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JULIE BERGMAN

Two-hand band: Larkin on stage with her Olson SJ (see Gearbox, page 90).

cellist Gideon Freudmann, and bassist Richard Gates and spiced up with backing vocals by Jennifer Kimball (formerly of the Story), Bruce Cockburn, and Jane Siberry. Engineering and mixing duties were performed by Alan Williams and Ben Wisch, respectively.

There is an eclectic swing to the range of material, from soft acoustic poems to stacked electric soundscapes, with traces of funk and hip-hop, and the bite of vintage Larkin humor. As ever, Larkin's songwriting subtly

takes center stage, and her use of varied tunings shakes up the harmonic status quo. Two of *Perishable Fruit's* 11 tracks are in standard tuning ("Brazil" and "Red Accordion"), and the rest are all over the spectrum: "You and Me" is in dropped-D (D A D G B E); "Wolf at the Door" (transcribed on page 58) and "Pablo Neruda" are in open C with a D on the first string (C G C G C D); "Rear View Mirror" and "The Road" are in F G D G C D, a tuning Larkin borrowed from Richard Thompson; and "Angel's Wings" is in G G D G C D (the lowest string is tuned *down* to G), a modal tuning Larkin was inspired to invent after reading an article in *Acoustic Guitar* about Emmylou Harris' lowered tunings (inspired, in turn, by Daniel Lanois). "Heart" is in Larkin's favorite tuning, D A D G A D; "Coming Up for Air" is in a D A D G A D variation, E A D G A D; and "The Book I'm Not Reading" is in C G C F G C—D A D G A D tuned down a whole step.

Wittman added severely detuned lap-steel sounds to the recipe, which were run through Larkin's Fender Princeton amplifier. On "Angel's Wings," he tuned to a low C G C G C D, dragging a slide to form the basis for an industrial percussion loop. On "Wolf at the Door," he created the quirky funk foundation by playing with a pencil and his hands, and on "The Book I'm Not Reading" he added percussion by drumming on the back of his mandolin. On "Heart," a timpani mallet was used to softly strike the head of a bass tuned to D G A D, and the sound was then run through a delay to form the sound of a heartbeat.

All this is a long way from the camp songs Larkin began learning when she was ten years old and living in Wisconsin (after leaving the piano to her sisters and becoming a closet guitarist). Larkin began writing songs when she was 12, and guitar was a full-blown passion by the time she entered high school. "I was exposed early on to some really classic songwriting, like Bob Dylan's and Paul Simon's, and it was a time when just about everybody I knew played the guitar," Larkin recalls. "We were all playing by ear, but there were a lot of songs being passed around. There was a folk revival going on, and some creative popular music, and it was the beginning of an expression of more poetic emotions in songwriting. The first time I heard Joni Mitchell, I said, 'This is it.' Music took on a whole new meaning for me."

Larkin listened mostly to R&B bands in Milwaukee and interacted with other songwriters, then spent two years at St. Mary's College, followed by two years at the University of Oregon, where she focused on her playing and her future. She was ostensibly on the road to becoming a high school English teacher when she started to play her songs for other people and make demo tapes. She immersed herself in everything from Delta blues to old-time fiddle tunes to jug band music.

Formal guitar study was not on Larkin's agenda until her last year in college. "It opened up a whole new door for me," she says. By the end of her college years, Larkin was on the musician's road. "I had a love of music," she says, "a pure desire." The summer after college, she moved east and began studying jazz at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. There she was one of only two acoustic guitar players and only a handful of women students. When she began at Berklee, Larkin already had a sense of the fretboard and chord voicings. She excelled in music theory and arrangement but struggled with her jazz ensemble classes. "I was a bit overwhelmed," she

also writing and performing on her own, she began to question her already considerable musical abilities and motivation, and nearly gave it all up. Larkin says, "Basically, I had a nervous breakdown. I call it my 'white period,' because there was a point where all I would wear is white clothing. I didn't believe that I was worthy of being a musician. It was a self-acceptance

congas, flute, and bass. Larkin remembers it as "a combination of Brazilian standards, my own songs, and other instrumentals influenced by sounds from Latin America."

