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The Journey of Jane Dough

Northeast Ohio's Entertainment, Dining & Leisure Connection

Jane Dough is Keeping Rock and Roll Alive

By Helen Marketti

Band member Songbird is grateful to have had life experiences that have shaped who she is, where she is and how Jane Dough is evolving.

Looking back over the days of rock and roll that heated the airwaves of the late 60s and early 70s, we can find Cleveland area band, Jane Dough appreciating those earlier days mixed in with their own creative originality to help define their sound and still keep things fresh.

Band members include Songbird (vocals, guitar), Brendan Gilberti (guitar/background vocals), Mike Pella (bass/backing vocals) and Ernie Richmann IV (drums, percussion).

"Jane Dough has had a lot of members in the five years since the band was founded by Brendan Gilberti, myself and former hand percussionist Byron delPinal," said Songbird. "Each member that has been part of the band has brought their own unique contributions to the band with the common thread being Brendan and I. We started out as an "acoustic mayhem" band with no kit drummer and often times, no bassist. It wasn't until we picked up former kit drummer, Andy Reichert and former bassist Chris Tangent that we went electric and really started to develop the sound that we are known for today."

"The great thing about playing with the same guys for a long time is that I know their playing styles and can write to the strength of the band as a hole. I write compositions with the full band in mind and require them to somehow telepathically know exactly how to play the song as it sounds in my head. Believe it or not, they yell at me a lot, but somehow it cosmically happens. They are the real miracle workers."

The band's name, Jane Dough actually came from a phrase that Songbird wrote in one of her songs. "I wrote a song called, Freeway Rider after I moved to Cleveland. It was an "answer song" to Stephen Stills Treetop Flyer. I decided to write from a female road smuggler's perspective. One of the lines in the song is, "My name is Jane Dough and I'm the real deal, I'm a highway smuggler and I've got nerves of steel." That song will be on our upcoming album. So, we were thinking of a band name and just about any band name you could think of has already been taken. One day, Brendan said, "What about Jane Dough?" I thought it was kind of cool but didn't want to impose a female name on a mostly male band but everyone liked it."

Songbird has had musical influences ever since childhood. "I grew up in a bubble of sorts," she recalls. "My dad worked for the government and we moved every year or so.

When I was younger, I listened to the rock and roll radio stations and the only other constant I had was my dad's record collection. He had an original pressing of John Lennon's Imagine that had the original poster with it. He also had an original pressing of George Harrison's All Things Must Pass, which had a poster with it as well. My dad had Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits, 1 and 2. As you can see, my dad had some great records so I grew up with quite an assortment. He would let me put his records on the turntable. I listened to a lot of John Lennon and Bob Dylan. I have also loved folk, bluegrass and the 60s. After rock and roll lost its roll, then I think that's when it lost its soul. It became digital, technical and very sterilized which made me lose interest. People wonder how I can be so into the 60s when I wasn't even around for it but I just feel that it's the right path for me."

The seeds were planted very early on for Songbird to follow music as a career path. "I remember taking out those black and white posters from my dad's collection and just staring at them. There was something timeless and meaningful to me when I would look at the posters of John Lennon and Bob Dylan. I really didn't realize it then what it would mean later but I remember there was something special about it."

Playing guitar was not Songbird's first instrument of choice. "One of my earliest memories is going to the kitchen, setting up the pots and pans and creating my own drum kit. My parents were amazingly tolerant! In fifth grade, I joined the school band as a drummer and did that for a few years."

Songbird continues, "I had played hand drums, too. I started playing guitar around the time I was 19. I actually have considered myself more of a hand drum player than a guitar player. I've been playing guitar now for about 15 years."

"Brendan has brought me light years in my knowledge and understanding of playing the guitar, particularly in the rock and roll style," explains Songbird. "I've always been dedicated to learning the guitar on a daily and continual basis and had been playing for several years before we had met. I felt I had reached a plateau in my knowledge and only had played acoustic guitar at the time. Playing with Brendan, I have been able to expand my horizons as a player a thousand fold. He is an amazingly gifted player and I am very lucky to have him to grow with as a musician on a daily basis."

Songbird's life experiences have brought



Photo: Jen Badr

about an acute awareness of people, places and lessons along the journey. "My parents weren't hippies but we did live a bohemian kind of life style with many years of traveling and moving. I actually left home at an early age, which was a very unique situation. We lived a vagrant, gypsy-like life style because of it. We moved to a town that I didn't like and I was hoping we would move as we always did but this time my parents said that we were going to be staying awhile. So, I decided that I was going to leave and that's just what I did! I was 15 years old at the time. I dropped out of school and went on the road with The Grateful Dead!"

