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Mrs. Fun 101

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Abstract: Mrs. Fun breaks boundaries between established musical genres and in the process incorporates a sense of humor, spontaneity and critical consciousness that makes each performance a unique experience, whether they're leading 3,000 people in a sing-along while opening for the Indigo Girls, delivering spoken word rap over a steady rhythmic pulse or launching into a virtuoso jazz instrumental piece. Improvisation was prevalent around Bach's time when they figured the bass player and the keyboard player, harpsichord player, organist, or whatever would improvise.

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Full text: Connie Grauer's keyboard artistry and Kim Zick's outrageous talents on the drum set have earned them admirers around the country and abroad. Together they comprise Mrs. Fun, a Milwaukee-based group whose music is so original and beyond categorization, Grauer and Zick call it "hardcore electra-acid-jazz." Mrs. Fun breaks boundaries between established musical genres and in the process incorporates a sense of humor, spontaneity and critical consciousness that makes each performance a unique experience, whether they're leading 3,000 people in a sing-along while opening for the Indigo Girls, delivering spoken word rap over a steady rhythmic pulse or launching into a virtuoso jazz instrumental piece. They work within a broader community of female musicians that includes k.d. lang (who has appeared on their records and invited them to play with her); Indigo Girls (who also appear on their records and took them on tour twice); Jane Sibeny, Phranc and Moe Tucker of The Velvet Underground. Last spring they released the fourth album of their ten-year career, Groove, on their own label, FunTime Records.

Where do you stand in relation to jazz?

CG: We never used the word "jazz" to describe ourselves when we first started. Our first band together was a jazz-fusion band, so we were already playing live shows where we saw what size the audience was. When we started Mrs. Fun, I was thinking it would be great to approach this like we're accessible to everyone. I thought we should go into this project thinking bigger than life and not just have one sort of audience, even though our influences were jazz.

Are audiences initially more suspicious of what you do because you are women?

CG: When we were first playing, we played these venues where the sound engineer would automatically assume we were playing dinner music. That's why I never wanted to book us into a restaurant because that would support what people already thought of us-dinner music, lounge act, laid back-all that stuff was associated just by looking at two gals, two people. Things have changed quite a bit since we started. Women or men as an audience are still not used to seeing that many women onstage playing the hell out of the drums or doing what we do in this odd, particular fashion.

Do you feel you have to overcome a fear of jazz or experimentation on the part of your audience?

CG: We try not to underestimate the intelligence of our audience and play what we play.

The way I like to bring everyone in is with the monologue in between-the humor and whatnot-and that actually opens up their minds. If they can't understand the music, at least they'll understand the repartee.

KZ: I don't feel like it's anything we have to think about or overcome. I don't think about it at all. Once people hear us it's not a problem for them to enjoy the music. People have come up and said, "That's sort of like jazz, isn't it?"

Is Improvisation at the core of your music?

CG: Our whole premise in starting Mrs. Fun was based on spontaneity and improvisation, which is very much a jazz sort of thing. Although with my background in classical music, it's also very much a classical thing.

Improvisation was prevalent around Bach's time when they figured the bass player and the keyboard player, harpsichord player, organist, or whatever would improvise. We do that every time, and because we've kept that premise always in the forefront of our minds-spontaneity and improvisation-it's kept it very fresh and exciting.

How does that improvisation translate into recording?

CG: In the studio we go for the best take out of three. Each time we play it is a little bit different so we've got to get the good take live. If we're in the studio and it takes longer than three times, that might not be the day for it.

Explain your writing process.

CG: I write it all and present it to Kim. Every song has come to me in a different way. It's either based on a drum riff or a groove of some sort or a bass riff, a melody line, a phrase or a chord progression. We've have lyricists present their lyrics to us and I've actually written some material for the lyrics, which was very exciting.

Why did you start your own label?

KZ: We didn't know anything about the music business so we did it ourselves. We didn't know that anyone could do it for us.

CG: Signing to a label never occurred to us when we started Mrs. Fun because we just wanted to make great music. We didn't care that we did not have a bass player or a lead singer or a guitarist. It wasn't until we started looking for agents, managers and industry people to help us that we understood a little bit more about what they were looking for. I said to Kim, "We've got this group that is uruque. We have a vision. Let's see what we can do on our own."

As we developed our sound, our music and our knowledge of the industry, Mrs. Fun and FunTime Records started taking off. We've learned a lot along the way and have ended up getting help from Mends we've performed with and people in the record business. Through the course of time, we've made great contacts in radio and the media.

Do you want to be signed to a major label so you can get wider distribution or do you want to continue on your own?

CG: If the deal is the right one for Mrs. Fun then a resounding yes. We've had several offers and after looking over the whole deal we decided we were doing just fine on our own.

KZ: I would like to have some help because we spend more time on business than we do on the music and that gets a little frustrating. We constantly try to balance that. We could easily spend all our time on the business.

CG: We have seen both sides of artists signed to labels and heard many more horror stories than success stories. But the success stories are very nice and you can see the potential of what that extra help can do for artists.

If you wanted to sign with a label, would the musical categorization pose a problem?

CG: The way the music industry is set up, definitely. But as far as we're concerned, it's only been to our advantage. We've never once subscribed to the format of the industry anyway, so our whole emphasis has been creative marketing, and the music is highly creative. It has worked well for us.

Sidebar

Discography

Mrs. Fun

Groove, FunTime, 1998

No Ennui, FunTime, 1995

They Are Not A Trio, FunTime, 1991

Lulu's Walk, FunTime, 1987

Connie Grauer

Short Stories, FunTime, 1994

Other Recordings

One Step Up/Two Steps Bade: The Songs of Bruce Springsteen, EMI-Capitol, 1997

k.d. long, Drag, Sire, 1997; and Red, hot & BJue, Chrysalis, 1990

'80s compilation Gag Me With A Spoon, Don't Records, 1995

Indigo Girls, Swamp Ophelia, Epic, 1994

Victor De Lorenzo, Pancaie Day, Almo, 1995

Peter Corey Sent Me, Chameleon, 1990

Phranc, I Enjoy Being A Girl, Island, 1989

Gear

Connie Grauer uses a Yamaha DXV, which she plays left-handed keyboard bass. She uses a Korg SG1 that she mids to an Emu Proteus I, and uses a Korg 3, Korg X5 and a Hohner clarinet when she wants extra keyboards. Her microphone of choice is a Neo Dymium 457.

Kim Zick endorses Ayotte drums and uses a 18 or 20 inch bass drum, 10,12,14 inch toms and a 12 inch Brady snare. For cymbals she uses a Zildjian 18 inch vintage K ride, 13 inch K hi-hats, 20 inch china, a Sabian 16 inch sound control crash and 10 inch splash.

AuthorAffiliation

Audrey Bilger is an associate professor of Literature at Claremont McKenna College who has published extensively on 18th-century British women writers and comedy, reviewed books in women's studies journals and the Los Angeles Times Book Review. Her interview with novelist Jeanette Winterson appeared in the fall/winter 1997-98 issue of The Paris Review.

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