a Texan rite of passage, buying her first pair of cowboy boots.

“Someone called me a retro cowgirl. And I was like, ‘Oh, someone should use that name for like a business.’” Steele recalled. “And at the time, [our manager] was making clothing a lot. And I was like ‘Wait what if you made a business and we named it retro cowgirl? ‘And she’s like, ‘Well, what if you guys have that name as your band?’”

Just like that, Retro Cowgirl is born.

Packing Bags

Retro Cowgirl officially kick started their career in 2021. Steele credits the Central American for reigniting her love for classic rock and their bluesy sound. With songs ranging from hard knock blues (Roots), garage rock (Honey) to acoustic jazz (Stronger), their go-to genre is not easy to pin down.

“We’ve debated the sound that we’re going for a lot,,” Steele said. “I feel like we’re much more like garage rock influence, like 2000 Scrub drop, but in a modern twist.”

The group’s manager and Fiallos’s fiancée Raquel Nava recalls their first show at Wong’s Bodega in Texas’ oldest city. Nava said she still gets emotional thinking about it.

“I still remember them just being emotional and now every show I get a little emotional.” Nava said. “I’ve always known that they’re meant for bigger stages. So that’s the ultimate goal for me. Just to get them on the biggest stages.”

They took their first 70 mile trip up north to the live music capital in 2022 at the Halcyon in the Mueller neighborhood. Since then, the musicians travel to the capital city three to four times a week. Nava said Austin is more viable and suitable for the band’s future and sound.

“As much as we love San Antonio, it’ll always have a place in our hearts for where we got started,” Nava admitted. “You know, there’s a bunch of Latin music going on, there’s a bunch of metal. But for us, Austin is just keeping us busy, for sure.”

Retro Cowgirl is slowly but surely working their way through the Austin’s venues, from performing at Hole in the Wall to Mohawk Austin. Steele said she “fangirled” after Stubb’s BBQ posted Retro Cowgirl on their official account when promoting their aftershow supporting Teddy Swims.

"I've been wanting to play at Stubb's for a while now and I just didn't think that it was going to come so soon and that just really feels really good," Steele said. "Anytime we play at a new venue that is really great, I'm really excited about it."

Looking ahead

Retro Cowgirl lived many lives in the past three years, moving across the country, releasing nine singles, one EP and three separate bassists. In spite of slow starts and new homes, Retro Cowgirl is not done yet. Steele wants the band to be a household name and Fiallos does not want to go back to his nine-to-five.

"I think my main dream is to make the band a source of income," Fiallos sighed. "All that stuff with music that comes with, royalties or shows or whatever the music industry has for us, [is] ultimate goal. And keep it coming."

Steele retrospectively tells herself to stop stressing about the smallest things.

"It's funny because we were just as stressed when we first started as we are now," Steele laughed. "We just had so much of a dream. It was just so big and it was hard and it still is hard, but I think it was even harder at first."

The leads both hope to earn a Grammy someday or perform at large festivals like Coachella or Lollapalooza. The move to Austin may be fruitful for the group, just like it did for Spoon or the 13th Floor Elevators. But for now, Retro Cowgirl is putting in the hours to make this dream come true, one stage and one "DANCE BITCH," sign at a time.