"It was an incredible experience and it was amazing that my parents even allowed it," said Songbird. "There were hundreds of people that traveled with The Grateful Dead. It was like a small city. I have met several members of The Grateful Dead but they didn't necessarily meet or interact with all of the people who followed them on the road. There was an entire infrastructure to their shows. There were cars, school buses, different ethnicities of food and clothing. It was a traveling commune. It was a portal that carried over from the 60s. I believe it paved the way for how I am now. We went everywhere the band went, depending on where the tour was going. It's funny though, I never really considered myself a "Dead Head". I loved the experience and enjoyed the music. Many people were around because of the surrounding scene that went with it. I was more interested in the band's synergy. I enjoyed Jerry Garcia's singing and guitar playing. I liked Robert Hunter's song writing. The songs were so descriptive; they were like a painting. Jerry was a master at bringing this to life."

She continues, "To get into their shows was like a barter system. I was good at crafts so I made macramé projects and hair wraps. People would make jewelry and clothes.

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Everything was so colorful and beautiful. I did this for about four years and then decided to stop touring with The Grateful Dead and settle down. Well, after living the way I did for so long, it was very hard for me to settle down."

"I started going to music festivals a couple times a year," said Songbird. "I lived in California for awhile and came back to Ohio during the 90s. I started going to bluegrass festivals, studying the folk scene and the roots of it all. I started a little bluegrass acoustic band for a while. I had dread locks, which were down to my knees, and you don't see that too much in the bluegrass circuit. (laughs) I was amazed to be hanging out with some pretty amazing musicians like Jack Casady, Jorma Kaukonen and more!"

Names in the music industry can often carry the way people think of you and your music. Songbird is a name that is quite appropriate for her style. It is a unique story of how this name was given to her. "I always felt that whatever I was taught in school, I could learn about those same things in a book or better yet, I could go to these places and experience them for myself. When I was about 15, I was at the Rainbow gathering, which is like a big, traveling commune in the woods of national parks and forests all over the country and all over the world. This type of thing has been going on since the late 60s and early 70s," explains Songbird. "We were having a ceremony one evening. There was a girl playing guitar and I was singing. Everyone was gathered around the campfire. Well, within the Rainbow Tribe, there are people who are known as "the elders" who have been part of the group since the early beginnings. At some point in the evening, everything came to a stop and one of the elder's said, "I am going to name you Songbird. We'll have a ceremony and that will be your name." A lot of these people who were around at the time continued on with The Grateful Dead tours and still called me Songbird and it has basically been my name ever since. My real name is actually Bessie Young and I am thinking about going back to using it. I think my real name still represents my music and who I am even though I have been known as Songbird for a very long time."

Experiences from traveling the road at such a young age have shaped how Songbird views life and music. "It's given me an even richer perspective as a person, as a musician and as a songwriter. These experiences have given me a Woody Guthrie-like experience," she said. "When you are traveling from place to place you are basically homeless unless you have money for hotels or can crash at someone's house. I could not wrap my head around a framework existence where you get up the same time every morning, eat the same food and then go to the same job every day. After living the way I did, that seemed so foreign to me. I would go downtown to the tourist-like area of cities that we traveled to and talk to some of the homeless people. Many of them were Vietnam Vets. I used to have a long Mohawk hairstyle that was different colors. I was

between punk rocker and hippie. I didn't care what I looked like back then. I would hang out with the homeless people and panhandle with them. They would tell me these amazing stories, which I thought, were so cool. Most of the time, people would just walk right past them. As I said, many of them were Vietnam Vets and they were like me in a sense that they could not integrate themselves back into a box of daily life after they had gone through the atrocities of war. There was no way they could just go back to a nine - five job even if they had wives and families so many of them took to the road."

Inspirations for song writing can come from anywhere for Songbird. "A lot of my songs are based on my traveling experiences. I took a sabbatical from social media for a while and decided to turn inward and reflect on where I had been. It was like going into the



wilderness and having nothing but paper and pen. I was thinking about all sorts of different things and writing songs. I filled a couple of notebooks. I wrote a song about a homeless guy I knew whose name was Shorty. He was such a character! I met him in New Orleans. Shorty took me under his wing, so to speak. I used to hop trains with him. He taught me how to survive on the road without getting hurt or getting into trouble."

"I write most of our music for Jane Dough," said Songbird. "I would call it rock and roll. I really don't like to have names and genres because then it all becomes compartmentalized. Record companies have kept things sterilized with cliché lyrics. There doesn't seem to be anything raw or human any more about music. Many record companies are not doing well because music has become background wallpaper."

