

Singing and Studying the Blues: An Interview with Kat Danser

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Figure 1: Kat Danser

The path that led Kat Danser to the blues and ethnomusicology was a rather unpredictable one. A social worker with 20 years experience in the field, Kat decided in 2009 that her motto was, “If it doesn’t have music in the title, I don’t want to do it.” She had just

returned to Edmonton, Alberta, after a period of studying Delta blues playing with Honeyboy Edwards and Koko Taylor in Mississippi. With that motto, she became a full-time musician, dedicating herself to improving her technique, writing original

songs, and touring her powerful stage show on the Canadian festival circuit.

Ever curious about the music that she played, Kat wasn't satisfied with spending all of her time on her performing career. She also spent time in Mississippi researching fife and drum¹ for her master's thesis, which then led to her beginning a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at the University of Alberta in 2011. Her academic work has inspired a new perspective on the music she plays, opening her eyes to what her audience may experience at her shows. It has also encouraged her to contextualise the blues, to situate each song within its stylistic, narrative, and geographic traditions for listeners.

Now Kat is taking this approach further, working on a documentary that properly represents Canadian female blues musicians. Her studies in ethnographic filmmaking have prompted careful consideration of how she represents her contemporaries in film, ensuring that their voices are the ones of authority. Kat is careful not to assert her academic authority in the project, instead embracing the opportunity to lend agency to the subjects of the film by presenting their own point of view.

The subject of women playing blues is one that is not commonly addressed in histories of popular music, or even in scholarly discussions of female music making. Yet, it is an area that demands exploration, as contemporary female blues musicians are notable for their command of the guitar and their songwriting skills. Moreover, they have adapted to a form that is, especially in the case of the Delta blues, not always conducive to conventional feminine expression. In other words, it can be a pretty tough world for female musicians to enter, let alone dominate. Kat is one of many who recognize the power of the genre, and who must also combat the expectations placed on the female blues voice, that primary mode of communication that cannot escape its long history.

Kat has recorded three albums and regularly performs at prominent folk and roots venues in Canada. She has appeared at many western Canadian folk festivals, the 25th Anniversary of the Women's Blues Revue (see <http://music.cbc.ca/#/concerts/Womens-Blues-Revue-2011-2011-11-26>), and co-hosted an episode of *Natch'l Blues* with Holger Petersen on CKUA. She balances all of that with her full-time graduate studies, spending much of the summer touring and writing papers on the road. Recently, Kat has been at work exploring the sonic possibilities of the guitar, partnering with Canadian-born, Austin-based singer-songwriter Ray Bonneville to fix up her guitar

collection and compose new songs on them. Here are some excerpts from my interview with her from March 2012.

GT: Can you tell me about your musical background?

KD: My musical life started before I went to Mississippi but changed quite dramatically when I lived in Mississippi in 2008. I'd already been a professional musician for six years by then, but I wanted to go to Mississippi and live there to absorb more of the culture, to really immerse myself in where blues began and then to find out how that was going to change me; I was sort of at a crossroads, I guess you could say (laughs). I was at a crossroads and I came back from Mississippi knowing that I was going to let go of my professional social work life. I'd worked as a medical social worker for 24 years before this change. So it involved all kinds of risks, both on a scholarly level and on a musical production level, risk is par for the course. So I started playing music from more of a hobby perspective, and it became something I couldn't live without, so my motto in 2009 became, "If it doesn't have music in the title, I don't want to do it." I made the shift to full-time musician status in 2009 and then began working on my master's degree.

GT: Your Ph.D. is focusing on music in Mississippi again, or are you going in a different direction?

KD: I'll go in a different area of study, I'm actually going into the Theravadan culture of Sri Lanka and I'm really going to challenge myself in my Ph.D. in a way that I didn't in my master's. I want to try and learn another language and I need to brush up on music theory so that I can understand what is happening musically in Sri Lanka. I'm really fascinated with women's music making, particularly female drummers. Buddhism and chanting and drumming and dancing are all quite integrated, but you don't hear or see very many women doing it, so I want to go and find out what women are doing. So that will be my focus for the next five years.

GT: How do you integrate your educational life with your performing life?

KD: My biggest output is during the summer festival season. That's pretty good, and with technology, it lends itself very well to academic work, in terms of carrying your books and continuing on. So I often finish a lot of my assignments on the road. I guess establishing the routine, there isn't one. That's the thing that's been hardest to get used to, coming out of a 8:00-5:00 job scenario, Monday to Friday into academic life and music life, you have to build in your breaks every day, I find, or you just don't get them. It

took me a while to realize that there is no routine. If I can just go with the flow, I'm good. Musically, sometimes it gets tough contractually, because I accept contracts a year in advance of what my schedule may or may not be, so I just have to live with that aspect of it. I'd say one of the harder things for me is not really being able to be involved in the ensembles [at U of A] as much as I could be, because I'm doing my own thing. On the other hand, when I perform blues music, my knowledge and commitment to education comes through in the way that I am with audiences, not in a preachy way, but more like a sharing way, a way of talking about the rich history of the blues. I'm an acoustic blues musician more closely associated to traditional styles even though it's very much in a contemporary context, but my style is rooted in the traditions of blues. I get to talk about that and when I'm performing I really understand where this music comes from, who this performer was, what this performer meant to music overall, I guess in some ways it's like a living history. That's what education has really been helping me with is bringing a living history into my performance.

