

Karla Bonoff still loves the stage

**By Jon Matsumoto
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In 1976, Karla Bonoff had three of her songs included on Linda Ronstadt's hit album "Hasten Down the Wind."

Thirteen years later, Ronstadt sang three more of her tunes on another popular album called "Cry Like a Rainstorm, Howl Like the Wind." One of those tracks, "All My Life," earned Ronstadt and her duet partner Aaron Neville a Grammy Award for Best Pop Vocal Duo.

Toss in a 1993 No. 1 country hit Wynonna Judd scored with her song "Tell Me Why" and the impression you might get is that Bonoff is first and foremost a songwriter. In actuality, the Los Angeles-bred artist feels she has always been as much a vocalist and performer as she is a tunesmith.

"I don't separate them, because I've written songs and performed from the beginning," Bonoff says. "People know me as a songwriter because other people recorded my songs, but I can't really separate those things."

This weekend, Bonoff will showcase her skills as a performer and singer in shows in Berkeley and Santa Cruz. Sprinkled in with her catalog material will be some more recent songs that were featured on her 2007 concert CD, "Karla Bonoff Live."

On stage, she will be backed by her longtime collaborator Kenny Edwards on bass, guitar, mandolin and vocals and guitarist Nina Gerber.

Bonoff began performing at open mike nights at L.A.'s famed Troubadour club when she was just 16. After briefly attending UCLA in the late '60s, she was part of a short-lived band called Bryndle. The group also included Wendy Waldman, Andrew Gold and Edwards.

A self-titled debut solo album was released in 1977 by Columbia Records. Because it came on the heels of Ronstadt's "Hasten Down the Wind" and included the three songs she wrote for that album, Bonoff often was compared to Ronstadt. At times, there was even the misperception that Bonoff was playing Ronstadt's material, when they were actually her songs.

"I was opening for Jackson Browne out on my first tour, and I was playing those songs," recalls Bonoff, who also plays guitar and piano on stage. "I just assumed that people would know that I wrote them. All of a sudden I went

assumed that people would know that I wrote them. All of a sudden I went, 'These people think I'm playing Linda Ronstadt songs!'

"I had to start explaining to audiences that these were my songs. After that they would come around and be really excited."

Overall, Bonoff expresses a great deal of gratitude toward Ronstadt for covering her songs and helping to shine a light on her own performing career. When Ronstadt recorded her songs "Someone To Lay Down Beside Me," "If He's Ever Near" and "Lose Again" on the "Hasten Down the Wind" album, Bonoff was little known and struggling financially.

Bonoff recorded three albums in the late '70s and early '80s. Her second album, "Restless Nights," reached No. 31 on the Billboard album charts, but stardom eluded her. Mostly known for her ballads, Bonoff says she was often pressured by Columbia to come up with the type of up-tempo songs that were favored by pop radio at the time.

Interestingly enough, Bonoff's sole single to reach the Top 40 was a song she didn't even write. The jaunty, but somewhat formulaic, track "Personally" reached No. 19 in 1982.

"That song really wasn't representative of what I do," she says. "It was what they used to call a faceless hit. People liked the record, but they didn't identify it with anybody. Those type of records don't make careers. A song needs to come from the core of what you do."

Following "Personally," Bonoff said she tired of trying to conform to what Columbia Records expected from her artistically. She recalls going "on strike" for a while, and Columbia subsequently dropped her from its artist roster.

Since that point, Bonoff has only released one solo studio album of fresh music, 1988's "New World."

Bonoff says her meager output of new music over the years is attributable to her inability to write songs quickly. However, she harbors hope that eventually a collection of new tunes will be available to her fans.

"I'm a really, really slow writer," admits Bonoff, whose songs also have been recorded by Bonnie Raitt and Nicolette Larson. "I'm also not particularly motivated all the time. I'm not one of those people who has to write to be happy. I don't have a collection of really good songs yet that I would want to put out a studio album."

Bonoff did release two albums with the reunited Bryndle in 1995 and 2002. She says getting that band back together was special, because the members felt

shortchanged during the '70s when the only album it made during that period was never released by A&M Records. Bonoff says the record label was unsure of how to market the group.

But with the band members busy with their own projects and lives, more Bryndle activity in the near future appears unlikely.

Bonoff believes her current concerts demonstrate a vocalist who has grown a great deal over the years.

"I feel I have become a better singer than I was when I first started," she says. "I've learned about endurance and singing. At this point of my life, I'm probably in the best physical shape, and I know how to pace myself."

At the age of 56, Bonoff appears to be enjoying life. She calls living in the beach community of Santa Barbara "paradise." She also enjoys staying in touch with her fans through her concerts, which number about 30 to 40 per year. Bonoff performs across the United States as well as in Japan, where she has a strong fan base.

"I don't want to lose contact with my fans," she says. "Otherwise, you feel sort of isolated. Plus, this is such a great way to make a living. I really appreciate that I've been able to survive in the music business doing this pretty much my whole life."