



AdChoices

THE BLOG

Albert Camus and Beyond: Conversations with Eric Andersen and Kerry Fenster, A Really Short Chat with Chris Janson, Plus Michael Kroll, David Nyro and Cave States Exclusives

04/01/2016 10:01 am ET | Updated 2 days ago



Mike Ragogna
Trafficbeat Entertainment, Music Biz Vet



KERRY FENSTER ALBUM COVER

A Conversation with Kerry Fenster

Mike Ragogna: Kerry, you have a new album that's bringing attention to special needs, especially in children. What brought you to recording a project with this focus?

Kerry Fenster: Even though it's technically the first album I've made of its kind, there was sort of a lineage to it. I've worked at summer camps before; I've written some songs while working at a summer camp in Massachusetts; I'd written songs with campers there that were children's songs, so to speak. I've always had this penchant for writing fun, children-related records in my past, but with this particular record it was my experiences working at a school for people with autism. I was just totally inspired by the students. I had really good rapport with a lot of them, and so many of them were so musical. I'd have my acoustic guitar in class with them, or often they'd earn breaks, like a "Music with Kerry" break and we'd go outside the class and play music. The students there and the experiences at that school mixed with my previous experiences writing songs with neuro-typical kids and just made me want to write an album. It just hit me like a ton of bricks. There were certain lessons that were kind of recurring in the classroom that were really good for the students, so the songs were based on those lessons.

MR: Can you give an example of how one of the songs came together?

KF: Yeah! In the classrooms, a lot of the times, the kids got nervous, and maybe they'd get a little physical, a little tactile. They'd want to slap their desk or their body or break boundaries with the person next to them, so a lot of times in class we'd say, "Quiet hands," and that would just work. It was very simple. The thing with autism is the students are often very intelligent, but they can get overwhelmed by social complexities and things like that, as we all can, really. A lot of times people will try to communicate to people on the autism spectrum and they'll over talk or come at people with too many words. Everyone can relate to this. When someone comes at us with way too much detail, it's just sort of overwhelming and kind of irritating, so I just learned that less is more. Being economic with concepts is a really good way to communicate, and not just with people with autism. Even though this whole concept was inspired by and kind of written for people on the autism spectrum, really these concepts apply to everyday life. Economy of speech became a vehicle. Saying, "Quiet hands" is two words and so many students would just get it. There's actually a music therapist who had several principles about therapy and one of them is using music as a carrier of information, and that's where I was going with it.

MR: With this album, you're educating while creating catchy songs. How do these songs help you express what you need to personally while simultaneously educating?

KF: That's a great question. I always think about Jim Henson. He was a huge inspiration to me, not because I'm a puppeteer obviously, we're talking about a musical endeavor, but I think that he was so good at that. His stuff was so appealing to children, and it was appealing to adults, and it was obviously creatively fulfilling, and there was an educational aspect, and he was making the world a better place, and it was funny, and it was kind of subversive. I think the same thing about The Marx Brothers. There's something about the ability to mix making people smile, making people learn, but there's sort of a wink-wink, nudge-nudge subversion about it. To be able to pull all that off in one project is amazing. I just kind of applied that to this. I just wanted to mix everything together. I don't think things need to be so compartmentalized, like, "This is for children." I wanted to make it inclusive. I wanted to make it for everybody, so I just thought about the songs and I said, "Well let me have them be fun and upbeat for kids," but I wanted them to be sophisticated enough that parents wouldn't be rolling their eyes at it like when you hear Barney for the five hundredth time, where it's kind of musically condescending. For me, that became the creative fulfillment. It was the game of, "I want it to be for kids and adults."

MR: What brought you to music as your creative outlet?

KF: I come from a very musical family, my mom's a singer and a piano player so from a very young age I was singing and playing with her at the piano. My dad's a professional appreciator, so we listened to records a lot. There are recordings of me at four years old writing original songs; I just really connected with it. I remember writing songs and wanting to play instruments. Whatever I picked up, I could kind of play, maybe not well but I just understood how to communicate with music. Starting in elementary school, I started taking band I played cello and I played trombone and all these more classical instruments. Then right around ten, eleven, twelve, I started picking up electric bass and electric guitar and then I was done, because I had the ultimate songwriter's instrument. Right away from junior high, I was in rock bands. That was like the age of rock 'n' roll for me, thirteen or fourteen. I got into punk rock and then I got really into Caribbean music and a lot of ska and reggae, bands like The Clash were really big for me because they mixed punk and reggae, which I thought was really fun. I was in a band in New York that moved out to L.A. and that's what brought me here. Then I ended up working at the school and making this record.

MR: How were you introduced to the school and how did that lead you to recording this project?

