

Coming full circle

Beth Garner's musical journey leads her back to the blues.

By Blue Lisa

BETH GARNER IS AN ARTIST AT THE PEAK of her powers, as a guitarist, vocalist and songwriter. And the story of her musical journey getting here is as captivating as her talents.

The journey began in Dallas, where Garner benefited from her mothers' love of the arts. The Garner children were taken to the opera. Enrolled in dance classes. And encouraged to play musical instruments. The boys first: Andy (drums), Scotty (guitar) and Robbie (bass); and then the twin girls – Linda (bass) and Beth. But of the siblings, Beth's musical drive would prove the most relentless and lead to her destiny – as a passion and a life.

She sang in school choir and played flute. The real spark, however, was ignited watching G.E. Smith on Saturday Night Live. How she wanted to be in his shoes, playing with that awesome band! She knew – “I want to do THAT!”

At 14, Garner picked up the guitar and was ambitious from the start. Early on she decided to learn the Star Spangled Banner to play on Fourth of July, but of course, the Jimi Hendrix version. Being new to the guitar, she didn't quite master it, but it helped lead her to one of her life's passions: the Blues.

When other young women her age were worshipping at the altar of the latest pop princess, Beth instead studied the mastery and zeal of the Kings: Freddie and BB, Magic Sam, and Otis Rush. Soon she was attending Blues jams, like the immensely popular ones hosted by Dallas Blues kingpin Hash Brown.

Her guitar and vocal skills were mentoring by Brown and scores of other internationally renowned musicians that called Dallas home but frequented these jams when off the road. Professionals that they were, they sensed her potential and nurtured her ambitions. In 1994 at the age of 16, Beth, with her sister on bass, began gigging in the local Dallas/Fort Worth/N

Texas Blues circuit.

Driven to learn and improve, Garner set her sights on attending the prestigious Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas, enrolling as a Jazz Guitar Performance Major. Along with other talented students who would soon make their marks on the music world, Beth immersed herself in Jazz. She also learned about Black Southern Soul, Gospel and R&B.

In addition to studying the styles, Garner gained an even more important education when she actually got the opportunity to play with some of the biggest local names in these varied genres when they came to the school.

Jazz allowed Garner to go deeper places with her music. She still loved blues: the realness and earthiness of it. But Jazz introduced new rhythms and timings and she was captivated. Her guitar skills and vocal prowess took on a new richness. Wanting to continue this education, when she graduated from high school she moved to Austin to attend Southwest Texas State University (now Texas Tech San Marcos).

There she dove headfirst into the diversity and creativity that is the Austin music scene. Exposed not only to the Jazz of such artists as Wes Montgomery, and the iconic Austin Blues scene, but Surf guitar music as well, these new influences seeped into her soul and her style.

After two years, she transferred to the University of North Texas in Denton to complete her Jazz Performance degree. And while she dug even deeper, increasing her knowledge of legendary Jazz artists (such as Pat Metheny), Denton's eclectic scene exposed her to Americana,



She graduated from the Booker T. Washington High School: Beth Garner

including Jack Ingram and 1100 Springs. Assimilating all these new sounds into her own, she continued to grow as an artist.

Finally she was ready to make music a career. Beth began playing clubs and festivals across Texas and in the winter of 2001, self released her first CD, *Much Later For You*, a collection of blues originals and covers. The project charted at #4 on local KNON Blues radio. And to this day songs from the release are on XM/SiriusBlues Radio's continued play list.

By this time, in addition to fronting her own bands, Garner had toured with a number of other acts including Blues slinger Shawn Pittman, Pakistani rock band SHOR and Bruce Springsteen E-Streeter Danny

Frederici. In 2006, her career took a fascinating twist when she signed on for a US tour with the zany Russian Rock and Rollers The Red Elvies. “It was such a unique experience,” says Garner. “We played small sold-out venues to enthusiastic crowds all across the US. I gained a lot of fans and learned new things about my own country crossing it with a van full of Russians!”

But the defining moment came in 2001 — that moment when she knew her destiny to was to make music her life. After watching fellow Booker T Washington alumni Norah Jones gathering Grammy awards as the years went by, Garner decided it was time to take control and kick her career up a notch. She released *Much Later for You*, a

collection of Blues originals and deep covers functioning as not only musician, but as producer and arrangers. In the dark days after the 9-11 attacks when the whole country seemed to be trying to refocus and reprioritize, Beth came to some life changing conclusions.

Deciding things were just not happening in her beloved Dallas, she made a sudden decision to pack up and in a few days had moved back to Austin to start playing music full time.

“Faced with what really mattered,” she says, “I thought — What do I want to do with my life and as an artist. I am a messenger. I need to create the music only I can create. I need to be true to myself.”

2005 saw Garner sign with

English label Armadillo and in 2006 she released *Addictions*, a collection once again of mostly original compositions. But in contrast to 2001's Blues release, this one showcased her Country, Americana and Jazz influences. The project charted at #3 on the Euro-Americana charts. Two tours of England and Wales followed.

Feeling the need again to grow as an artist, in 2006 she moved outside of Texas for the first time, to Nashville, Tennessee. Her first four years in Music City, USA were intense: playing show after show, sometimes for 8-12 hours straight in Downtown's Broadway district. Broadway offered a lot of work for an enthusiastic and driven musician like Garner: a few closely packed streets consisting of about three dozen clubs, some three stories tall with live music on every floor.

Live music started around 11 AM in the district and continued until 2:30 AM the next morning. Much of the material was standards, but the audiences were appreciative and enthusiastic about her original material as well. She became part of the cities vibrant music community, finally making a good living financially doing what she loved most and, buying a house, settled in.

Playing night after night with not just good musicians but great ones sharpened her already considerably developed musical talents.

She was in the middle of a great place in her personal and professional life when her old friend, The Blues, came calling. Early on, the music had moved her and she had the proficiency to play it well. But now, with a wider rang of life experiences, she had the understanding to really feel it.

From her old friends call came a new project, “Snake Farm”, a return to her native Texas Blues, but this time with the added bonus all of her life's influences infusing her style. She wrote 6 songs and decided to add the Ray Wylie Hubbard penned title track — a favorite at her live shows. And Beth hand picked the best of the best to play on the CD — those with a fire in their souls reflected in their playing.

So with the world wide release of *Snake Farm* on February 24, Garner's musical odyssey takes yet another step. Feeling she has truly come full circle, Beth is thankful for her Texas roots, but self-assuredly moving forward. And those confident steps promise great things for the future. This is a woman on a mission. It is a pleasure to watch her soar! ■

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