She then landed a gig teaching fingerstyle guitar at the local Guitar Workshop. "That was a total gift," she recalls, "because I had to study Hot Tuna, James Taylor, Ry Cooder, and John



Larkin and Bruce Cockburn harmonize in the studio.

"I wanted to spark creativity in myself and the other musicians by doing an album based entirely on stringed instruments."

says, "but inspired. I was a songwriter trying to learn jazz. It pushed me."

Larkin left Berklee to study privately and teach guitar, and she began jamming in Cambridge with Celtic musicians, including a flutist, four fiddlers, four guitarists, and a concertina player. A core group developed, which busked on Brattle Street in Harvard Square and became known as the Brattle Street Band. Larkin hit a wall of self-doubt around that time; although she was

issue, where I wasn't going to allow myself to do music, because that's exactly what I wanted to do. I've since decided that if you want to do something, do it. We can be our own worst judge. Eventually I decided not to block myself from what I wanted to do. I also decided to vary my wardrobe."

Larkin next hit the clubs with a Brazilian jazz band that performed atmospheric and musically intricate material. The instruments included

Renbourn in order to teach them. I was learning songs I had known pieces of but couldn't sit down and play. Renbourn was particularly intriguing, as he had a bit of blues and a lot of bass movement. I was looking for a style."

The '80s found Larkin continuing to stretch. She abandoned her Brazilian band and resurfaced with an original R&B group, Telecaster in hand. "We were a dance band," she says, "and I was writing pop tunes. I traded my semihollow-bodied Guild for a Fender, and I began wearing black."

By this time, Larkin's performances were reaching a high level of sophistication. For Larkin, the stage was theater, and her well-known penchant for humor was creeping into the act. "Humor loosened me up," she says. "It connected me to the audience and

Continued on page 60

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JANA LEON

offered a break from the more serious side of my material. Basically, I couldn't stop. I wore blond wigs and red boas, did splits, and channeled Ethel Merman. I realized it's a *stage*. Have fun."

As Larkin's musical journey progressed, her songwriting took center stage and began to outgrow the confines of pop/rock. She decided to dedicate her energies to her Martin D-18 and her solo acoustic career. She recalls, "It was 1985, and I wrote a batch of new songs that were based on acoustic guitar. I was also able to transfer some of the band material to solo gui-

she includes her ring finger. "I generally rest my ring finger and my little finger on the pickguard and go from there," she says. "More recently, I have been exploring using the full hand and the thumb to get a really percussive sound out of the instrument, as I did in 'Wolf at the Door.' On 'Angel's Wings,' I use a right-hand tapping technique to slap the guitar, while my left hand occasionally pulls off several notes at a time for a percussive effect." Larkin also used this technique on her recent cover of Laura Nyro's "Poverty Train" (from *Time and Love*, Astor Place, 1997).

"There's so much music I want to learn.

Studying any style always has an enlightening effect on my playing and creativity."

tar, and those became very rhythmic and driving pieces. This was actually the beginning of my interest in the guitar as a percussive instrument."

Larkin's guitar playing evolved into a combination of techniques that suit her intimate songwriting and her use of vocal and instrumental dynamics to set the mood in her performances. "I use a flatpick in the traditional way," she says, "but I have also developed a style of right-handed muting that combines the flatpick and the wrist to vary the rhythm of the song. The muting can also come from the left hand, stopping the strings from ringing."

In her fingerstyle work, Larkin uses mostly her thumb, index finger, and middle finger, though on some songs

After 12 years of recording solo, which resulted in seven CDs, Larkin is still exploring her instrument and her craft. "I go through more technical periods where I'm really working on technique, stretching what I can do with guitar," she says. "On the last three records, I've also been concentrating on songwriting. The goal is to keep working on new sounds and incorporate that into my writing."

