

Tania Alexandra headlines Eastern Keyboard Show at Steel City

By David W. Wannop
Correspondent

This Saturday at Steel City Coffee House, relative newcomer Laura Shay, whose rockin' piano complements her contralto voice, will share the stage with the lovely and melodic Ellen Lerner on a program featuring the strange twists and turns of Tania Alexandra.

Originally from Englewood, Colorado, Alexandra has unique points of tension in her music that help redefine the term rock opera. Her songs don't just tell one story, though her warm sensuous presence is a story in itself. Her songs have the intangible beauty of high art, despite using pop music as a base.

Recently, Alexandra was reflecting on her musical influences. "Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, was and continues to be one of my greatest influences. He was a doer, a dreamer, and was truly inspiring. And he knew how to have fun in the process.

"When people ask me who influenced me the most

musically, I like to say 'my father,'" she continues. "He's not a practicing musician but he introduced me to a wide variety of composers and musicians, from Stravinsky to Pink Floyd, Freddie Hubbard to Tom Waits, Laurie Anderson to John Cage, Hildegard Von Bingen to Kate Bush. These are examples of some of my youngest influences. I'm usually inspired by any artist that creates from his/her own passion whether it's in or out. I'm happy to say that there are some pretty fantastic local artists here in Philly that have that passion and inspire me as well." One of these inspiring musicians is

Monica Mac'Intyre who plays cello in Alexandra's band.

Alexandra spoke of her creative process. "My lyrics are inspired by so many things — conversations, ponderings, nature, people, a lot of feelings, my own experiences, other peoples' art work. I get seeds

of ideas at very random moments, which is why it's good to keep a pen and paper handy at all times, and yet I don't, so sometimes my ideas will be



Starring in the all-woman Eastern Keyboard Show at Steel City Coffee House on Saturday, Dec. 6, are (L to R) Laura Shay, Ellen Lerner and Tania Alexandra.

written right on the palm of my hand.

"But the bulk of the writing happens," she continues, "when I am completely alone — usually at my piano, but not always, because that's where it feels safest to explore the seemingly most absurd ideas and really go with them without judgement to dampen their possibility."

However, Alexandra is careful when addressing high-minded musical structure. "Usually the musicians I work with are excited about the unpredictability in some of my music, because it

gives them a little more of a challenge and a chance to explore," she explained. "Also, I don't like to talk too technically about the music because although there are some uncommon time signatures or chordal structures, that's not the focus of the music. In other words, I don't say 'gee, I'm going to write songs in 7/6 today.'"

Of course, like all musicians, Alexandra had to learn her craft. She related, "I was performing in musical theater since I was 7. Also, when I was young, my parents put the family piano in

my bedroom because I played it all the time, and the house was small so it gave more space in the living room. I used to use it like a diary and I would make up songs and figure out how to accompany myself.

"I took piano lessons for a couple of years in middle school, she said, "and in high school I played the oboe as well. Then I studied vocal music education at Ithaca College, where I learned that while studying music can be beneficial, it's more important to believe in what you're doing, separate out all the negative ego that sometimes is found in art schools, and have passion to explore creatively."

One fascinating facet of this charismatic young woman is that she has only recently entered the commercial music market. "Emergence," her second album, was released this year, and she has been using Philadelphia as her musical laboratory.

Our conversation included a veiled and murky allusion to a dark side and a difficult period that led to many of her recent songs. She continues to believe that her creativity has gained her a healing path and greater insight. Yet she is bright and truly captivating in live performance. As for her own favorite song, she stated, "All of my songs are like children to me. I have different favorites at different times."

MUSIC

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Steel City Coffee House

Main & Bridge Sts.,
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