

Long Biography for Vanessa Lively – 909 Words

For a woman who thrives on jumping into the unknown with both feet, Vanessa Lively took an unusual approach to her new album, *Uncovering Stones*. She and her producer-husband, Jason, planned it practically down to the last note before stepping near a recording studio – which happened to be a room in their Austin home, tricked out for the occasion by co-producer/engineer Keith Gary. Vanessa even painted the album cover art beforehand – on 42 canvas squares she then sold individually to help fund the 12-song disc.

It's uncommon methodology, to say the least. But then, Lively is an uncommon woman. The San Antonio native discovered her musical muse relatively late, after she'd already started a career as an artist and graphic designer. It became one more adventure for a seeker who loves pursuing alternative experiences, including raking blueberries in Maine as a migrant farm worker and moving with her husband to South America for a few years to do volunteer work in impoverished areas.

After experiencing “a completely different rhythm of life” in the blueberry fields, she found herself making music constantly during her sojourn in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. “It was how people connected,” Lively recalls. “We'd get together; we'd sing songs. Everyone either danced or played an instrument or sang. People were just musical; it wasn't like you were a musician or you weren't. You play as a pastime. Music was such a thread of connecting with people and celebrating.”

Her first three albums all grew out of her experience in South America. The first, *Let Me Rise*, was actually recorded while she was living there, followed by her second *A Chain Unbroken*, which was recorded in Northern England with friends she met while living in Ecuador. Her third, *Canto y Cantera*, was a tribute to Argentinean singer Mercedes Sosa and the nueva canción song movement she popularized.

Lively regards *Uncovering Stones* as an extension of those connections. In fact, it's filled with themes that permeate her life and experiences: “Community, living in solidarity with those around you. Feeling what other people's struggles and joys are and being connected with them.”

In true folk tradition, she also addresses social issues, such as Sudanese refugees in “The Lost Boys,” as well as personal situations she or people she cares about have experienced. She describes them as “Love and loss, heartbreak, transitions, dealing with your past, healing processes a lot of us are going through.”

Through rhythms that embrace “hints of urban, world, Latin, funk and pop,” Lively writes songs that address universal topics, but she says the overall themes are “community and compassion.”

And from the very beginning, she involved her own community; painting at the home of her friends Carrie Elkin and Danny Schmidt, she encouraged people to drop by and offer input and advice – on the artwork, the music and the recording process.

Then she and Jason made detailed lists of instruments they would use on each song and the textures they wanted, and made charts for each musician even before they knew who would play them. They wound up with a who's who: bassist/trumpeter Mark Wochner, drummer Rob Hooper, fiddler/melodica player Sick, guitarist Andre Moran, banjo player Trevor Smith and harmony singers Raina Rose, Danny Schmidt, Michelle Huff and Carrie Elkin. Jason also contributed harmonies, upright bass and charango, a 10-stringed Andean/Bolivian instrument that's a cross between a guitar, ukelele and mandolin.

Though they also rehearsed and tweaked in advance, Vanessa and Jason made sure to leave room for spontaneity. The result is a compelling mix of tempos and styles that features Lively's clean, clear voice and guitar playing. *Uncovering Stones* opens with the reggae-flavored "Digging Up Dirt," about readjusting to American culture and finding roots in Austin after returning from South America. The delicate "Through the Veil" addresses the loss of a parent. "Estoy Volando ('I Am Flying')," one of two Spanish compositions on the album, is, she says, "an expression of full freedom and living your dream, but not being able to expect anything from anyone but yourself, and trusting your intuition and finding confidence within yourself, not through others' approval."

Songs like "Learning to Breathe," "Follow Your Heart" and the closer, "Skeletons," also contain empowering messages; for Vanessa, that's really what life is about: finding empowerment through love, friendship, creative expression. It comes across in the very way she describes her passions, one of which is writing.

"I have so many favorite memories," she says. "That is why I must keep a journal. My life is too sweet and too good and full of amazing experiences, and I just can't seem to keep it all in my head so I go back and read my own stories! My favorite memory is doing yoga in the early morning while living in Vilcabamba, Ecuador. That was such a sweet, relaxing time full of life, energy and beauty all around."

It's an appropriate twist of fate that Vanessa wound up with the last name Lively. Her zest for life is contagious, and with *Uncovering Stones*, she's made the album she's dreamed of – an inspiring album full of energy and beauty. If it touches you, the rest of her dream will come true.

For more information, visit www.vanessalively.com

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