

INTERVIEW WITH **JANET KLEIN:**
'A HUNDRED PER CENT CHARMING.'

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Getting into **Janet Klein's** universe turns out to be so easy. It does not matter whether if you are familiarized with what she does, with all those songs, all those sounds that come to us right from the mists of time, of if you are not. Janet's unconditional kindness and sweetness, and above all, her limitless passion for her own work, which she reflects in every answer, is enough to whet anyone's curiosity. However, there's one thing that she likes to make clear: she's nothing like an impersonator or an artificial revival of 20's and 30's music. She's a true researcher of melodies and works of art -even a lifestyle- that if it wasn't for people just like her, would have vanished from the face of the earth a long long time ago.

Though she's been on tours around Japan and Australia, in Spain we're still waiting for someone to bring her to our stages. Until that day we'll have enjoy from a distance of the music and the words of this lady and her fascinating 'imaginarium'.

“I’m in a mission for charm”, that quote belongs to you. I can’t imagine worse times than these we’re living in to undertake such mission, though. Can you?

Ha! Thanks for resurrecting that quote. In certain ways I feel like the canary in the coal mine... it does look pretty rough out there, but you know if you send the little bird into the dark shaft and the environment isn't completely poisonous, the bird will keep singing. A dead canary in a coal mine signaled miners to evacuate immediately. If charm dies completely in our society, we are cooked. I came to this old music out of a sense of deprivation, from a feeling that some things seem to be completely missing in contemporary culture, certain basic human emotions are being depleted, short-changed, squashed... like there is no air for small expressions of the sweetness of life. [...] When you think about the music of the Depression Era, it was custom-made to cheer people up in dark times. Somehow the composers and lyricists managed to fill their tunes in an enticingly clever way with lilting lyrics full of reminders about the things in life that mean the most and don't cost a thing.

Let’s make something clear: there’s not a fictitious character called Janet Klein. The real Janet Klein behaves and looks just like she does in the shows, in the videos, in the pictures...

What you see is all me, all the time. Whatever it is, it's sincere. I am not an actress, or musical theatre person or an impersonator. I come from a fine art background so learned to make things to suit myself and I had a lot of searching to do to figure out what would relieve my discontent. When I finally

started putting my aesthetic fascinations with my musical interests, I felt like all my molecules had found the right configuration.

Are you really as sweet and charming and polite as you seem to be on stage and in your songs or is it just a character you play? Does Janet Klein ever burst in anger? Does she ever swear? In short –and I quote one of your songs-: are you "a whole lot wilder than you look"?

I am a pretty polite powder puff kind of a person I guess. Maybe this is why I feel so comfortable in Japan. But of course things effect me and anger me and make me swear like a sailor! Well maybe like Popeye, or more like Olive Oyl. I am a hard-working polish peasant in a ladylike package. One minute I am sewing and mending and the next thing you know I could be doing a mean Blackbottom dance.

The lyrics on the songs you play are usually kind of naive, or at least they seem to be. Now, are there much subliminal messages in them? I mean, do they have deeper or tougher meanings than it looks?

No, I don't think the lyrics are so naïve. They are most often very nuanced and complex. For instance, songs that refer to the excitement of getting married had implicit sexual meanings (petting, spooning, or knowing what to do on a rainy day). Also there are plenty of songs about tough "clip joints", gigolos and taxi dancers delivering bananas in fruit baskets, songs about cocaine, tuberculosis, homosexuality... The songs are so melodic that if you are not listening closely you could miss a lot of colorful lines. [...] One of characteristics particular to 20s music is that they almost always have an introductory "verse" which sets up a story. As time went on, into the 30s these verses got cut off. Sometimes the verses are inconvenient in dance situations because they often delivered "rubato" out of tempo, and then into the 40s, everyone went straight to the "hook" of the chorus. I love to sing these verses. One of my favorite examples is the song "Side By Side" which is a song that many people recognize and often it is sung in a light uptempo jolly manner. "We ain't got a barrel of money, maybe we're ragged and funny. But we'll travel along, singing a song side by side." But not many people know the verse which is very beautiful and which has a lot of pathos: "See that sun in the morning, peeking over the hill, I guess you know it always has and I guess it always will. That's how I feel about someone, somebody feels about me. That's how we love each other and that's the way it will always be. If he goes and takes him a notion to go and drown in the ocean, well it's sink or it's swim, it's me and it's him, side by side." Also, another common factor was that many songs were about tragic things happening to nice girls. When a sweet girl stands on stage clutching her purse singing: "Wherever I go whatever I do, I want you to know I blame it on you, I wouldn't be where I am doing what I am feeling what I am, if you hadn't gone away." Or songs about living in sin, that still is enough to elicit the imagination as to guess at the terrible possibilities.

Have you thought about re-writing some of those lyrics to adapt them in some way to nowadays language and expressions?

I have had to adapt lyrics here and there. It is a bit of an obstacle course because many old songs have sexist or racist language that needs fixing. It is actually very positive that this type of thing jumps out as being inappropriate. It

means that society has learned some good lessons along the way.