KF: I moved to L.A. with my band and that was a good time. We had a lot of fun successes, but also as a musician you're like, "I have to pay rent and eat," so you end up teaching lessons. I was teaching private guitar lessons here and there and that was fun, but I wanted something a little more full time because I wanted more money. I knew I wanted to teach because I liked teaching guitar, and I had good experiences working at summer camps, so I wanted to work with people. I found out online—maybe on Craigslist—that there was a school in L.A. that was focused on students from pre-school to twenty-two years old. They needed some help there and I thought, "That sounds pretty cool." They weren't specifically looking for a music person, I guess they just needed a classroom aide, but I knew I'd be able to weave music into that position, and it totally worked. I was basically the assistant to the teacher, but I always had a guitar in there, and the kids were always working for music breaks. We just brought music into the program a lot, and that's sort of how the job became the musical project.

MR: You have a physical disability, but it hasn't stopped you from being able to express yourself creatively. What was it inside you that brought you to your attitude of, "Eh, whatever, no big deal."

KF: That's a great question, Mike, and I can only guess. It's kind of similar to where the music came from, where I could place some of the responsibility on my parents for giving me so much music, but also it was just in me and I wanted to write. I feel the same way about my fortitude about my disability. My parents were really good, they never treated it like it was a disability. They were always like, "Get up and do that." They always expected me to be able to do things, and I think that expectation was very helpful and the right thing to do. That's also mixed with something in me. I never, ever had a thought in my head of, "Oh, I'm going to use this to be lazy," or be a victim, or weak. I don't want to be any of those things. I want to do everything I can, and if I can't do something I'm not afraid to ask for help. Every challenge that we get is a test of, "How much can you take?" Every hardship, no matter what it is, is really just a challenge to step up to. I just never saw it as a bad thing. I like being different, I like being unique, and having my hand the way it is, I just thought it was cool. My heroes in movies always get their hand cut off. I watched *Star Wars*. I'm like, "Sweet, I'm Luke Skywalker." I watched *Evil Dead* and I'm like, "Sweet, I'm Ash." There's like a whole theme with all my favorite heroes. I just never wanted to feel powerless, or like I couldn't do something, so I just lived my life thusly.

MR: And your parents helped foster that in you. Do you feel like you're bringing that to the kids in class?

KF: I do. I'm glad you just asked that, because I feel like that is a huge motivation in this project. It's kind of like passing the torch. If I was lucky enough to have a personal sense of value and ability and my parents reinforced that—the ability to pass that to another generation of kids whose parents maybe don't empower them or who just feel insecure about their disabilities—I think it's completely my responsibility to lead by example. You can have a disability, whether it's cerebral or physical or whatever the "developmental disability" is, as they call it these days. You can't always cure it, it might be something you have forever, like with me, but it also means you can have an excellent life and step up to a lot of challenges and surprise the hell out of a lot of people including yourself and you can do more than maybe you thought you could. That's definitely a motivation for this record.

MR: What was the recording process like?

KF: That was super fun! Richie Gallo, my manager, knew of a producer he had worked with back in the day whose name is Mark Mazzetti, and Richie and I really believed in the songs. So we got in to the studio in Hollywood with Mark and his engineer Anthony Brodeur. It was a really intimate recording. It was just Mark, Anthony, and me with a couple of guest instrumentalists coming in some days. It didn't take very long. It was over the course of a few weeks but it was only a few days per week. It was the ultimate work experience; we had stuff to get done and we wanted to do it well, but it was so much fun.

MR: When it was fully recorded and you listened to the project from top to bottom, what was your impression?

KF: I couldn't believe it was happening. I had dreamt of this whole idea several ideas prior, so to hear it on record and to see it happening was just amazing. It was the stuff of dreams. It's fantastic. Unfortunately in life a lot of dreams of our don't come true, it's just a harsh, cynical truth, but sometimes they do! I had this idea years ago about, "I want to write these songs for the kids, it's all the stuff we talk about in class that's going to come out like rock 'n' roll," and then I made my own really cheap demo that sounded okay but kind of demo-y. But then I met Richie and he championed the whole thing. We got into the studio and it was the same songs, but they sounded great. I was so impressed with the production quality and Mark's work in the studio. It was so impressive. I also really liked collaborating. I was so impressed with how Mark and Anthony understood the vision and the ways they produced the songs to deliberately to make the songs sound like rock 'n' roll but also with a children's edge to it. I was just so impressed with the whole thing.

MR: What does "success" mean for this album, and maybe even your career as it moves forward?

