

Karla Bonoff says her classic pop hasn't changed, despite struggles with fame

There are certain artists who represent a distinct period - a specific time and place - in the lives of music lovers. For many who came of age in the 1970's, Karla Bonoff is one of those artists.

When her self-titled first album was released in 1977, Bonoff was in her early 20s and already a veteran of the Southern California music scene. That debut recording catapulted Bonoff into the national limelight, an experience she found overwhelming.



"If I'd been older, I could have handled it better," she says in a telephone interview. "It's a lot of pressure being famous. It's a lot to deal with emotionally and professionally, and I kind of resented it."

What she resented, she says, is the fact that her first recording was 10 years in the making and, after that initial success, the record company "Wanted another right away. The problem is I wasn't a songwriting machine.

"My songs grew out of my experiences and my feelings, and they didn't seem to understand that. I was never gonna make a lot of records," she says.

But Bonoff has stuck with the music business, releasing four solo recordings and two with her group, Bryndle, which formed in the late '60s.

Over the years Bryndle members - Kenny Edwards, Wendy Waldman, Andrew Gold and Bonoff - have continued to work together collectively and on each other's projects.

When Bonoff appears in the Starlight Theatre of the Madison Civic Center on Sunday, Dec. 3, she'll perform in acoustic guitar and piano, accompanied by Edwards, who plays guitar and mandolin. And they'll be drawing from more than 30 years of music-making.

"My music is basically the same, although lyrically it's more mature and appropriate for my age," Bonoff says. "My approach has always been a classically simple song structure. I like to think of myself as a classic pop-song writer."

While Bonoff's songs may be categorized as pop, they are uncommonly intimate and poignant, shedding light on secrets of the heart that resonate with so many. She says writing those songs was, and continues to be, a cathartic process.

"When I'm writing songs it can be helpful for me and for a lot of people, too. They often tell me how much the music has meant to them," she says.

Her songs have struck a chord with other musicians as well. Even before Bonoff began recording, stars such as Linda Ronstadt had taken notice of her work. Ronstadt had recorded three Bonoff-penned gems for her 1976 record, "Hasten Down the Wind," then helped launch Bonoff's solo career by appearing as a background vocalist on "Karla Bonoff."

"When she recorded 'Someone to Lay Down Beside Me,' 'Lose Again' and 'If he's ever near,' that really set things in motion for me.

Other major artists, including Bonnie Raitt, began recording Bonoff songs, and soon she found herself touring as a solo artist, opening for acts that draw big crowds.

"I remember opening for Jackson Browne in front of 10,000 people. I was terrified."

After her initial success, Bonoff struggled with personal issues ranging from self-imposed isolation, self-doubt and creative blocks. Yet she continued - "in the background as a songwriter and doing some regional touring."

She released her second solo album, "Restless Nights," in 1979, and followed with "Wild Heart of the Young" in '82 and "New World" in '88.

She said the music industry has changed completely since her professional initiation.

"It's so much bigger and more corporate and impersonal. That never used to be the case," she says. "Our generation was kind of more laid-back and relaxed about the music. Now there's way too much product, and I think the quality has suffered. You're disposable if you don't sell a million records. It must be difficult for new artists."

She calls the efforts of some of the younger artists, such as Ani DiFranco, who record, release and promote their own work, inspiring.

Five years ago, Bryndle regrouped to record an album that's clearly rooted in their sound of earlier decades. It was critically acclaimed and the band began touring to promote it. Since then, they've returned to the studio and expect their latest release to hit store shelves this spring or summer.

Meanwhile, Bonoff continues to write new songs and perform them alongside the earlier material.

Many of Bonoff's songs are so emotional and moving that you wonder how she can continue to get in touch with those feelings after repeated performances.

"It's kind of like getting into character, or the character of the song," she says. "For me, the music kind of transcends the tedium of doing the songs repeatedly. It has sort of a life of its own. Of course, a lot depends on the situation."

She says her favorite venues have intimate settings where people pay close attention to the music.

"I like best the small theater environment and performing art centers. I was in Madison a couple of months ago and got to look at the Starlight Theater. I think I'd love playing there.

