

M U R I E L

ZOE

INTERVIEW

·AN INTERVIEW WITH MURIEL ZOE
BY "AKUSTIK GITARRE"
EDITOR STEFAN WOLDACH

An Interview with Muriel Zoe by “Akustik Gitarre” editor Stefan Woldach:

Since this is a magazine that caters to guitarists, let's get the most obvious question out of the way first: When and how did you start with the guitar?

I was probably about 11 years old. The sister of a family friend showed me my first chord. Then my father showed me another. Those two chords kept me fairly busy for a while.

Did you take lessons for guitar and voice or are you self-taught?

After some time, I started taking some lessons from a kid at school who was a little older than me. He played in one of the school bands and could ride a bike hands-free while holding the guitar tucked under his arm...my first guitar hero! I learned a lot from him, mainly through playing, singing and listening to records together. I also had a few voice lessons at one point, but most of what I've learned has come through trial and error and some good tips that I've picked up here and there over the years.

Were you raised in a musical family? Did they support the idea of you doing music?

Some of my most beautiful childhood memories are of me sitting next to my father while he played the guitar. Those were peaceful moments where time just stood still and everything else could just simply wait. I spent my elementary school years in a boarding school in southern India where my family was living at the time. At school we sang a lot, but unfortunately not a lot of Indian music... mainly Christian songs in English. I got a fair amount of approval and support from my circle of friends and fellow musicians.

Tell us a little about your experience with your early band projects....

My first gig was with that guitarist I took lessons with. We played in Hamburg at the “Logo” on one of their singer/songwriter nights. My cousin from California was visiting at the time and took photos of us the whole night. He thought we sounded pretty good...I was obviously very happy to have his approval.

In 1990, I participated in the “Popkurs” in Hamburg and met some musicians through whom I had my first contact with jazz. This was new territory for me and my curiosity was piqued. Over time this grew and between 2002 and 2005 I recorded my first two albums with the jazz label ACT. These two albums were primarily jazz standards and other covers with a handful of originals. Writing, singing and accompanying myself on guitar have remained the most important thing for me however. And for that reason it was clear that doing more of my original material would eventually become my focus. I tried out my songs with several different line-ups until I came across the musicians that eventually ended up being the band for my third album “Flood”. With them, things just fell in to place in the most natural way.

I also tried some co-writing with different people, but soon found out that the best way for me to write is alone... amongst a smudged up pile of paper and a couple of guitars.

Who would you call your all time biggest influence?

It's hard to say. There are so many! And in the case of some of them, I'm not even aware that they were an influence. The closest to my heart would probably be Rickie Lee Jones, Bonnie Rait and Elliot Smith.

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How do you write your songs? Where do you get your inspiration?

Funny enough, most of my ideas come while I'm moving...either on a bike or in a car or bus. That's when my thoughts get into the flow. It might be just a few good lines of text or part of a melody...then I just jump on it! At first, I just kind of casually play around with it so I don't scare it off. It's kind of like when you've just fallen in love but you don't want to scare the other person off by telling them that you want to have four kids with them! There is usually something around that I can use to scribble down my ideas. I've been meaning to get myself a proper notebook but that just hasn't happened yet. In the meantime, I usually carry around a motley collection of used envelopes, napkins and receipts with me. Then I throw the whole lot onto my bed and start looking for something I can use.

At this point I record a quick sketch in my home studio and start trying out different accompaniment ideas for the guitar or a harmony for the vocal line. Even though it's usually just the guitar and voice, recording a sketch helps me get more of a "birds eye" view of the song. It makes it easier to decide what I might want to change and what I want to keep.

What role did Stephan Gade (who produced the album), Tim Lorenz, Fontaine Burnett and Martin Gallop (and others) play in the making of this album?

Well, I basically just showed up on Stephan's front door with my demos in hand. I've always loved his playing and way of producing, so I knew all along I just had to have him be a part of this. We played in the basic tracks live with me on guitar, Stephan on bass and Tim on the drums. Stephan was responsible for the arrangements. There wasn't a lot of discussion about which way anything should go...it was all quite clear from the start and we just laid it down.

Then Fontaine Burnett (Muriel's duo partner for the live shows) and some other good musician friends came into the studio, put their hearts and talents at our service and helped us complete the tracks.

How do you see the development from "Flood" to "Birds and Dragons"?

Birds and Dragons is kind of like the sequel to Flood. A more mature and developed version of the last album.

What was your biggest challenge in making this album?

For me, I think that would be trying to sing and play just as relaxed in the studio as I would if I were sitting on the edge of my bed at home. Recording in a familiar atmosphere like Hafenklang Studio with some trusted musical colleagues was an ideal situation.

Which guitars did you use for the recording and which ones do you own?

For the album I used my 1968 Gibson Blueridge. I borrowed a couple of guitars from Hafenklang: a wonderful 2009 Gibson J-45 and a 1966 Epiphone Caballero.

Other guitars that I own are a 1999 Takamine EN-10c, a 2006 Fender 60's re-issue Telecaster and my very first, very inexpensive concert guitar which actually belongs to my daughters now.

Do you work on your guitar technique?

I'm pretty lazy when it comes to that...but I guess I do just through playing.

What do you do when you are not making music?

On those rare occasions that I get to choose, then I stay in bed with some coffee and a good book or two.