

UP YOUR IMAGE

Silvia Kohan — Beyond the Fat Girl Blues

Silvia Kohan is a San Francisco Bay Area singer who was born in Argentina. Her first album, Finally Real was released by Dancing Cat Records in October 1984. Her original song, "Fat Girl Blues" has been a favorite among the West Coast women's communities for many years.

How did you get started as a singer?

My mother wanted to be a singer. But she did what was expected of her, rather than what she wanted. For as long as I can remember my mother would always put me in front of people and say "And now my daughter's going to sing." My mother sang her passion. The minute I stopped singing, she'd start. I got a lot of the Latin influences in my music from her. When I reached my teens, I knew entertaining was what made me happy — it was what I wanted to do. I came to the United States from another country, and I didn't speak English. Music was the one way I could communicate and the one place where I didn't feel outcast.

Who and what has influenced your music?

Musicals! I know the words to practically every musical written after 1957 — the year I came to the States. Later I got more into jazz. Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Lena Horne — those are the women who inspired me. I was also very influenced by the music of Piaf. Seven or eight years ago I began to discover my roots, to find out what kind of soul music I came from. Now I sing Yiddish, Hebrew and Spanish, with a few English songs here and there.

What prompted you to start performing more Jewish songs?

Pianists Dovidia Ishatova and her mother Henia Goodman were doing a show about surviving the holocaust and their mother-daughter relationship as Jews, as survivors. They invited me to join them, we travelled together for several weeks. For a long time before that I didn't use my last name. I didn't want people to know I was Jewish, for good reason. Luckily I got over it. At one point I was Silvia D'Singa. Jewish women in the women's community were doing a lot of work around internalized and general anti-semitism. The more I loved myself as a Jew and didn't want to hide anymore, the more I wanted to be singing Jewish music.

How did your album come into existence?

After the tour with Dovidia and Henia my father died and I was ready to quit the music business. Then I got a phone call from someone I had known in L.A. — George Winston. He had always promised if he was ever in a position to produce an album of my music he would. So he took me into the studio and we made the record — talk about dreams coming true! And I didn't have to compromise! I didn't have to lose weight for

it, and I could have an all-woman's band. I'd been struggling for twenty years, always feeling like my size had a lot to do with whether I got hired.

As a performer how have you dealt with people's emphasis on appearance?

I used to dress outrageously. Ten years ago I wore a purple satin jumpsuit with red high-top sneakers. It wasn't until I drew that kind of attention to myself that I was noticed. I just decided that fat is not going to hold me back. I strutted my stuff and I was loud and big and took up my space.

How does the audience react when you act outrageously?

They just love it. But I've become more conservative; I'm not as naive as I used to be. Now I'm much more willing to be my regular self. When I was being outrageous it was hard to create an atmosphere in which I could be intimate. Now I'm much more present. Communicating with my audience is very important to me. But I'm still aware of being a fat woman 100 percent of the time.

Are there fat women performers who have been inspirational to you?

Sophie Tucker, Cass Elliot. Certainly Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn are not thin women. In the women's movement one of my examples was Linda Tillery.



Photo by Irene Young

How did you decide to write "Fat Girl Blues"?

It came out of a major depression. For a long time I thought that what went wrong in my life was because I was fat. I got home one day and realized that I had had the fat girl blues ever since I was nine:

Being teased and being lonely that's how I spend my time

My life as a fat girl had its ups and downs

The downs were wearing girdles, the ups were being high all the time on amphetamines

My envy of those slim ones got deeper every day

There was no way of telling how long I'd be that way.

People used to tell me I would lose that baby fat

But slowly I discovered that fat is where it's at

Now my baby fat years are coming to an end

'Cause it's a stong, fat, happy woman who's standing here today.

How did you move from being that blue fat girl to that strong, happy, fat woman?

By being involved with a group of fat women. This was a way for me to start feeling sane — to feel strong and good, about being fat, about being a woman, being a lesbian, being a Jew, being poor . . . there was a political context in which to put my life, as well as a personal context.

How did your attitudes about "fat" change?

The "Fat Underground" started putting together information about how harmful dieting is and what to do about the oppression they experienced as fat women. When I read the material I found a place for myself and a whole new life began for me.

What have been some of the high points in your performing career?

When I was with Up With People I got to sing at Carnegie Hall. We went to Germany. I hadn't done all the Jewish identity work I've done now, but even back then, I knew going to Germany was major, as a Jew. It was monumental. We crossed the U.S. three times in the six years I was with the group.

After that I joined the Venice Free Theater, and at every performance I'd get a standing ovation. I thought, "They really like me. I can really do this." That was the beginning of my solo work.

Certainly the women's music festivals have been a great experience for me. The support I get from doing all women audiences was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

What would you say are the main themes that occur in the songs you perform?

About ten or twelve year ago I decided that I wanted to sing to women about women's struggles.

I sing Maxine Feldman's song about her mother, a woman who's reached her fifties, her husband's dead, her child's gone and now what?

I bring sexuality, self discovery and politics into my music. I sing about work, how you make your money, and the kind of compromises you make. I sing about what it's like to be an immigrant, and a fat one at that. To let people know I like what I'm doing I try to bring in a lot of humor. I always hope that by the end of the evening we'll have a little better consciousness about things going on in the world.

What's in store for the future?

Well, I have two more albums to do. George signed me for three. I still get scared and insecure, but basically I feel I'm on a path. Sometimes I'm shocked and I think "God! I do have a voice!" I often get overwhelmed but when I step up to the microphone — my voice is there. She's a strong tool.

I'm going on tour in September. I now feel emotionally and physically prepared to get out on the road, sell the album and get ready for the next one.

And how does your mother feel about your career?

She loves it! She loves the album. Watching me become a singer has been great for her. She encourages me a lot. She's my friend.

BARBARA RUTH is a free-lance writer from Berkeley, California.