GT: Your audience must be really appreciative of this, especially at festivals and similar venues.

KD: Yeah, you can't beat folk audiences. They're just fantastic, I think in part because folk audiences tend to have a broader perspective of music and just not as fixed ideas. So that's really helpful, and it also is a terrific avenue, blues music in general, when you have that open energy between yourself as a performer and the audience, then there's also a greater capacity for healing my own experiences. Because I write solely from personal experience, I'm not making up a story about someone, I'm talking about how I live in the world. I once did this paper on how my performance style is self-reflexive because I'm evaluating throughout the performance what I'm going to do next, and how to open up the energy and create an avenue for sharing the joys and sorrows of life.

GT: Who are your biggest musical influences?

KD: My teachers in Mississippi were David Honeyboy Edwards, he just passed last year, but he was the oldest living acoustic bluesman and he was my mentor in Mississippi as was Koko Taylor, who passed I think in 2009. I made very specific notes and wrote a lot of music during that time to remember them by and so I go back to that over and over and talk about what they meant to me and what they shared with me. That's been really helpful. In terms of a mentor or influences right now, I'd have to say Ray Bonneville. Ray and I became friends last year and he's really helped me take a look at songwriting in a different

way and helped me to expand my sonic presentation. And create more atmosphere. Because I've been playing acoustic so long, creating atmosphere is something that's very difficult to do in an acoustic situation, because there's no mediated manipulation of sound. But I've been playing with electric and really exploring a lot of different soundscapes and that's been really helpful for me and it's expanded how I write.

GT: Is it true that you are building guitars with him?

KD: No, not building. What happened was he helped me purchase a vintage Gibson, a 1959 Gibson electric guitar, and he helped me create the electronics in it. And then I found someone here in Edmonton to do what we had conceived of. Basically, he helped with the electronics of that instrument to try and get the best possible mellow tones out of a '59.

GT: How do you find doing guitar work like that and also getting into the field of blues as a woman? Do you encounter much resistance or surprise, or are people quite receptive to your work?

KD: Two things, I think. First of all, usually when female musicians are competent on their instruments, nothing is said. That's been my experience. I think on a commercial level, it's kind of been interesting, but my playing has been almost dismissed, you know? It hasn't been seen as an artistic output, I guess. That's been surprising to me, because my style is a very unique style and it takes me multiple instruments, forever to learn something, and it's sort of surprising to me that it goes by the wayside. So sometimes when your playing is invisible during a performance, like there's nothing to critique, the flipside of that is there's nothing to notice. And that's unfortunate. Every now and then, a really astute reviewer will notice the way I approach the instrument, which is quite aggressively, actually. And they will make a comment about it. That's always nice for me to hear, but it's amazing to me that it's not really noticed.

GT: What do reviewers focus on, then? Your songwriting or your singing?

KD: My songwriting is even more invisible than my playing. It's my voice. Which in some way fulfills the stereotype about blues women as singers and it limits me in a certain way. They don't see the trifecta of it. They only really hear what they hear and I can only assume that they focus on my voice because it was something that they felt. Perhaps they're not feeling my words. Some people do feel my lyrics, if you take the time to listen, but sometimes people are just attracted to something that moves them, and of-

ten that's a more sonic, human quality rather than what's said or what's implied on the instrument.



Figure 2: Kat Danser

GT: Tell me about your documentary on women in blues.

KD: I'm just working on a paper right now about that very thing. I'm studying ethnographic filmmaking and trying to take a look at how to move that analysis forward. I find that, first of all, there's only been one documentary film on women in blues; it was done in 1989. Women blues players have been in blues films, but it boils down to the same old, same old, which is focusing on women only as singers, marginalizing women on film, which suggests women's voices aren't important, so basically men talking about women in blues. They don't really recognize that blues music is a gift for sure, a gift from the African-American people in the South, and I honour that. It was given as a gift to all of us, in the world, who care about that form of music. Since then, blues has really progressed, but we haven't found any way to really capture how that music has progressed. Toronto is fantastic; it has the only organization in North America that celebrates women's music, solely women's music, when they do the Women's Blues Revue. I

was in Toronto for the 25th anniversary of that, and it was a phenomenal experience because the only musicians onstage were women. It was my first time ever having had that experience. So I really, really want to draw attention to the Canadian blues music scene, the varied perspectives of women playing blues, not from a place where I'm reinforcing the techniques that have already been done, voiceover narration, or those kinds of things, or just focusing on the performance. I want to select a certain number of blues women and just find out who they are and who we're listening to, and how that influences our music and what our experiences are. And to enter into conversation with each other about it. Hopefully the viewer can have an experience to get a little bit more dimension to who blues women are in Canada. I'm working right now with Buffalo Gal pictures out of Winnipeg towards that end, and we've been dreaming about this for a long time but we finally have some solid ground. Hopefully it will be on Bravo Network at some point in the near future, it's hard to say with funding. That's what I want to do, to talk about the multidimensionality of women in blues in Canada.

Visit Kat Danser's website at: <http://katdanser.com/>.

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Notes

¹Fife and drum is military music that likely originated in Switzerland but is now specifically associated with America. Although it was initially practiced in New England, its use spread across North America during the time of the Civil War. The music is used for certain signals and camp duties. For a full discussion of fife and drum in the New England area, see James Clark, *Connecticut's Fife & Drum Tradition* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 2011.



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