

Bringing it all back home: Shelley Doty rocks Berkeley

By Andrew Gilbert
October 13, 2015

Shelley Doty didn't play in the school jazz band as a teenager but one concept she picked up at Berkeley High continues to shape her musical world. The polymorphous ensemble she brings into Freight & Salvage on Thursday is known as the Shelley Doty X-tet not because as an X-factor guitarist, songwriter and vocalist she can rock, groove, swing, stomp or croon as the particular musical moment demands. Rather, she christened her band with the indeterminate letter because "I recall from high school algebra that X is a variable," Doty says.

"Over the many years I've had the X-tet the number of musicians can be different per night. The wonderful thing at the Freight is that throughout the night the number will change. There are all these musicians who I love to play with, and we'll have duos and trios and larger lineups with maybe as many as 10 people."

As a co-founder of the band Jambay in the late 1980s Doty played an essential role in sparking the Bay Area jam band scene. In many ways this edition of the X-tet builds on her early musical associations, with a rhythm section featuring her Jambay compatriot Mike Sugar on bass and drummer Dale Fanning, who's best known for his work in Seattle jazz power trio The Living Daylights with saxophonist/vocalist Jessica Lurie.

"Dale and I have been playing music together for decades, and he's one of the best drummers in the world," Doty says. "And Mike Sugar is so ridiculously talented. He can transmute ideas into music with no effort at all. He's the kind of cat you can throw anything at him and he'll make something incredible happen. There's always magic when we play together."

Oakland pianist/keyboardist Julie Wolf, an in-house producer at Fantasy Studios, is one of the essential creative

forces on the Bay Area music scene, who's worked widely in theatrical settings while collaborating with singer/songwriters like Carly Simon, Ani DiFranco, Bruce Cockburn, and the Indigo Girls. And East Bay percussionist/vocalist Vicki Randle spends most of her time these days singing backup for the legendary Mavis Staples (though she and Doty also collaborate in the band Skip the Needle).

"Julie's resume is so huge," Doty says. "She always finds the perfect way to accompany someone. I love to let her open it up and get into the improvisational side of things with her, as well as all the pop music stuff. And Vicki is such a powerhouse. I'm constantly discovering instruments that I didn't know she could play. On Thursday she'll be singing of course, and playing acoustic guitar and percussion, and maybe be doing some surprise bass playing."

Randle and Doty's Skip the Needle partner Kofy Brown will also be on hand, as will Green and Root vocalist Green Huse, who recently produced a captivating evening of Joni Mitchell songs at the Berkeley Arts Festival gallery that featured Doty on a gorgeous solo version of "For the Roses." Mitchell was a formative influence on Doty's songwriting, along with an eclectic array of artists including Billy Joel, Kate Bush, David Bowie, and Joan Armatrading.

Her mother was good friends with alto sax star Cannonball Adderley, and growing up in Berkeley Doty was surrounded by jazz, folk and classical music. Her older brother turned her on to rock 'n' roll, and she had something of an epiphany discovering the music of Heart.

"It wasn't until I fell in love with Nancy Wilson's guitar playing that it clicked in my head, hey I can do that," Doty says. "She's doing that. I can do that. That's why I feel it's so important for young women to hear me and other women play."

After graduating from Berkeley High in 1984 Doty

Bringing it all back home: Shelley Doty rocks Berkeley (contd.)

headed south for college and spent four years at UC San Diego focusing on biology before changing to a music major shortly before graduation. UCSD is where she met Sugar, guitarist Chris Haugen, and drummer Matt Butler (who's now running Everyone Orchestra), her bandmates in Jambay. She spent about six years touring nationally with the group, which recorded three albums before they disbanded in 1996.

She came up with the umbrella X-tet concept as way to stay connected with her expansive network of collaborators, a close knit community that stems partly from her longtime involvement in the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. She and Randle were on hand in August when the event celebrated its 40th and final season. With its variable personnel, the X-tet fits her needs as the mother of an almost nine-year-old son. "I've put a lot more energy into learning how to be a mom and less into marketing my brand," she says.

With Doty's numerous influences defining her brand has never been easy. She's often hired as a rough-and-ready guitar slinger, but she's just as inclined to pick up an acoustic guitar for a stripped down session. The Freight has long served as her primary East Bay showcase where she gets to explore "all the different sides of my musical imagination."

"To be able to play the full acoustic singer/songwriter thing and know I'm also going to let my electric guitar speak for me for five minutes makes me so happy," she says. "I love playing a bar, but to be able to do it all in one night and present a concert where there's a little bit of everything is huge. Music is a form of language, a form of communication. It's play. I get to play music with my friends, like we're kids, and that's amazing."