

DeCicco finds pitch and poise with the Jons

By Steve Wildsmith

A year ago, Christa DeCicco was finding her voice at open-mic nights at downtown Knoxville's Preservation Pub, nervous and timid before a crowd of disaffected drinkers who offer polite applause and quickly forget about the budding singers who clamor for their attention.

DeCicco had something, however, that demanded a second listen. Quickly, the girl with a voice like warm honey began to get noticed, and within a few months, she went from volunteering her services at the Pub's open-mic night to getting paid to play there.

"Playing at an open mic is difficult, because no one really listens to you, and it's extremely loud in there," DeCicco told The Daily Times this week. "It's kind of brutal, and it's hard on your self-confidence to go in there and do something personal and feel like no one even notices."

As it turns out, DeCicco -- a graduate of both Farragut High School and the University of Tennessee who's lived in Knoxville since she was 5 -- was too hard on herself. Not only did she earn recognition as a solo artist performing around the area, she gained the respect of her peers, and three months ago, she was joined by Jon Whitlock and the drums and Jon Warren on the bass. Christabel and the Jons were born, and DeCicco suddenly had a fuller, richer sound.

"I always wanted to put together a band to back me, because when I write songs, I hear a full band sound in my head," she said. "I really wanted a drummer first, and I got introduced to Jon Whitlock through a friend of a friend and just asked if he would play with me. We clicked from the very moment we started playing together. He understood the swinging kind of folky, bluesy sound that I was going for."

That was back in May 2005, and the two played together as a duo for six months (while Whitlock split his time between his numerous other projects, including Phil Pollard's Band of Humans, Primordial Soup and the Mitch Rutman Group). After adding Warren to the mix on the bass, the trio began working on its stage presence as well as its music.

"The last few months, I've been getting a lot of CDs out of the library -- Ella Fitzgerald, Django Reinhardt and a lot of gypsy-swing, folk-oriented artists -- and that's opened up a whole new world of music to me," she said. "The older sounds are inspiring to me, and that also relates to the image of the band we're trying to cultivate -- a speakeasy, torch-singer sort of look. I wear vintage dresses, and the guys wear three-piece suits, and we try to present these classy kind of images."

Teaming up with the two Jons has given her music a classier sound as well, she added.

"I used to write more simple folk songs, but with the band, almost everything we do now swings," she said. "I never anticipated being described as swing, but we've sort of fallen into that, and I love it. My sound is a lot jazzier with the band. With me solo, it sounded a lot like Gillian Welch, which is great, but I'm really happy with the changes. People tell me I sound like Norah Jones and Billie Holiday, and it's really nice to be compared to jazz singers like that, because I want to go more into that direction."

Since Warren joined Whitlock and DeCicco, the band has quickly become a favorite in the Knoxville scene, performing regularly at Preservation Pub and getting airplay on WDVX-FM. DeCicco said she hopes to expand the group's touring base across the Southeast, and Saturday, Christabel and the Jons will perform at Brackins Blues Bar in downtown Maryville.

“The people at Brackins are going to get music that is mesmerizing and danceable and creates a warm, inviting mood that's going to make them want to sit and drink beer,” DeCicco said with a chuckle. “We do covers of all sorts of stuff, but I've been writing a lot, because one of my goals is to have almost entirely original songs. That's not possible yet, which is why we include folk covers, jazz covers, blues covers and songs that fans just generally enjoy hearing.”

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