

Profile: Karla Bonoff

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Five years ago, heartfelt singer and hit songwriter Karla Bonoff moved to Montecito from Los Angeles because the congestion and crime of her native city was stifling her creativity.

"L.A. is so rough-edged," she said. "It just made me grouchy and tired with a smog headache."

Now, her gleaming grand piano sits in a bright room of the 1920s-style Spanish dream house she designed, looking out onto an acre of oak trees and sage, just steps from guest quarters that house both a recording studio and her longtime friend and collaborator Kenny Edwards.

But with such inspiration surrounding her, she now has a new problem keeping her from her work. It's called Perfect Life Syndrome.

"It's easy to not work here in this incredible environment," said the artist, 50, who wrote the 1976 Top 40 tune "Someone to Lay Down Beside Me" and the Grammy-winning "All My Life."

Ms. Bonoff could easily wile away each day engaging in merciless distractions such as hiking San Ysidro Trail, pulling weeds in her lush garden, wandering among the ponds and fountains that grace her property and cuddling with her beloved cats — if she didn't have a musical career to maintain.

Highlights of that career will ring through the Lobero Theatre on Friday night when Ms. Bonoff gives her first local concert in 20 years. The die-hard animal lover will perform as a benefit for the Santa Barbara Zoo.

Over three decades, she has penned dozens of melodic and often melancholic soft rock tunes, many of which became hits for Linda Ronstadt, Aaron Neville, Bonnie Raitt and Wynonna Judd. But Ms. Bonoff, whose unadorned voice calls to mind Carole King, also has had a respectable solo career, touring with Jackson Browne and James Taylor and releasing five albums of her own material. She and Mr. Edwards still play gigs all over the country.

"People say, 'Oh, I didn't know you still play!' They think I died or something," she joked, while sitting on a couch just off her big, open kitchen. But for every person who lost track of her, there's a devotee that still follows her every move.

"In every city we go to, there's a real hard-core group of fans," she said. "They say, 'Your music has been the soundtrack to my life.'"

People say her sweet, pensive songs helped them through tough divorces or lulled their fussy babies to sleep. Her music has been played at countless weddings, and as many funerals.

"A lot of the music has been real touching to people and important to them," she said, guessing they must feel about her work the way she feels about James Taylor's. "It does this warm, wonderful thing. It's like having a massage or something."

Ms. Bonoff grew up in Westwood, the daughter of piano teacher Shirley and radiologist Chester Bonoff. Her parents cranked Frank Sinatra, Benny Goodman and Barbra Streisand at home, but she and older sister Lisa preferred more modern acts. "We had our transistor radios on the beach in Santa Monica," she said, "listening to Motown, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones."

Ms. Bonoff began guitar lessons at age 10 and studied Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell and Judi Collins. Music was a passion — but school was a bore.

"I felt like an alien there," she said of her alma mater University High, which counts Randy Newman, Bonnie Raitt and Jan & Dean among its alumni. "I never went to a football game, I didn't go to prom, I didn't go to graduation. I was very much a hippie. I just wanted to get out of school as quickly as possible."

At age 15, she began cutting class to wait in line outside the famous Troubador nightclub for its Monday night, open-mike "Hoots."

She stayed out till 3 a.m. to meet and play for fellow burgeoning artists such as Ms. Ronstadt, Mr. Browne and Mr. Taylor, who performed "Carolina in My Mind" there when the song was brand new.

"I remember just standing there with my mouth open," she said. "It was so magical to me, such a powerful time, and I was just sucked into it."

She graduated high school and attended UCLA for just six weeks before dropping out, despite her parents' protests, to pursue music full time. She endured the typical struggles of a starving musician, even performing at a bowling alley/nude club/biker bar near LAX.



But in 1976, Ms. Ronstadt recorded three of Ms. Bonoff's tunes — "Someone to Lay Down Beside Me," "Lose Again" and "If He's Ever Near" — on her "Hasten Down the Wind" album, earning the songwriter her own solo record deal. She recorded four albums over the years and, in 1999, released a best-of collection called "All My Life."

The following year, she moved into her brand new villa on East Valley Road, a spacious but not sprawling estate with beamed ceilings, iron chandeliers, antique tiles and a wooden dining room table that once belonged to the late Ojai potter Beatrice Wood. A screened-in back porch was built and appointed with mini-armchairs especially for cats Kiki and Willy.

Ms. Bonoff keeps guitars all over the house, even on her bed, to remind her to spend a little time each day working on new songs. Sometimes she's inspired, sometimes she's not.

"Songwriting, to me, has always been this magical thing where the songs are out there and waiting for you to channel them," she said. "'Someone to Lay Down Beside Me' was like that. One night, it just seemed to arrive on paper and I never quite understood where it came from."

Another "secret," she says, is to write without censoring yourself. She once penned a song called "Goodbye My Friend," inspired by the death of one of her cats.

"I wrote it as therapy for myself and I didn't edit it at all because I wasn't planning on anyone hearing it, but in the long run it came out wonderful," she said. "Those songs that come from that really pure place that your inner critic isn't monitoring, those are the wonderful songs."

But it's taken her a long time to learn that.

"I spent too many years trying to make other people happy," she said. "It's so easy to get caught up in, 'What will they think of this song?' or 'Will this be on the radio?' All those things really paralyzed me way more than they ever should have."

Like any musician, she's been beaten up a bit by the music industry.

"It's a cruel business. There's rejection all along the way," she said, from being told she was too naive at her very first audition to being dropped by Columbia Records two weeks before Christmas. That event sparked a several-year bout with depression.

"I always had somebody mad at me because I wasn't making records, keeping up the pace," confessed Ms. Bonoff, who writes about four songs a year. "I'm really not that prolific."

Perhaps that's because she never cared much about being a star. That's why she was thrilled to let other singers record her material.

"The gift of being able to write songs and have people record them is a blessing for me," said the artist, who always has been shy. "It's an easier life than being in the spotlight all the time. I can go sit in restaurants and people don't recognize me."

That may change soon. Ms. Bonoff is thinking about recording a new album in her home studio.

"I'd like to make a record completely for myself, one that isn't governed by what other people in the business think it needs to be," she said. "I don't have to go audition. I don't need a record company to pay for it. I can put it out on the Internet and it doesn't really cost anything. If a record company picks it up, great. If they don't, it doesn't really matter."

What matters is she finally feels at home, with her art, her self and her surroundings.

"I love it here," she said. "I can honestly say I'm happy every day to wake up and be here. I wonder why I didn't do this sooner."