Larkin also gets inspiration from the work of other artists. "There's so much music I want to learn. Studying any style always has an enlightening effect on my playing and creativity. I love Richard Thompson's musical mind. And I've recently fallen in love with a record by Mary Margaret O'Hara. She

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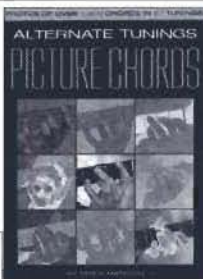
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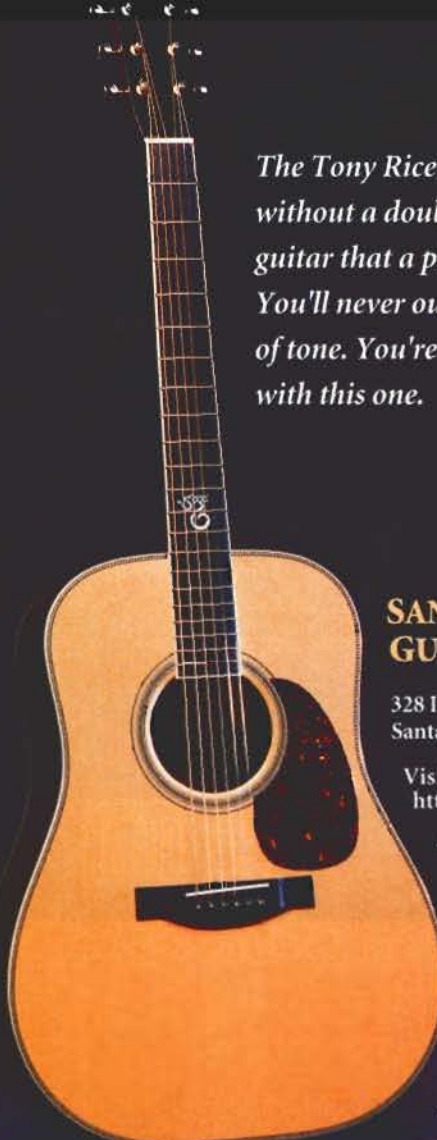
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does very interesting songs that begin as pop, then swirl off center into something that's more akin to new music. Music is about taking chances, the way I see it right now."

The music industry has always been a mystery to Larkin, and she's chosen to address it on her own terms. She says, "There's this huge popular music culture that I've worked outside of, and inside of, off and on throughout my career. Because of the kind of music I write, I've felt like I'm one of the people moving up from the underground and the outside circle. The unfortunate, but true story with pop music is that it's a fashion industry. I like popular music and I am influenced by it. I play with contemporary sounds on this album, but I'm hoping that I'm grounded in something that's larger than comparison shopping."

The current surge of successful women singer-songwriters is another source of Larkin's optimism. She says, "Look at where women writers have gone in the last five years. You've now got everyone from Sarah McLachlan to Shawn Colvin to Ani DiFranco at the top of the charts. These are very exciting times."

Larkin identifies with musical contemporaries whose art transcends the trendy, and she isn't too concerned about getting older, especially when there are strong role models to put the youth culture theory to bed. "The kind of music I've always loved and that touches my soul is timeless," she explains. "The older you get, the better you are as a musician in jazz and blues and world music. When I look at the long haul, I know I will always be playing, writing, and recording—putting my

DISCOGRAPHY

PATTY LARKIN

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In the Square, Philo/Rounder 1136 (1990). Rounder, 1 Camp St., Cambridge, MA 02140; (617) 354-0700.

I'm Fine, Philo/Rounder 1115 (1987).

