

Singer-songwriter Karla Bonoff has written for a variety of artists, but it's her own voice that makes her music unique.

Colleen Smith
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Karla Bonoff took the Swallow Hill stage by storm again on Saturday, packing the intimate Denver venue with aging Boomers. Bonoff's set list led concertgoers down a '70s and '80s Memory Lane as she sang her songs, rendered huge hits by other singers like Linda Rondstadt and Aaron Neville, Bonnie Raitt and Wynonna Judd.

But true Bonoff fans turn out to hear the songwriter's singular voice, still as velvety as the black skirt she wore. Bonoff makes her home near Santa Barbara, Calif., which means she comes from sea level and humidity to our mile-high-dry air — no easy transition for the lungs or the vocal chords. "I'm out of breath," Bonoff said early into her set, later thanking the audience for putting up with her "froggy throat."

The truth is, Bonoff continues to carry all her notes. With integrity and clarity and admirable modulation, she belts out her lyrics. And she hits artistic grace notes, whether on piano or guitar.

Bonoff grew up in Los Angeles and wrote her first song by age 15. She came of musical age in Southern California's singer-songwriter stew, performing at the Troubadour, also frequented by the likes of James Taylor and Jackson Browne — both of whom she toured with later.

Bonoff has written passionately, if not prolifically, so her set on Saturday consisted of her four albums' melodious and emotional old favorites: "Home," "Someone To Lay Down Beside Me," "Tell Me Why" and "All My Life." "You're so well behaved," Bonoff told

the audience at Swallow Hill, where people tend to take both making music and listening to music seriously.

Bonoff's albums include back-up performances by J.D. Souther, Glenn Frye, Don Henley, Christopher Cross, Michael McDonald and Peter Frampton. She recalled for the Swallow Hill audience an anecdote about singing with James Taylor at Red Rocks.

Saturday night at Swallow Hill, Bonoff was joined by her current band. Her longtime friend and producer, Kenny Edwards, a strings virtuoso, also provided backup vocals. Formerly of the folk-rock trio Stone Poneys and Linda Rondstadt's touring band, Edwards also performed a song from his new solo CD. (Edwards, Bonoff, Wendy Waldman and Andrew Gold form the all-star band Bryndle.) Also with Bonoff was Nina Gerber, who can coax her electric guitar into sounding like a dobro, at times, or a slide guitar.

Between songs, Bonoff rified about her "jerk songs," record company misadventures, a television show host mispronouncing her surname as "bone-off," watching on television as other artists collected a Grammy for covering her song, and her beloved cat that died. But Bonoff's self-deprecating sense of humor and her sweet speaking voice prevented the tales from tasting too bitter. And one of her most recent songs, "What About Joanne" — absent from her Saturday set — demonstrates her ability to transcend pain with an uptempo, toe-tapping tune.

Bonoff, as she often does, closed her concert with an achingly lovely rendition of "The Water Is Wide," a song she learned as a teen from her guitar teacher, Frank Hamilton of the Weavers. And she gave a shout-out and a thumbs-up to Denver singer-songwriter Megan Burtt, who opened the concert. It must have been a thrill for the younger singer-songwriter, who had, in her set, mentioned that she had "grown up at Swallow Hill" and

declared Karla Bonoff one of her heroes.

Colleen Smith, a longtime contributor to The Denver Post, blogs about the arts, yoga, skiing and other interests at colleenwordsmith.blogspot.com and serves as Denver Flower and Gardening Examiner.