

Songstress in a new hometown

MUSIC REVIEW

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Five years back, singer-songwriter Karla Bonoff became another celebrity escapee from Los Angeles, stealing her way up north to Montecito where the living is easier. Friday night at the Lobero Theatre, Bonoff finally played her first adopted homecoming gig, lavishing the crowd with a surprising passel of songs she's penned over the years. It was an evening of pleasant surprises and reassuring moments from one of the more talented singer-songwriters to emerge from the '70s Los Angeles scene.

"Santa Barbara, finally," the amicable and witty performer sighed, before launching into one of her lovely tunes, "Home.

This was a show close to home in more ways than one, being also a benefit show for the Santa Barbara Zoo. Bonoff, a confessed animal lover, demonstrated the good humor of her stage manner by plopping two toy stuffed meerkats on the grand piano, like mute mascots for the evening.

Her living, breathing partner was the multi-faceted Kenny Edwards. Switching from bass to guitar to mandolin, he always offered tasteful solo turns and seamless vocal harmonies, to boot. Sporting a fine new CD himself, Edwards -- who also produced some of Bonoff's '70s albums -- opened the concert with a warm set of his own songs, ranging from the bluesy "You Tore Me Apart" to the restless chordal and lyrical motions of "Will I Ever See You Again."

Edwards is a romantic, clear-eyed and wary in just the right

degree, an attitude that also describes Bonoff's songbook, but with pop savvy added.

Bonoff's songbook is chockablock with well-crafted tunes, simple enough to state their unpretentious case. She's from the era of unapologetic sincerity, before irony crept into the firmament of pop music through new wave and other movements. Heard afresh all these years later, her songs sound like models of restraint and emotional directness, and they usually veer just to the side of cliché. A song like "If He's Ever Near" relies on more than just the usual folk and pop chords, dipping into some Brill Building sophistication.

Many of her best-known songs sneaked into the Top 40 via versions by Linda Ronstadt, whose own vocal style Bonoff's resembles. Her voice is intimate, but capable of belting, and the distance between those two poles is always in control.

On Friday, the hits, of both the single and album-cut variety, kept coming. "All My Life" made its way to pop's collective memory through a duet version by Ronstadt and Aaron Neville, but sounded great in Bonoff's court, as did the grandly dramatic, set-closing finale of "Someone to Lay Down Beside Me."

One of Bonoff's newer hits, Wynonna Judd's fetching take on "Tell Me Why," scored on the country charts, which shouldn't be a shock. Bonoff has some country and western and folk elements in her songwriting vocabulary, a touch of twang, as heard in a song like "I Can't Hold On."

Inversely, Nashville has leaned heavily towards the legacy of the L.A. folk-rock singer-songwriter heyday of the '70s lately.

A sense of irony was not lost on Bonoff that her one Top 10 hit, 1982's "Personally," wasn't an original, and she subjected the tune to injections of comic relief. For the final encore, Bonoff again turned away from her own songbook, but this time without

flippancy. She chose the lovely old English folk song "The Water is Wide," which, she explained, she learned as an L.A. teenager from Frank Hamilton of the Weavers. Bonoff sang the tune with a persuasive purity that had nothing to do with the Hit Parade, embellished by Edwards' lovely tangled vocal harmony on the last verse. It was hardly show biz as usual.