

Do One Thing Well

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 30, 2023)

This article is brought to us by John Job. His insights into the musical world helps him bring us this story of one of our own who has done an amazing job in a highly competitive world of pop music. Learn about Jenn Cristy from John's perspective.

I've been struggling with writer's block for the first time in my life. It's the oddest feeling. I have pages of notes for an article I'm trying to write, tying together my reactions to new bluegrass albums by Alex Leach, Wyatt Ellis, Emi Sunshine, and the Po' Ramblin' Boys. The article is about "first listens" ...about what happens in your head the first time you hear a new tune, a new song, a new album, especially when that first take stops you in your tracks.

OK, not what happens in *your* head. It's about what happens in *mine*. And lately, whenever I sit down to flesh out my notes, I lose my focus.

But then last Sunday I went to hear Jim Hynes and a trio of Knoxville's coolest jazz vatos playing live in the bright autumn sunshine in front of Bud's Farmhouse coffee shop, and there among the 100 or so ardent supporters of real music, seated in folding chairs in the parking lot of a midtown strip center, I saw Becky Ball.

Becky has always been one of my favorite writers, because she embodies all that's truly valuable about local journalism. Her reviews of the performing arts in Oak Ridge, from the Playhouse to Masquers, from the Symphony to the Community Band, are filled with the most generous erudition a performer could ever ask for.

Becky was with her husband, Syd Ball, who said he had just returned from France the night before. "What were you doing in France?" "Oh, they want to learn about molten salt reactors. They're trying to build a couple of them." You know, some things you hear only in Oak Ridge. Like live jazz in a parking lot.

I asked Becky if she was writing anything, and as she huddled there in a long coat even though it was a Spring-like 78°, she said "Nope... I can barely see anymore, I can't hear, I almost can't feel anything..." She was smiling that Cheshire cat grin of hers as she said this, but that didn't hide the weight of it. And as Jim Hynes played his achingly searching rendition of "Bye Bye Blackbird," Becky asked "Are you working on anything?"

I was dumbstruck. She had just stood up to the ravages of age and macular degeneration, and somehow writer's block was going to sound ridiculously lame by comparison. So, I said I was writing a sequel to "Love's Labour's Lost."

No, dear Becky, I'm writing about another remarkable Oak Ridger, Jenn Cristy, a 1997 graduate of Oak Ridge High School who has made a name for herself in the incredibly competitive world of pop music.

Fresh out of college at Indiana University, where she was an All-American swimmer, Jenn Cristy's magnetic musical gifts attracted another gifted musician in Bloomington. And instead of slogging for years through the tedious proving grounds of bars and station wagon tours, Jenn's rock world initiation was as a multi-instrumentalist and singer in one of Americana's defining bands, led by one of the more prolific songwriters of the time, John Cougar Mellencamp.

"I'm gonna break every rule." Tina Turner

Jenn's tenure with Mellencamp was like a musical doctoral program in which her innate talents were honed to such a degree, she was equally comfortable as a songwriter of original material and as an

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interpreter of songs by the performers she most admired. And when she set out on her own path, it was free of other footprints. It was sorta breathtaking, because she wasn't a diva, she wasn't a rock star, she wasn't a candle burning at both ends. She was Jenn.

"You only gotta do one thing well to make it in the world, babe." Janis Joplin

Jenn Cristy had become an actress. An actress whose scripts were songs. Some were her own, but what really lit her fuse was transforming the songs others had made famous. Jenn is the only singer I know who can channel Tina Turner and Janis Joplin simultaneously.

Being an artist with other people's songs is nothing new. "Private Dancer" might have been Tina's biggest hit, but it was written by Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits. Janis Joplin didn't write "Me and Bobby McGee." Kris Kristofferson wrote it. So, when Jenn combined the stage smarts she learned from years with John Mellencamp and the liberating power of reshaping classic rock, pop, roots and soul with her unmatched vocal energy, it made possible a concert experience that is simply amazing.

Jenn Cristy is coming home to Oak Ridge to perform at the Grove Theater, one night only, next Wednesday, November 8th, with Eric Brown, another remarkably gifted musical actor who has been Jenn's stage partner for eight years. Their two-person show, "Jenn & Eric," spans six decades of America's most popular musical culture.

What Jenn has done for Aretha, Janis, Tina, Joni and many other iconic voices, Eric has done for Springsteen, Petty, Buffett, and Elvis. The Beatles, Fleetwood Mac, Jimi Hendrix, The Eagles, Billy Joel... you can hear them all in one night, like you've never heard them before. There's even a medley of 40 songs in seven minutes.

You can't pretend to be a great actor. *You have to be one.* You also can't pretend to be a great musician. *You have to be one.* And to be both? Well, that's almost unheard of.

"Jenn & Eric: Simply Acoustic, Simply Amazing" is a 2-hour performance starting at 6:30 pm on Wednesday, November 8, 2023. Presale tickets are \$10, or \$15 at the door. Tickets are available at www.eventbrite.com or www.jenncristy.com.

Thanks John, for bringing us up to speed on Jenn Cristy, an amazing lady from Oak Ridge, who is performing at our own very special Historic Grove Theater. <http://www.jenncristy.com/new-events/2023/11/3/1pulse-jenn-amp-eric-4relm-awbtt>

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