

The Magical Journey of Jefferson Starship singer, Cathy Richardson

By Helen Marketti

Cathy Richardson has been the singer for Jefferson Starship since 2008. Prior to such an honor, she had taken the space left by Janis Joplin and toured with Big Brother & The Holding Company as well as played the role of Janis in the theatre production of "Love, Janis". Cathy has been on a musical road for most of her life yet she still finds time to create her own inspirations when playing with her own band in her hometown of Chicago.

"I remember my next door neighbor and I trying to learn to play the guitar. I was about ten years old at the time and she was a little older than me," recalls Cathy. "She would let me listen to her record albums. One day she told me that if I really wanted to hear girls playing guitar then I should listen to "Heart". I knew my sister had one of their albums so I listened to it and when I heard the opening for the song, "Barracuda", that was THE life changing pivotal moment for me.

Here were two women who were out front leading this hard rock band. They were pretty and mysterious looking. I love Ann Wilson's voice. From that point on, I knew I was going to be a rock star. As I got older, I was able to see "Heart" in concert several times. Another dream come true was opening for them during the 90s in Chicago. I had my own band by that time. The second time I opened for them, I was by myself doing an acoustic set in Hawaii, so it definitely came full circle."

"I first learned to play the ukulele because my hands weren't big enough to handle a regular sized guitar. My dad had a guitar and we had a piano too. I remember wanting an electric guitar for Christmas one year but got an acoustic instead.

I was very disappointed," said Cathy. "I remember my mom and my grandma being very concerned that I was such a tomboy.

They went to the music store and asked the male clerk if girls played electric guitars and he told them that girls played mostly acoustic. They listened to what *he* said."

Sensing that Cathy's heart was set on getting an electric guitar, her father came to the rescue. "My dad said if I saved my money from my allowance and babysitting, he would then match my funds and I could get an electric guitar," said Cathy. "After I had \$80 saved we went to the music store and I picked out the guitar I wanted. We plugged it into our stereo jack and immediately there was feedback and distortion. I thought to myself, "Yes!"...this is exactly what I want." (laughs)

As time went on, Cathy seemed to be prompted by the universe as a series of events lead her to play the role of Janis Joplin. "One day in high school someone put up a flier that said, '60s Day tomorrow! Dress like a hippie!', I thought that sounded cool," remembers Cathy. "We started dressing like hippies all the time. I wore these large framed, prescription glasses and my hair was long and somewhat permed. I was playing guitar and singing by then and everyone started calling me "Janis". I have to admit, I had no idea at the time who Janis Joplin was."

Cathy continues, "My dad had one of her albums, Pearl. I started thinking how cool she was. I learned to play "Bobby McGee" on the guitar. I was 17 years old when I started covering, Janice. In my senior year of high school I sang, "Get It While You Can" in the variety show. Whenever I played solos, I always did "Piece of My Heart", "Bobby McGee" and "Mercedes Benz". I really didn't know anything beyond those hits and the songs on the Pearl album."

"I had a friend who worked in the theatre

and told me that "Love, Janis" was coming to Chicago and suggested I see it. I had already read the book "Love, Janis" so I was familiar with her story," said Cathy. "One day I received a call from the producer of the show. He said the girl who was going to play Janis dropped out, that the show was going to open in a few weeks, none of the auditions are working out and everyone keeps saying that he needs to see me because I would be perfect for this role. I had no theatre experience at all and said, "no thank you" but he persisted, telling me they just needed a singer and not to worry about anything else. He suggested I stop by the theatre and meet Sam Andrews (original guitar player for Big Brother & The Holding Company) who was the music director. I figured if I went to meet them then they would see I am not the right one. Well, they ended up offering me the role of Janis on the spot and rehearsals were to start the following week. I toured with "Love, Janis" for about a year and a half. I left the show in 2002."

Life has a way of finding us even if we are not paying attention to what it has in store. "I got back on the road with "Love, Janis" in 2006 in San Francisco," said Cathy. "The following year I did the show in Phoenix and Tucson. At the time, Sam Andrews told me they were going on a national tour of thirty cities with Jefferson Starship, It's a Beautiful Day and Quick Silver Messenger Service. He asked me if I would be interested in being their singer for "Big Brother". I remember thinking how cool it was that several of the original musicians were still touring with these bands. Mostly every night of the show, they would gather in the wings to watch me sing "Ball & Chain". It was one of the greatest times in my life."

"After the tour was over, Diana Mangano, who was the singer for Jefferson Starship, decided that after thirteen years she didn't want to do it anymore," recalls Cathy. "Paul Kantner (original member of Jefferson Airplane and Jefferson Starship) asked if I



Photo Credit: Michael Pittman

would be interested in singing with them and that's how it all got started."

Cathy works with her own bands when not on the road. "I have my own Cathy Richardson Band which is based in Chicago. I have had this band since the 90s and we do a lot of original material and cross over different genres. My other band is the Macrodots, which is a partnership between Zach Smith (formerly of Scandal) and myself. Marcodots has a more focused rock sound. Inspiration for songwriting comes through life experiences because some events are more prolific than others."

In 2003, Cathy received a Grammy nomination for her artwork for the album, The Road to Bliss. "I was inspired to start creating cool CD packages after I saw Joni Mitchell's album, "Turbulent Indigo" which was the first CD I ever bought that reminded me of an album where the art work was tied in with the music. I used to stare at my album covers and read every single liner note."

The road for Cathy Richardson is paved with good intentions and remarkable experiences; a magical trip that has no signs of slowing down.

For more information:

www.themacrodots.com and www.CRBand.com

Cathy Richardson is on Facebook.

