



She's played for The Tonight Show, now the Park Center

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For clarity, poetry and just hitting the mark, for me the gold standard for opening lyrics are measured against "Downbound Train" by Bruce Springsteen: "I had a job, I had a girl, I had something going mister in this world. I got laid off at the lumberyard. Our love went bad, times got hard. Now I work down at the carwash where all it ever does is rain. Don't it feel like your riding on a downbound train."

Springsteen quickly sets a melancholy tone to a heartbreaking digression that end stanzas ahead with a man begging on his knees.

Singer-songwriter Mary Cutrufello's first lines of "I'll Still Love Your Forever" conjures up some of that same Springsteen sensibility with, "If you leave, if you go, there just one thing I want you to know. You'll be aside me for the rest of my life. I won't apologize and I won't think twice."

Described as a "Texas honk-tonk heroine" and "a fiery Midwestern roots-rocker," Cutrufello will take the stage at 7:30p.m. Saturday, Nov. 16, at the Park Center in Hayward and many – like me - will be attending to meet the woman who wrote those lines and surely has stories behind the lyrics. This won't be Cutrufello's first appearance at the Park. She performed here in the band with Michael Perry and the Longbeds, but the Nov. 16 show will be her first as the headliner.

Cutrufello is a Yale graduate who left her East Coast roots in the 1990s for the Texas music scene. She was signed to a six-record deal with Mercury Records and toured with Springsteen's E-Street keyboardist Danny Federici. Cutrufello was the featured musical act on Jay Leno's Tonight Show in 1998 and appeared on the musical showcase Austin City Limits.

She met Perry, the New York Times best-selling author who moonlights with his band, the Longbeds, while Perry was on a freelance assignment. Cutrufello, who then was grabbing noteworthy reviews in Rolling Stone, Newsweek and People, was the subject of the interview.

But her career took a sharp turn when her record deal with Mercury fell through after the record label was merged with Seagram's and PolyGram. In 2001, she left Texas for the Twin Cities. The move was not just because she wanted to experience four seasons – she did – but during her tour with the major record label she was impressed by the people had she met there and their level of musicianship. She also had a sense that another act, like Prince, was set to make it big.

Cutrufello continued to perform but to pay the bills she also became a FedEx driver.

In 2012, Chris Riemenschneider, writing for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, called her "the biggest rock star the Twin Cities music scene doesn't yet know!"

When it comes to making music, Cutrufello calls herself a "lifer" who is following a calling - be it on the Tonight Show or a local stage. Her last record, "Faithless World," was released in 2014, but she's also passionate about other things and when she had the opportunity to further her education she couldn't say no and recently obtained a master's degree in urban and regional planning from the University of Minnesota.

"I've been able to observe a lot of cities and how people live in them and what makes them work and not work as I am traveling around being a musician," she said.

This Americana performer said her performances are about making connections by singing her original songs – and some standards - and always telling stories.

"I try to take the audience on a journey with me," she said. "I tell stories between songs. I try to contextualize the songs, some of them are going to be kind of heavy and sometimes I'll tell stories to not let the room get completely gloomy. Michael Perry does the same thing. He tells stories to be funny, but not all his stories are funny. You try to strike that balance. It makes for more meaningful evening if you acknowledge that life is full of both funny moments and somber, serious or heavy moments!"

Favorite conversationalist

Perry said he had to get up the nerve to ask Cutrufello to play with his band. Their first performance together was at a county fair after a horse pull.

"The horse pull went long," Perry said. "There was dust flying everywhere, and we were separated from the crowd by a mud bog racing pit. All Mary did - besides play scorching solos – was talk about how interesting the horse pull was. That kind of sums her up. It's great to have a lead guitarist who can rip it up onstage; it's even better to have one who can fill long van rides with good conversation.

"Mary's guitar playing reflects her long history of playing country music in the toughest Texas roadhouses, but her conversation reflects her knowledge of history, old railroad trains, urban planning and whatever else you wanna have a go at. The fact that she drove a FedEx truck and went to Yale makes her my favorite kind of conversationalist. She can discuss Romanticism or split-shifters. But above all, you gotta hear her play and sing!"

Someone else who has known Cutrufello for years as a performer and also a friend is John Adler, a singer-songwriter who performs as SonofMel. The two met decades ago while Adler was working at a ski lodge in New Mexico.

"Mary Cutrufello is an absolute one of a kind whose songs funk up rock and rolling country in blistering root rhythms," Adler said. "She lays down the law with every delivery. Her telecaster turns solos into tablets from Sinai while she can also slink through existential delivery driver blues.

"She was blazing a new trail many have thus followed long before her first performance on The Tonight Show and national tours. She invented 'woke' when I accompanied her drive down to Little Red River, New Mexico, on a night in the early 90s when she walked into a honkytonk filled with folks just sitting around ignoring the band. She got up and took the lead guitar and mic (microphone), and then filled the dance floor within a minute. Then did the same thing across the street 30 minutes later. Her performances are a 90-minute mic drop. Obviously I can't say enough grand about her."

Information -

More information on Mary Cutrufello is available at www.marycutrufello.com.

Advance tickets for the Saturday concert are \$20 and are available at Art Beat in downtown Hayward or online at www.TheParkCenter.com. Tickets are \$30 at the door.

Students 18 years and younger are admitted to Park events for \$5.