Do you feel comfortable with labels such as ‘retro’ or ‘revival’?

I am not crazy about labels and “scenes” that people like to refer to. But yes, I guess I am in a reverse orbit or retro gear so to speak. It is interesting that within the world of the internet you can search for things and not be stuck to a category on a record bin. Rock, folk, classical, pop... think of the intricate and varied types of music that has ever been made and now on the computer you can search in a wonderfully detailed way. How bout tinpan alley, early hot jazz, Hawaiian 1920s music, French musettes, English Music Hall, theatre music from the early 1900’s, vaudeville, ragtime, sea shanties, traditional Italian, mandolin orchestra music, traditional ethnic music the world over... You can start to search “retro” and then discover micro-niches beyond that. I just tried typing in “retro” on a search engine and 1970s style tennis shoes came up first! Ha! So you see that shoe just won’t fit!

Do you consider yourself a music archaeologist?

This of course sounds very fancy, but if archaeology is to study the history of people and cultures via artefacts and remains of the past and to examine material evidence from a specific time and place... well, that about explains what I do, with the addition of singing and getting to play music with wonderful musicians. If this were solely a scholarly pursuit, surely I would seem to be having way too much fun.

How much time do you spend researching, looking for old songs, pictures and stuff? It looks like a 24/7 occupation.

It is a natural and enjoyable part of life for me. Over the years, I have been lucky enough to widen my circle of friends and sometimes historians and film preservation folks suggest things to me, send me things... Also when we first toured to Japan, I had the great surprise to have people there bring me recordings from Japan in the 20s and 30s and I was hooked. I ended up learning quite a number of wonderful western influenced Japanese songs. In some cases, this had the same effect that it has here, that bringing these tunes out, revitalizes the music for a new audience. In preparing for our most recent tour to Australia, I learned a neat tune, originally recorded by a duo called Mr. Flotsam and Mr. Jetsam in 1930, called “Is ‘E and Aussie Is ‘E Lizzie?”. Now if we can just find a way to come to Spain...I’ll get right to work on something new...

The songs you play are not the usual ones that anyone can hear in the radio or download from a p2p network. You must be a real *connoisseur* to even know that kind of stuff. How did a girl who was raised in the 70s come across 20s and 30s music?

It might be obvious that I am a bit of a contrarian. Before I ever thought of performing in front of anyone, I was a music nut. I spent a lot of time in the music library at UCLA, combing through LP recordings and I searched for things through the California state librarian, who you could access via telephone. Also, before the internet, I participated in something called the Letter Exchange out of Northern California. I started trading home made compilation

cassette tapes with other people. It took me years to find some of the small commercial record labels that were compiling recordings from the early 20th Century and it took me longer still to find out that some extraordinary 78 rpm record collectors were living nearby. Like the main character in Terry Zwigoff's movie "Ghostworld", I stumbled into a parallel universe in meeting collectors. I felt like Alice falling down a rabbit hole. Lucky me.

And how did your classmates and friends (who probably were fans of Bowie or Alice Cooper) react when you showed them all that old stuff?

In the 1970s I was still trying to keep an open mind and so I tried socially to dabble in listening to modern music. I went to a few concerts, appreciated Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, the Beatles, but privately and little by little I kept trying to figure out where their sources might be coming from. Older blues, or in the case of the Beatles and say Tiny Tim, I could tell that some of their tunes were coming from 1920s influences and I was curious, but kept it to myself.

You moved to Los Angeles in the early 80s, when all those hair metal and the Sunset Strip scene were on top form. Didn't you feel a little out of place?

Yes, but I was used to being a misfit! When I escaped from my hometown of San Bernardino, where so many kids were steeped in that metal music, the thing that stood out to me in LA was punk music. It was not for me, but I did go to see Johanna Went and Exene (Cervenka, from X) and could appreciate them as interesting artists. I was experimenting with performance art and poetry recitation myself at that time and I met Robert Loveless who was playing and recording in a band called Savage Republic. I loved what they were doing, this atmospheric, industrial, spaghetti western, middle eastern tinged surf music... and also Seventeen Pygmies, I was knocked out by their covers of music originally recorded by Brazilian organist, Walter Wanderley. Los Angeles is a good place to encounter just about anything, which is inspiring and for me, the layers of old Hollywood history really make me feel at home.

You say you want to stay totally true to the styles you play, but then again you don't want to be called a nostalgic. How's that?

People don't call classical musicians "nostalgic" for playing old music, or historians for studying, interpreting and presenting material from the past. I tend to think that this term "nostalgic" is used to pigeon-hole someone as being wacky or stuck on a kitschy retro fad of some kind. The general idea is that there is so much great neglected music from the early 20th Century that I have a great deal of respect for and I am just trying to do a good job in rendering it.

Because I play with musicians who really know and appreciate the old styles of early jazz and ragtime etc, I think we can really put the music across with authenticity without imitating any particular band from the past. Ideally I like to think that we are functioning like a band from that time, influenced by the zeitgeist of the old music we are immersed in and carrying it out with our own style and flavour. At the same time, it is 2009, we have an opportunity to shatter some of the stereotyped expectations that people have now about 1920s music being corny and baby-voiced "booping".

