

Knoxville's Weekly Voice **METRO PULSE**

Hindsight 20/20 **A year in the life of Christa DeCicco**

by Leslie Wylie

Hunkered down in a corner of Golden Roast, pen in one hand and steaming cup of tea in the other, Christa DeCicco looks the part of your neighborhood singer-songwriter. Her transparent, aloe-hued eyes possess that classic, dreamy stare; the dreadlocks framing her olive complexion are tangled with passive neglect. Clearly, hairbrushes fall low on the lengthy list of things that occupy her mind.

At this particular moment, for example, she's attempting to sketch out a timeline of the past year of her 25-year-old life—a retrospective to explain how, over the course of 12 months, she's gone from a professed “living-room musician” to a semi-regular fixture on the local music stage. The scribbled explanation takes up two full pages of her pocket-sized notebook. It starts with a resolution.

“Last New Year’s Eve, I decided I was going to go out and play in public if it killed me,” she explains, and a shy downward glance verifies the statement. Preservation Pub’s weekly Open Mic afforded her an opportunity to do so although, as she recalls, the experience was hardly confidence building. “The audience was tough, and I really felt lonely in a way because it was just me and my guitar. I felt like it was very, ‘Oh, she’s doing the singer-songwriter thing,’ but I wanted to be different than that.”

Enter the asymmetric musicianship of drummer Jon Whitlock. As if his roster of bands wasn’t thick enough (he plays out regularly with Primordial Soup, Band of Humans, and the Mitch Rutman Group), he volunteered to take DeCicco under his wing. But the chemistry still wasn’t quite complete—that is, until Whitlock talked his neighbor Jon Steele, an upright bass player, into coming onboard. With the addition of Steele, and the aid of a linguistic coincidence, Christabel & the Jons was born.

“We like the trio. It makes things a lot easier, having as few people as possible,” DiCicco says, but adds that having a “dream multi-instrumentalist” might be nice as well. “There are so many songs when we



NEW KNOXVILLE GIRL: Chipped paint and pensive thoughts.

think, if only we could get a clarinet on this, you know, or a mandolin. So if anyone out there can play trumpet, accordion, clarinet and mandolin, give us a call.”

Thankfully, instrumental minimalism suits DiCicco’s voice, a bluesy purr better suited to a 1920s phonograph than modern microphones. In accordance, the lyrics she drapes her vocals over are suitably nostalgic—whether a memory of watching fireworks over the Tennessee River or a cover of Jolie Holland’s “Old-Fashioned Morphine” or Paul Simon’s “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover.” Steele and Whitlock amble along in time on their respective instruments, typically outfitted in three-piece suits that complement DeCicco’s own vintage gloves and gowns.

An antique suitcase offstage opens to reveal another of DeCicco’s quirky, old-fashioned infatuations. “I have this funny fascination with postcards,” she explains. “I’ve collected them for years, and I have a huge box full of them now. I love to send them to people, and I love it when people send them to me.” Recently, DeCicco took up the medium herself, hand-stenciling postcards to sell at shows.

“I like to get crafty with the band,” she says, smiling at the allusion to her non-musical hobbies: quilting, craft nights with the girls, and, especially, gardening. DeCicco is a gardener by passion and profession, with a college degree in ornamental horticulture and landscape-design: “It’s something that is very artistic, very creative, and it’s also very holistic—you get exercise and fresh air while you’re doing it.”

This summer, she spent two months participating in a work-study program on organic farms in California. Hours spent poking around in the dirt gave her time to think about things, like new songs—“The songs I really like are ones that happen just spontaneously”—and future musical endeavors. But looking forward, of course, is sometimes best done in the context of hindsight.

“This has been the best year, I think, of my life,” DeCicco asserts. “It’s been a year for me to really break out of my mold. I can be a very organized, patient kind of person, and to do something like be a musician is the total opposite of that. It’s really caused me to kind of grow in a different way.”

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