"I do not consider myself a "solo songwriter", but rather as a wildly uninhibited sonic painter of colorful psychedelic musical portraits, surrealistically painted in the grand rock and roll tradition of the late 60s and early 70s. I feel that playing with Jane Dough has tremendously developed my skills as a songwriter, composer and musician which all function as part of a larger whole. I think I sing more like a guy than a girl. I don't have a diva style or anything like that. I think I probably sound more like Mick Jagger. (laughs) I

feel that both Janis Joplin and Grace Slick had more vocal range than me but I would say my style is similar."

Songbird continues, "Sometimes the music and energy of another artist will inspire me to write songs with a similar feel. That's my way of tipping my hat to the artist. Grist For The Mill is kind of a snapshot of what it's like to be on the road. Performers, artists and musicians live a very solitary life. I wrote it in tribute to Bill Kerchin who was inspirational for the song coming to pass. To me, writing lyrics to a song is like building the foundation of a building. The rest can be as intricate or as simple as you choose. Every building is unique and different."

"I try to use the term rock and roll a lot. I try to say it in some of our songs," said Songbird. "I want to tell people that rock and roll is still here, it still exists and it's alive and

well in Cleveland! It's just a matter of the rest of the world knowing it. I think our style is of late 60s and early 70s west coast, San Francisco type sound. I like to tell people that our sound is like if The Byrds, Crazy Horse, The Rolling Stones, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Jefferson Airplane all got on a bus together to party... then the band members got mixed up by getting on the wrong bus and created their own band with the various members. That is how I would describe the music of Jane Dough. We are very vintage rock and roll."

Through various contacts, connections and networking, Songbird was introduced to James Guyette of WRUW-FM 91.1 radio station. "WRUW can be attributed to assisting with getting Cleveland musicians out there and be heard," she said. "One day we were invited to be on the Cuzin Dave Show. When we walked into the station, they had some huge microphones that looked like they could read your mind! I was so nervous I don't think I said more than two words. I know that is hard to believe! (laughs) Brendan is more on the quiet side but he ended up doing most of the interview because I was so nervous. Anyway, WRUW has been very supportive of our music and I credit them for us still being a band today. I think it's a little bit harder when your band plays originals. It's a cover band climate and difficult to break out of the box. There are venues out there that support original acts and I think more should be done to promote the original music scene. In my mind, Cleveland is a historical spot for original music."

James Guyette, aka Mr. JEG on WRUW had some very thoughtful words in regards to Songbird and the music of Jane Dough. "Songbird was among the favorite performers of the late Cuzin Dave who had hosted "When the Roses Bloom Again" for nearly 40 years. (He passed away in September.) Songbird

and her band mates have made numerous in-studio appearances on the program and she has always been eloquent in describing the songs and their upcoming gigs. A particularly important factor for someone in the music industry is Songbird's willingness and ability to produce creative and artfully done posters advertising the various events. Songbird played a key role in the benefit for Cuzin Dave and his family held at the Beachland in August during his illness. Her assistance was invaluable in coordinating the contributions submitted by numerous listeners, performers and artists. She also was a great force in organizing the lineup of musicians who were volunteering their time and talents to make the benefit a success. Songbird's overall enthusiasm for writing songs, recording them and playing out is a big factor in furthering the band's exposure to the public."

Jane Dough is continuing to turn musical heads and moving forward with some great support along the way. John Gorman, former Music and Program Director of WMMS, The Buzzard, said, "I like Songbird. She is a survivor. She speaks her mind. You know exactly where you stand with her. She doesn't play in other people's games. I feel this band has a lot of potential, which is driven by their passion for music. They may not be at that magical "there" yet but they have all the necessary ingredients to go the distance."

Ken Dixon of EYE SEE MUSIC had this to say, "After more than ten years since my last CD was issued, a song by the band, Jane Dough made me want to do it again! Grist For The Mill was a steamy slab drawing truth that I felt people needed to hear. Songwriting vocalist, Songbird has journals full of lyrics that are enough for a full album to be issued soon, preceded by an old-fashioned single... a vinyl 45-rpm record! Songbird made me see that it was time to re-enter the music business."

After finishing a recent recording session in Nashville with Jane Dough, Chris Mara who is the owner, engineer and producer of Welcome to 1979 Analog Studios said, "Jane Dough is the kind of band we sit in here and dream of recording. These were some of the most productive and efficient sessions we have had in years. This is a real rock and roll album by a real rock and roll band."

On Saturday, July 23, Jane Dough will be on the main stage for the Burning River Fest on Whiskey Island. For people who have never seen Jane Dough before, Songbird lets them know what to expect, "People can expect to have the same feel and sound right down to the vintage equipment like they would have experienced at a rock concert during the late 60s or early 70s. It's very spontaneous and we also do instrumental jams. We are a pretty hard rockin' band."

For more information about Jane Dough including show dates, the latest news on their album and much more, please visit: www.janedough.net

Jane Dough is also on Facebook

Cover Photo courtesy of Mike Pella.