Anyway, is it possible to feel nostalgic about a time you didn't live through?

I wouldn't call it nostalgic, I would call it "strong attraction" to the culture of that time frame. I have always grilled the older people I've known for stories from their past. It was certainly a particularly colourful period in the US between WWI & II (between 1917 and 1938) and I am relentlessly inspired by the music, film, entertainment and design from this period. I can't help but appreciate the fact that I can gather first hand information from folks still with us who participated in the entertainment world of that time. Ten years from now, it just won't be possible. Just tonight I had a chat with Carla Laemle, whose uncle Carl built Universal Studios. Carla was a dancer in films such as "Hollywood Revue" of 1929, "Broadway Melody" and "The King of Jazz" and others. She just turned 100 last month!

How do you get along with this era of speed, and internet, and fast food, where everything (including human relationships) is becoming more and more cold and superficial?

My husband and I live in a great old house from 1908 with lots of wood and detail, and we love to cook and eat things we grow in our garden... And then we suffer the LA freeway traffic (this is unavoidable here!) and when we are about town we try to spend our dollars in mom and pop small businesses and old time establishments whenever possible. We don't necessarily jump on every technological gadget that comes round and when I am out with friends, I shut my cell phone off. I can remember when there were no phone answering machines, no computers or cell phones. Someone would try to call you and the phone would ring, and they would just have to wait and try later.

How's your 'relationship' with the sound of the CDs? I assume you like those songs just the way they were, but you cannot achieve that old sound unless you fake it...

We do use modern recording equipment, but record live as a band playing together, not overlapping separate layers of overdubs. Sometimes we experiment with live room sounds. For instance, I am particularly inspired by some field recordings done by the Victor Record Company from 1927. I found out that these were made in a tobacco warehouse and the way that the instruments sound in that room really haunts me. On our second cd, we experimented with recording in a dance hall kind of space and I am very pleased with the way they turned out. We just did this for about 4 or 5 tracks: "Paradise Wobble", "Nasty Man", "I'm No Angel" "Sitting on a Rubbish Can" and "Clip Joint".

What do you like the most about this 21st century? I'm not talking just about music, but about society as well.

Air conditioning is a really good invention. Folks used to wear wool bathing suits in the 20s, that was a bad idea. The Internet and modern medical practices are very impressive in the 21st Century. Car design was certainly much more beautiful in the past, but okay, more deadly in an accident than autos today. But why are modern cars so deadly dull aesthetically these days?

Do you think you would have liked living in the 20s? Women were pretty alienated then, for instance...

Well, it was a pretty revolutionary time for women in the US. Suffragettes had done all the hard work to get the vote, to make more opportunities for women to go to college and for more "healthful" clothing, that is, get girls out of boned undergarments. The girls of the 20s got to take advantage of those hard fought battles and probably to the dismay of those early political organizers, the next generation got to be wild and rather frivolous, at least up until the Depression. Clothing was fabulously scanty, girls took on short boyish haircuts and commercial cosmetics were readily available, the music was good... lots of cheap ways to have fun. Ah well, I would have liked to experience life before the invention of plastic and a time when the only rock and roll was 20's jazz. You have to be careful what you wish for, though, because I am sure that there were a lot of grim circumstances you could find yourself in, in any generation. I admit that I am pretty lucky with this life in the 21st century and that I benefit from hindsight.

You also paint and write poetry (which makes me think that actually you don't belong to the 20s and 30s but to the Renaissance). Now, why not come out with a 100% Janet Klein album, in which you're not only the performer, but also the composer?

I do like the idea of somehow merging my painting/drawing and poetry with a music package, but it seems contrived. I like the freedom of art and poetry to slip into the mysterious cracks of expression that I can't access through music and I am not sure that I will figure out how to join them. I think this is perfectly okay. For instance many of my favourite painters wrote poetry: Kurt Schwitters, Marsden Hartley, Man Ray... and they didn't have to put the poems into the art (literally) to be complete artists. I seem to have a much stronger calling to uncover lost gems. There seems to be so much fascinating orphaned music that I can save and share and keep resonating. While so many people are inventing more and more new stuff, there is a chance that if I don't keep at this, some wonderful things may slip away or just get lost in time.

What about acting? You have a great talent for performing... but maybe you don't like modern movies. Do you?

I try to keep an open mind. The music has gotten us into some interesting adventures. So you never know.

The last one is not a question, but a request. Give us three good advices to be, look and feel 100% charming 24/7.

No corporate fast food! No tennis shoes unless you are playing a sport at the time. No blue jeans unless you are a farmer or a cowboy or mechanic! Here's more: Take pleasure in dressing nicely... How about a bow tie? And be sweet to your honey. Appreciate things in small packages, things that are hand made and anything that will still be beautiful in 100 years. Try not let gadgets rule your life. Oh, and don't leave your dentures where people can find them!