

Songwriter to the stars



PHOTO BY ERIC STAUDENMAIER

Karla Bonoff with folkie band Bryndell in 1996. 5/5/17

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OLD SAYBROOK » Bonnie Raitt, Wynonna, and Aaron Neville have covered her songs. Linda Ronstadt included three of her compositions on her 1976 Grammy-winning album "Hasten Down the Wind." The soundtracks of such popular films as "About Last Night," "Footloose," and "8 Seconds" featured still others.

Oh, and acclaimed singer-songwriter Karla Bonoff, who will be appearing at The Kate on Thursday, May 11, spent her 20s opening for James Taylor and Jackson Browne.

No wonder Billboard Magazine gushed in its praise of the versatile artist.

"Long before Alanis and Jewel," editor-in-chief Timothy White wrote in a review of Bonoff's 1999 "All My Life" album, "there was a breed of singer-songwriters whose earthly anthems of soul-searching, heartache and joy touched souls in a way few can muster today."

To hear the Santa Barbara-based artist tell it, it all began in the late 1960s and early 1970s when, as a teenager in the fertile Los Angeles music scene, she used to cut class with her sister Lisa to line up at the legendary Troubadour rock club at noon on Mondays to get a slot in the Monday night "hoot."

There, a 20 minute drive from their home, they witnessed then-unknowns Jackson Browne, James Taylor and Elton John, along with Glenn Frey and Don Henley, as well as Joni Mitchell, trying out their new songs.

"In retrospect it's seems amazing that all those people were in that same place



Karla Bonoff will be at The Kate May 11. Photo by Erin Fiedler.

at the same time, writing and playing and partying together," said the melow-voiced 65-year-old in a telephone interview from her home in Southern California.

"Of course when you're there, and in the middle of it, it seems normal. It was just our crowd. Who knew who was going to end up being the Eagles?"

The beauty of that time, it seems, was in its simplicity. Bonoff recalled Monday nights at the Troubadour watching people get up on stage and land record deals. "Seals and Crofts played four songs, and then all these record company people just swarmed them."

Better than that, "record companies would still take time to develop musicians," she said. "You couldn't make records at home. The only way you could record anything was to get a record deal or at least have someone give you money to make a demo."

In those circumstances, she said, "we had to really get good at what we did. We had no choice but to do it the old-fashioned way, where you had to get up

and be an artist in front of people and perform. That pushed all of us to hone our craft and at the same time to constantly invent and reinvent what came next."

Out of that powerful cocktail of creativity grew Bryndell, a group of songwriters that, according to Bonoff, "was ahead of its time." After it disbanded, the 20-something was opening for Jackson Browne and James Taylor when she got a call about one of her songs that changed the course of her career.

"I heard through a friend that Linda Ronstadt had learned 'Lose Again,'" she recalled. "They had played it in their sound check and she liked it and they were doing it in the show."

Hearing Ronstadt belting out her words in a packed Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles was an otherworldly experience for Bonoff. "When you're a songwriter, until you have that first moment, there's some part of you that goes 'Maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm really not good, maybe I just think I'm good,'" she

said.

It's fair to say that Bonoff laid those doubts to rest, considering the string of hits selected by other bold-faced name musicians—including "Home" for Bonnie Raitt, "Tell Me Why," by Wynonna Judd, and "Isn't It Always Love," by country star Lynn Anderson, to name a few.

"I was really lucky to have such great women record my songs," Bonoff said. "There's very little to complain about with Ronstadt or Bonnie Raitt, or Wynonna. And especially because they were artists at their peaks, they exposed my work to a larger audience."

If it wasn't all that hard to give up a song to an artist that would help it soar up the charts, there's no denying that she's complemented her songwriting feats with sold-out shows around the world, with "a voice close to the likes of Carole King or Carly Simon, and a sound that veers on country at times, King-like pop on the other," as Daniel J. Hamlow put it.

"I feel lucky that the music was strong enough to survive all this time and people are still moved to come out and hear it," said Bonoff, who will be accompanied by acoustic guitarist extraordinaire Nina Gerber, and promises a show that's semi-unplugged with lots of her standards and some surprises.

"The people of our generation still feel a deep connection to that music and that part of their lives."

Karla Bonoff will appear at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, May 11 at 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. For tickets and information, visit www.katharinehepburntheater.org