

Checkin' in with Chieko

What a breath of fresh air is this talented Portland musician

BY KATY DAVIDSON

In a time of deep post-postmodern self-consciousness, it seems an anomaly to encounter someone with wide eyes and boundless soul.

This in mind, it's a real treat to meet Leila Chieko, a *truly* earnest queer Portlander. A songwriter who puts beautifully sincere lyrics to hard-rocking music, the 26-year-old drummer and guitarist was born in Hawaii and has lived in Oregon for eight years.

She plays drums and sings with Portland band Vivian's Keeper as well as with her very own Leila Chieko Trio, accompanied by Asher Fulero on keyboards and VK's Joanna Agee on harmony vocals. Both bands are performing at Portland Pride 2003.

Katy Davidson: How did you get involved in music?

Leila Chieko: I was born into it. My dad is a musician, and one of my earliest memories is being caught by a smiling dad as I sat behind his massive drum kit, my tiny toes dangling 2 feet above the floor with gigantic drumsticks in my 3-year-old hands, enchanted by the fascinating racket I was making.

The instruments that seemed to come naturally to him—and to me, eventually—were the drums and guitar and also, being born and raised in Hawaii, the ukulele. The ukulele became my main focus for most of my childhood. You could often find me alone in my room, content for hours exploring rhythms and chord structures.

I eventually graduated to the guitar around the age of 12. However, I wasn't satisfied with learning only one instrument at a time, so this age found me sonically traversing the full drum kit as well—now that my feet could reach the kick pedals. I never took lessons nor had any formal training. I learned by ear, emulated other musicians and immersed myself in listening with rapt attention to my parents' album collection.

KD: What's attractive about music to you? Describe the feeling you get when you really get into the groove.

LC: Music is the movement of blood through my veins. Music pours out of me so fluidly that it feels more natural than speaking. I absolutely love performing. Getting into that "zone" is like meditating; it's calming and centering yet so exhilarating. I believe that performing live, making myself visible and vulnerable, invites people to have an intimate connection with my music. This is essential. I need to move people with music and have my emotional integrity reciprocated.

KD: Describe your songwriting process.

LC: Songwriting is almost always a cathartic experience. It is the arena in which I confront my emotions, bare my soul and come to find resolution. I usually begin with a rhythm guitar part or riff. I start humming a melody over it, and slowly they become words.... They appear abstractly, or I compile old phrases scribbled down on Post-It Notes that float around in various notebooks.

After a little bit I'll ask myself, "OK, what is this song about?" From there I'll solidify the stanzas, adding the necessary phrases that make



Multitalented Leila Chieko performs with both her bands at Portland Pride 2003

the song cohesive...they are always written and shaped after the music has been created.

KD: Name some of your favorite musicians.

LC: Stevie Wonder is a huge inspiration to me—multi-instrumentalist as well. He's an incredible drummer, you know. He is filled to the brim with *soul*. His voice is like thick, warm, golden rays of painful healing sunlight. He makes me weep.

Soundgarden is very influential. I identify so much with their music...tricky, clever riffs, amazing drum parts. Matt Cameron's my favorite drummer, and my fave singer is Chris Cornell. Lots of pain in his voice, too, and what a rockin' range! He's rough but sexy and smooth.

KD: How do you like the Portland music scene?

LC: I like that there are tons of music venues and lots and lots of bands. Musicians seem to be really supportive of each other. I am really only familiar with the folk/pop scene, and I think it's great. I think the songwriter-in-the-round thing should come back; I think folks got burned out on it, but it could be resurrected. I wish that all venues would adopt the no-smoking law.

KD: How about being queer and living in Portland?

LC: It is so easy to be queer in Portland. We're everywhere! [Laughs] Portland is a very comfortable place to be out.

KD: How do you identify? Lesbian? Queer? Pansexual? Something else?

LC: I identify as queer and in love. [Smiley face]

You'll fall in love with LEILA CHIEKO when she performs on the Triangle Stage as part of Vivian's Keeper at 1:50 p.m. June 14 and solo at 4:25 p.m. June 15.

KATY DAVIDSON is a San Francisco free-lance writer.

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