

Janis, Jodie, Jen . . .

Musical comparisons to Janis Joplin and a physical likeness to Jodie Foster sit well with Jen Porter. But make no mistake: This up and coming musician is an original

Posted 9 months ago

When music journalists write about Jen Porter, they almost always invoke the name of the Queen of Rock, Janis Joplin. In fact, in her 10-year career as a professional musician, Porter has starred in a couple of Joplin tributes and has been asked to audition for the Minneapolis production of *Love, Janis*, the musical based on a book by younger sister, Laura Joplin.

"I get that comparison all the time and it's an incredible honour," said Porter in a recent interview. "She was so well known for pouring her heart and soul into everything she did."

Pouring out heart and soul is something Porter knows well. She's a preacher's daughter -- her dad is Rev. John Porter of Thessalon's Zion United Church.

She's inherited her father's flair for performance and is busy channeling it, playing gigs five-to-six nights a week at clubs in her native Chicago.

And people have taken note of her. In 2003, she was voted the city's best local musician by readers of the Chicago Free Press.

She has belted out the American national anthem for the Chicago White Sox and the Chicago Bulls, where she and her "Most Fabulous" band play openers, as well.

On Tuesday, she'll be in Sault Ste. Marie at The Water Tower, Inn helping friends Harry Stewart and Chris Southin launch their new venture, Thessalon's Choco Productions. Choco is taking over where the River's End concert series left off, putting the word out and reviewing local cultural activities at its website (www.chocoproductions.ca), as well as producing a few shows of its own.

Porter's show is a steal at \$5 and gives her a chance to show her stuff to a Canadian audience. Unlike Joplin, Porter is a classically trained musician, who plays and composes on both piano and guitar. She has a deeper, richer voice that has often been compared to that of Natalie Merchant, even though her style is more raw and bluesy. She's also been compared to Stevie Nicks and Fiona Apple.

It might be easy to resent the continual comparisons, but Porter embraces them.

"A lot of artists shy away from that stuff saying, 'I'm an original.' But you have to use comparisons to find your audience. I have a note that's been taped up on my desk for four years now, given to me by someone after a bar show. It says 'You look like Jodie Foster, you play like Tori Amos, you sing like Janis Joplin, but you sound like yourself.' I've kept it because it reminds me that people will compare, compare, compare, but I am still me."

One comparison that is not apt is Joplin's lifestyle and early self-destructive end. At 33, Porter has already outlived her doppelgänger by six years and extols the virtues of regular exercise, the need for good, strong core muscles and a solid business sense. She quit her office job five years ago and now makes more money than she did working nine to five. Like a growing number of musicians these days, she manages, promotes, does publicity for herself, and publishes her own CDs. "I live in a big city where there are a lot of people who want to be musicians but want a free ride and to find someone to put up the money, the energy and the work while they just create music," Porter said. "But it's important to know that if you want to be a rock star, you will have to work hard and do a lot of stuff yourself for a while and then the right people will come along

or at least that's what people tell me."

In the meantime, Porter has bought health-care insurance -- a huge problem for many workers in the U. S. -- and puts aside for a retirement fund. She also keeps a reserve for low-cash times and, as a preacher's daughter, she

gives away money to a variety of causes.

She's also figured out a warm, sunny solution to the yearly cash flow crunch that happens when people, in cold cities such as Chicago, just don't go out as much in the winter. Last January she spent the month playing bar gigs in St. Maarten and plans to go back to the Caribbean this year. She is also at work on her fourth album. The budget is five times as much as her second album (she paid next to nothing on her first).

"It has been a progression. As I've made more money, I've gotten people who are higher up on the totem pole," Porter said.

"They cost more money but they are better at what they do and are making me better at what I do."

She funds her original work with the bar gigs that have pushed her to develop a long, diverse request list. She can pound out a Green Day tune on the piano, take on Led Zepplin or indulge people's love for the sing-along favourites. But she admits the oldies are feeling ancient these days as she plays them night, after night, after night.

"There is that side of it, where it's like 'Oh God, Brown-Eyed Girl again.' I try to make it fun, to infuse it. What happens is that when people enjoy the song, I can feed off that energy even though I've played it thousands of times."

Like any performer, Porter shines when playing her own stuff. And she has plenty to offer. Requests that won't steer you wrong include Get Out, Your Child, Thank You, Heaven to Me, and Another.

At the Water Tower show, look forward to a few tunes she's trying out for the new album.

When asked about the future, Porter doesn't have much to say. Instead she steers conversation back to the present and says she's content with her life.

"I already feel I'm successful at this point," she added. "I get to do what I love for a living, make enough money to put some away and help other people, I manage to take time off to go hiking and I get to work in the Caribbean. I feel like I've really been busting my butt to get to this point so I'd like to enjoy it for a while."

On the web: www.jenporter.com

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PORTER PERFORMS

Who: Jen Porter

Where: Water Tower Inn When: Tuesday, 7:30 p. m. Tickets: \$5