KF: I just hope that people like this record, it's just a labor of love for me. It was so much fun to make and I really hope that the people I made it for and everyone else can enjoy it. Like a good Jim Henson project, anyone can enjoy it. You can listen to it with kids, you can listen without the kids, I just want everyone to like it. I have lots of other songs ready to go, this was just sort of the first little bit, but there's lots of volumes already written and ready to go. Hopefully, if people like this one then the Muzic School record label that we created can make more projects to follow up "Songs About Us." And, of course, there's other types of endeavors, even though I would love to keep doing this forever. There's music I've written that's not necessarily for children, there are so many projects out there, so many different collaborations and things to tackle, hopefully this will springboard all of that.

MR: I always ask, what advice do you have for new artists? I also want to ask what advice you have for artists with disabilities, but that totally undermines everything you just said, doesn't it.

KF: Well done, Michael. My advice for new artists is just keep creating, never stop, because the one function of an artist—before you get money, before all those lofty goals come into play—is to create stuff. It's like being an inventor, but your medium is the arts. You just want to keep creating. Just don't stop. Don't let anyone stop you. Don't get discouraged, just keep creating, stay focused. The more you make, the greater you amass your own body of work, the more you'll be encouraged to do more. It's kind of like the more you do it, the more you'll want to do it, because you'll see that you can do it. "Look at all these songs I made!" They might not be perfect, you won't love all your creations the same necessarily, but the more you'll do it the more you'll be inspired to do it, and the more you love what you do typically the more other people will love what you do and you'll continue to strive and make quality work.

MR: Picture it's your last day of school and you're giving advice to the students you've worked with musically. What advice would you give them?

KF: It would be very similar advice. Don't be discouraged, and if you love something, you just have to follow it; you'll be unhappy if you try to ignore it. But I'd also probably want to recommend to my kiddos at the school to not let things get you down. There was sort of a bit of typical issues with neurosis and being depressed, because a lot of these guys are aware of their disabilities, and sometimes when you're aware of them that can be a downer quite frankly. I would definitely recommend just don't get down, everybody's different, everybody has some kind of a disability, everybody is somehow talented and somehow not good at something. No one's good at everything. I would just remind them, you are loved, no matter what you do, no matter what you have. You're a person and you are thus lovable and awesome and have something to offer the world.

MR: What's on Kerry Fenster five years from now? What will have happened?

KF: We're talking about 2021?

MR: Yes, President Whoever's second term.

KF: Are we talking jetpacks? Because I'm really interested in jetpacks, and Jeff Goldblum's teleportation devices from *The Fly*.

MR: Jeff, you don't want to abuse the machine like Goldblum did, just a heads up.

KF: [laughs] I would like to think that we've released more volumes by Muzic School. *Songs About Us* is just volume one. I would like to think that this record was endeared and enjoyed and that we make more records and that I'm able to make music not just for this population—although I want to continue to—but for all different audiences and keep expanding. Getting to collaborate with other artists is such a joy for me. This one was kind of just me with some help. But I would love to expand on collaborating and just keep making more records and keep amassing the body of work I've done, and keep trying to make the world a better place through music. This record is amazing and I'm so psyched to be part of it, and I'm just so proud of everybody that was part of it, because we all came together. This is not a typical record, it is kind of an unusual amalgam, it's for special needs, it's for kids, but the music isn't necessarily kiddie music. It's a niche and I just want to give a shout out to all of the people involved with it, my manager, the producer, the engineer, all the people who came in and did some really great backup, everyone just got it. It's not the easiest record in terms of making it, a lot of people were sort of like, "I don't get it, is it for kids? Is it for adults?" I'm just really proud of the people who collaborated on it, and they're amazing.

MR: That definitely evokes one more question: Just how much did The Beatles' *White Album* inspire this album?

KF: [laughs] Clearly, the lineage is there. "The *White Album* For People On The Spectrum" is what I want this album to be reviewed as. And in a way, that could be argued, because just like the *White Album*, there is a definite production narrative through line where you can hear that these songs all belong on the same album and the sequence is very deliberate, and also like the white album the genres are a little bit varied. There's a heavier rock song, there's a really cute, light folk song, there's a real up tempo ska song. Hopefully, in the years to come, this will be revered as the *White Album* of special education records.

Transcribed by Galen Hawthorne

CHECK OUT KERRY FENSTER'S APPEARANCE APRIL 2ND AT THE ROSE BOWL!

FYI, *Songs About Us* (which includes a cover of Pete Townshend's "Pinball Wizard") is the first in a series of releases from the Muzic School label, and a portion of all net proceeds will be donated to various children's charities. The project is available at all the usual spots, like Amazon, iTunes, CDBaby.com, etc., and both digital and physical formats include lyrics.

For more information: <http://muzicschool.com>