

Patty Larkin gets a little help from her friends

KATJUSA CISAR | The Capital Times | kcisar@madison.com
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It was a message in a bottle, times 25.

For her new album "25," Patty Larkin recorded her voice and guitar tracks on 25 love songs and then, with minimal instructions, sent one song each to her favorite singer-songwriters, including Mary Chapin Carpenter, Suzanne Vega, Willy Porter, Bruce Cockburn and Rosanne Cash. Backing vocals, instrumentation, percussion - it was up to them to add to the music as they saw fit.

Larkin, who grew up in Milwaukee but has lived in Boston since the '80s, says the album is a celebration of 25 years in the music business and "a thank-you to people who have been with me and listened to me for all these years and to the people who have worked with me for years."

She spoke with 77 Square on the phone last week from Australia, on a solo tour that swings back to the United States this week and stops on Friday, April 9, at the Brink Lounge.

You've been getting poetic with a few of your tweets from Australia. What do you think of Twitter and other social media?

At first it was a chore, but now I'm having a lot fun doing it. I'm evolving, I guess. I think I was resistant because everybody told me I had to do it. But with this project, "25," we've seen especially on Facebook, you know, a connection between the other artists' sites and my site. There are conversations going on. People are meeting up. There's someone [Semi-Precious Weapons] who's opening for Lady Gaga who's a fan of mine, and I would never know that if not for Facebook.

Why did you keep your requests to the other singer-songwriters on "25" so open-ended?

That's the way I like to work. I didn't want to say, "Can you do a high harmony here and a low harmony there...?" It's interesting to see what some people came up with, things that I never would have done. I'm much more by-the-book, and Jennifer Kimball and Jonatha Brooke and Erin McKeown, they're just outside of the box. That's just the way they are in life. What I wanted most from people was their personality. It gave these songs new life.

The music industry now makes it easier to make, release and discover music. Does that breadth of choice ever become intimidating?

You know, I always think I'm taking this huge left turn and being so wacky-weird, but it always ends up sounding like me. I always think I'm this wild person and edgy, but basically I'm an Irish Catholic from Wisconsin. It comes back to who you are on the planet -- like Laurie Anderson always sounds like Laurie Anderson.



Greg Brown is going to be in the Madison area (at the Stoughton Opera House) the day after you're here. What's the story behind him driving in an Iowa blizzard to record his part on the song "Here" for "25"?

He had to do a lot of work to get this track done, you know? He's never recorded without singing with the person he's singing with in the same room. It was like a leap of faith for him to take this one or two hour snow drive and then to record without me there or without any live performer there. I told him it's like a love letter. It was so exciting to get it back from him and see what he did on that song. I just kind of heard his voice resonating, you know? He's an icon. To me, he is Americana. He's a national treasure, like the Walt Whitman of songwriters.

When you perform on this tour, how do the contributions from other singer-songwriters on "25" affect your solo interpretations?

I played "Lately" recently and I whistled the solo like Martin Sexton. I miss them. I'm used to hearing some tracks with them on it. You know, I say "We're going to have holograms with their faces up there!" I get to talk about the people in the show, just what they did on it and who they are. It mixes it up for me because I'm tired of talking about myself.

Do you ever think of moving back to Milwaukee?

I do. It's a little cold. It's my heart home. Sometimes I regret leaving and having run away so completely as a young adult, but I think it was important to feel that independence and go play music with all kinds of musicians and get that exposure. Someone like Willy Porter can do it, or Peter Mulvey. But apparently I had to leave. Now it's just a little too far away.

How's work coming on your next project?

Well, I have to begin the writing, and you feel like a slug at the start. I think part of it's the physiological and physical (act) of picking up the guitar instead doing something else. That's what begins it for me. It's not pretty. It takes a little while to scrape the surface and start to get to what you're thinking or hearing. Inspiration followed by work, that's the weather report.

I try to think of something like Bob Dylan who probably sat down and wrote 50 verses before he stopped, rather than "Oh, okay, I've got two verses and a chorus and a bridge and that's good enough." How about five more verses or ten more? It's the coming back to it that is the work. Usually for me it's the words that take time. Then you have to jettison it, or take one line and say, "Okay, I've got one line!"