



The Girls In The Band

Female performers make their mark in pop, blues and jazz
By Joe Stumpe

The dance floor at Margarita's Cantina is jammed with bobbing heads and gyrating bodies when Carrie Jonas steps up to the microphone. Jonas's powerful, octave-spanning voice -- "Whoa-ooo-whoa-oh! You got the best of my love!" -- helps fuel the party atmosphere.

Meanwhile, the scene on stage serves as a pretty good microcosm of Wichita's bar band business: Jonas is surrounded by male musicians. The city's bar business has always been something of a boys' club, with male performers outnumbering female ones by a wide margin.

Nevertheless, a small number of women carve out niches in that scene, whether it's performing with bands or by themselves.

And when they sound like Jonas, blues guitarist-vocalist Rachele Coba or jazz chanteuse Donna Tucker, they leave no doubt they belong.



CARRIE JONAS -- "A BIG VOICE"

At 27, Jonas (pictured left) is the youngest of the three and the newest to the business. Jonas never formally trained in music, beyond taking part in high-school musicals. Instead, she was singing karaoke when music promoter Larry McKellips heard her and put her in a band called Synergy, which later morphed into an outfit called Zyba.

Those acts were successful, but nothing like her current outfit. Lotus started in Wichita more than 25 years ago and boasts, among other alumni, a certain country singer named Martina McBride. Most Friday and Saturday nights, there's a line out the door of Margarita's (owner by band member Don Overstake) waiting to hear the band.

For several years, Jonas watched with a mixture of envy and intimidation as a friend of hers, Mary Aaron, sang with Lotus. When she joined it herself in February, it was a nerve-wracking, "kind of surreal" experience, Jonas said.

Jonas is quite aware of "the girls that have preceded me" in the band, and she's not talking just about McBride. Aaron's shoes "are enough for me to fill. I still have a ways to go."

The members of Lotus agree -- but only when it comes to showmanship. Drummer Lee MacDonald said Jonas is essentially a "quiet and demur" person who band members must encourage to loosen up. Overstake said it was tough at first for Jonas to fit in with a band made up of men at least twice her age, playing songs of another generation. Neither man questions her talent, and they say she's made songs like "I Love Rock and Roll" and "Feel Like A Woman" her own.

"Carrie's got a big voice," MacDonald said. "She loves the crowd, and the crowd loves her."

Jonas has wondered why more women don't perform regularly in local clubs, though she acknowledges that working every weekend (in addition to her regular job

with a copy machine leasing business) takes a toll.

"You have to be really dedicated and willing to give up a lot of your social life," she said.

Still, she doesn't see herself giving up performing any time soon.

"Singing has always been a passion of mine and (Lotus) is a fun outlet to do that," she said.



RACHELE COBA -- "MUSIC CHOOSES YOU"

Female guitar players are rare on the local entertainment scene. Female lead guitar players are almost unheard of. But Rachele Coba has held her own with some of this city's best lead guitar players since returning here a decade ago.

Not that it's always been easy. "Sometimes it's been pretty uncomfortable for me to be the only girl," Coba (who's also a great singer) said. "I definitely got some flak. I remember auditioning for a couple of bands and guys would just walk out before they heard me."

Like Jonas, Coba grew up in Wichita. She played the violin in school and earned a degree in classical guitar from the University of Miami. It was in Miami where she found her real musical love -- the blues -- when she started sitting in blues jams to escape the regimen of classical studies.

After Miami, Coba lived and played for a while in Chicago, and toured with Superchicken, a Mississippi-based blues band, before moving back. She's played with Ray Murray, Jerry Hahn, the Macy Brothers and other well-known musicians here and also fronted two bands of her own.

These days, most of her gigs are solo appearances in restaurants; it's tough to find jobs that pay enough to hire sidemen. Coba has a voice not unlike Bonnie Raitt, while her guitar work alternates between country blues-style fingerpicking and urban lead lines. Regular stops include Chelsea's on the east side and B & C Barbecue downtown. She'll be Wichita's solo blues artist representative in the annual Memphis Blues competition next year. She's recording a CD that she hopes can help get her booked around the region.

To make a full-time living as a musician, Coba also gives guitar lessons and participates in Blues in the Schools, a program conducted by Arts Partners that stresses the primal role of blues in popular American music. For a recent session with kindergarteners, Coba had them clap in rhythm and "make train noises." They were having a good time," she said.

Coba notes that many women stop

performing after they get married and have children.

"I don't know why that doesn't happen with guys," she said dryly.

She says she "probably didn't have a choice" when it came to her career. "I think music chooses you," she said. "I'm not a big entertainer -- I don't do a lot of talking between songs. But I like it when music makes people happy, when it makes them feel good."



DONNA TUCKER -- "ONE OF THE GUYS"

Donna Tucker has been making a living making music for over 30 years. Don't hate her because she looks like she could still get carded in some of the clubs where she's on the bill.

Tucker grew up in western Kansas, playing everything from church organ to oboe. She went to K-State to study music and broadcast journalism, but left early after deciding she really wanted to be a jazz singer.

Tucker had a regular gig at Arthur's, Dallas's premier jazz club, for 11 years. She did industrial shows for Soutland Corp. (owner of 7-11), jingles and voice-overs before returning to Kansas in 1991 with her husband and two sons.

A few years later she developed a vocal jazz ensemble for Friends University, then began performing a once- or twice-yearly stint at the Tokyo Westin. In Wichita she's appeared at the Broadview, Terradyne and Suede, performs at Jardine's in Kansas City every couple months and actually keeps busiest with private gigs.

That's quite a resume, but Tucker isn't done. She recorded her first CD, "Right As The Rain," two years ago -- "it's doing best in Asia," she said -- and is getting ready to shoot an accompanying video.

Blessed with an elegant voice, Tucker said she realized early on that the only way to be taken seriously by her mostly male peers in the jazz world was to "be a musician first. If you can't read music and sit down at a piano and at least pick out the melody, you're not going to be taken seriously." Tucker, of course, can do much more than pick out a melody on the piano.



RACHELE COBA (TOP) | DONNA TUCKER (BOTTOM)

In Wichita she's played piano and sang with the likes of Bill Harshbarger, Steve Hatfield, J.C. Combs, Tom Fowler and Tim Henry. "Before I go on stage, I look at them and say 'live and work in a man's world,'" Tucker said. "The greatest compliment I get is, 'Donna one of the guys.'"

And she is one that isn't ready to give the world up.

"I'll keep on keeping on until the phone stops ringing," she said.