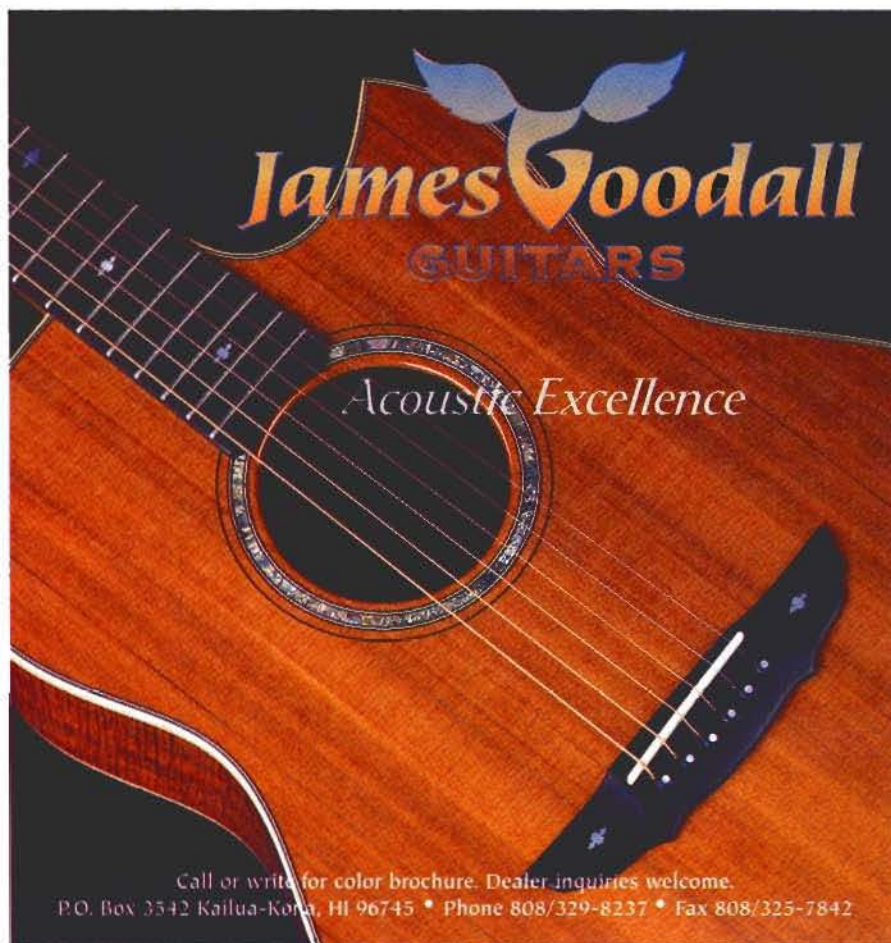
Step into the Light, Philo/Rounder 1103 (1985).

ideas out for discussion and exchange. I'm the same age as Sting, and he's still making records—good records—and it's a very strong statement that Bonnie Raitt is still up there kicking butt."

Larkin's songs have always reflected her spirit, interests, and humor, but they have recently taken on a more analytical cloak. In the past, a song would emerge in an hour or three, and she'd record it on a tiny tape recorder and write the lyrics down. That would be the song she wrote that day, set in stone. The process has changed some, with education and maturity. Larkin says, "Songwriting was very organic to me when I was a kid, and through the years it was a reflection of moods, and it still is. But now I think of it more as doing research. When I am home, I work on my writing every day. It's now a combination of the craft meeting the muse. If I don't push myself for new ideas and new techniques, I'm not inspired to write."

"Songwriting can also be a process of uncovering subconscious feelings that just come out in the writing," she goes on to say. "This always amazes me when it happens. For years I thought I should create upheaval in my life to become a good songwriter, but that made me an unhappy person. The age-old question is, Do you have to suffer to be an artist? There is something to be said for angst and insecurity, but more than that, you have to be observant to be an artist. That idea appeals to me more. I went through a self-destructive cycle, but eventually I wouldn't have been able to write at all, because I would have self-imploded. I now have love and friendship in my life, and I have learned that there is enough natural melancholy in my Celtic bones and enough complexity in the world that I don't have to do the research in pain."

Larkin hit the road in the fall on a solo tour with two acoustic guitars, an electric, and an octave mandolin. On several dates, she will share the bill with labelmate Michael Hedges, who was inspirational in the percussive guitar movement. Larkin says, "I thought I was innovative when I worked out thumb tapping, but then I heard Michael and thought, 'He's all over that.'" Larkin is reworking her show to feature her guitar playing even more, mixing old and new songs into the set and taping for a future live CD. She is well into the pursuit of the infinite possibilities of six strings and sums it up like this: "I'm guitar crazy again." ■



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