

Folk Divas

Laura Kemp, Janis Ian release new works.

Eugene's beloved folkie **Laura Kemp** has recently released a new CD, *May*, which she will reveal at a CD release party at Sam Bond's on Aug. 6. The singer/songwriter and guitarist found time to speak with me after a busy day of teaching guitar camps to youth through the OFAM summer music camps program. Since Kemp produces her music independently, without financial backing from any label, she doesn't shy away from the stark reality that paying studio executives and session musicians for recording time can be cost-prohibitive, which initiated a move toward recording tracks in her home studio.

"I worked on *May* for a year and a half and recorded most of the tracks at home, which was kind of a new thing," says Kemp. She got production help from another Eugene musician, her partner Tony Kaltenberg, who entered the picture about halfway through the project. "Tony had recently finished up recording a project with his band, Jellymoon, and he just kind of got sucked into it!" she says with a laugh. "It was great to have someone to help with recording the tracks but also just to bounce ideas off of and listen to parts. It was great to have another person who was into the project instead of being completely alone with it."

Saving money on studio time allowed Kemp to splurge on guest musicians. Some fabulous guests that Kemp brought in from parts beyond are Steve Smith, a mandolinist, and Sally VanMeter, "a dobro player from Colorado who is just one of the best in the country."

Local bassist and a friend from Babes With Axes, T.R. Kelley, helped out on *May*, as did drummer Brian West and fiddler/violinist Roy Brewer.

May is Kemp's fifth solo record and, counting the two she recorded with Babes With Axes, that's seven records (plus one debut cassette) in a 12-year recording career.

Kemp's favorite song on *May* is the first track, "Hannah Branch," an autobiographical song about a small Quaker community called Celso where Kemp lived in North Carolina before traveling west to settle in Eugene. "It's

not a relationship or a love song; it's about a love for a place, so it's one of those songs I can play over and over again and conjure up that emotion as opposed to a relationship song. Sometimes you get over it and you don't feel like playing that song anymore!" she explains.

Another favorite is "Snow Returns," a song based on a poem sent to her by Peter Straton. "I wrote the music to it and kind of twisted the lyrics around a little. I wrote the chorus part of it myself and then turned everything to rhyme because it didn't rhyme originally."

The song speaks emotively of loss and the turning wheel of the year: "When the snow returns without you I won't be waiting on the front porch in the slowly fading twilight, I won't be watching the wide sweeping of the headlights on the hill."

There's an ongoing conversation that Kemp may be one of the best unsigned folk singers around, thanks to her long career of self-produced CDs with no label backing her up. She says the idea of being signed to a label does cross her mind, but only rarely. "It did cross my mind with *May*, like should I shop it around to labels? And I haven't shopped it around. I kind of go back and forth on it. I love having complete ownership of what I do."

Kemp occasionally re-assesses what motivates her to continue making records, even though each time it's a big financial commitment. She says, "It's what I do. It's my art. There were times in my life when I thought, 'I'll do this or I'll do that,' and music will just be a side thing, and I'm not capable of doing that. It's just too much a part of who I am. I've come to that acceptance that I'm a musician and no matter what, I'm going to continue to create and put out albums and perform."

The McDonald Theater is branching out by initiating an outdoor concert series to take place at Broadway Plaza, located at Broadway and Willamette and sometimes called Kesey Plaza for the recently installed bronze statue of Ken Kesey. With a huge stage, food booths, a beer garden, and lighting, sound and a video monitor provided by the McDonald Theater, the concert series promises to be great fun. The

concert will kick off with Pink Floyd cover band **The Floydian Slips** on Aug. 7 and will continue with **The Neville Brothers** on Aug. 14. Adam Bernstein, owner and operator of LUNA jazz club and Adam's Place bar and restaurant, located just steps away from the Plaza, fully supports the concert initiative and will not book any shows at LUNA on concert nights. He says, "By leaving LUNA dark during the [concerts], I remove any live music competition, raising the expectation that businesses can work together to remind everyone that downtown Eugene is still a destination point."

Janis Ian, an enduring folk artist, will appear at WOW Hall on Aug. 11 to support her latest release, *Billie's Bones*. For more

than three decades Ian has been revered as a songwriter with poetic wordplay and a tender voice. A musician from an early age, Ian grew up on a farm in New Jersey playing piano at age 2, guitar at 10 and writing her first song at 12. Ian was 15 in 1966 when her controversial tale of interracial love, "Society's Child" exploded onto the scene. Ian continued making music in the '70s and '80s, earning nine Grammy nominations.

Billie's Bones is Ian's 18th studio album, "a resplendent mix of unadulterated folk, jazz and blues performed in Ian's unpretentious styling." The title is an allusion to singer Billie Holiday, and the CD also includes a duet with Dollie Parton, one of Ian's musical heroes, on "My Tennessee Hills." **EW**



Laura Kemp celebrates the release of her fifth solo CD *May* Friday at Sam Bond's.

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