



ON SCREEN MUSIC THE VELVET ROPE LIFESTYLE SIDE DISH OFF THE WALL ON CAMPUS ARCHIVES

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STREET PEOPLE: Delaney Gibson goes from opera to alt-rock, country and beyond

By George Varga
POP MUSIC CRITIC

Delaney Gibson does not "have a nuclear bomb for a brain," as she sings in "Champagne & Cyanide," a standout song from her upcoming debut album, "In the Worst Way." Nor is she a professional model, although at the age of 16 she appeared in an episode of "Baywatch" (in which David Hasselhoff "tickled" her on the beach).

But Gibson, 24, is a promising singer-songwriter. She's also a trained opera singer who earned a degree in music in 2006 from Cal State Northridge. Her next local performances will be tomorrow at 7 p.m. at Java Jones downtown and Sunday at noon at the Borders bookstore in the Gaslamp Quarter. She'll preview songs from her album, due out Sept. 2, and sell advance copies at both shows.

How did you get into opera when you were only 9? "I wanted to learn the fundamentals of music and be able to sing anything. I also liked the gymnastics of it ... it's the best vocal workout ever ... and it really stretched me. And the costumes! I love playing dress-up."

Speaking of which, tell me about the colorful costume you wear on your album cover. Is that a ballerina's outfit? "It's a pink tutu. I love wearing a tutu on stage. In the full picture on the back cover, I'm holding balloons, and it's kind of a nod to 'The Wizard of Oz'; my striped socks kind of represent the Wicked Witch of the East."

Opera requires a lot of discipline. How many hours a day as a kid did you study and practice? "I sat in my room pretty much the whole day. I was an only child and I'd sit all day and learn songs and sing pop songs. I would learn the pop stuff on my own, because I loved it. I must



have sat for eight hours a day in my room, every day, during summer vacation. When I was in school, I'd practice at home probably four to five hours a day. I spent every day working on music; I was kind of a nerd."

What kind of school did you attend? "I went to a little Lutheran school. Most of the stuff I studied, starting when I was 9, was classical music, like art songs and different things. My teacher showed me one Kurt Weill song, and I fell in love with all the German cabaret music. Ute Lemper is amazing! Anything that was dark and moody and morose I fell in love with."

When did you begin performing in rock bands or as a solo singer-songwriter?

My first band, Delaney Gibson, was when I was 15, up in Ventura. It was really cool. I had these seasoned musicians in my band because I had a manager at the time.""

How does a 15-year-old get a manager? "He owned American Music Guitar Shop. I went in to buy a guitar and he asked me if I could play and sing. So I did, and he decided to manage me. We actually ended up recording a demo with Blues Saraceno on guitar and Josh Freese on drums."

How did it turn out? "The music was terrible! My manager was terrible ... he wouldn't let me write any of my own songs, except for one. I hated it, but it was the best learning experience ever, because I got to work with great musicians. My manager wanted me to be a cross between Courtney Love and Britney Spears, and it was terrible."

I'm having a hard time trying to imagine what a cross between Courtney and Britney would be like. "It was rock music and he had me in a little Catholic schoolgirl's uniform. But I got to work with really great people. Unfortunately, I had signed a contract until I was 17 and couldn't get out of it. My manager shopped the album to Capitol and Columbia Records, and they said: `We really like her, but this music is *awful!*' He didn't listen to anyone and, still, to this day, doesn't listen to anyone. I don't think we parted on good terms."

What happened after your management contract expired? "I went my own separate way. Shortly after that, I enrolled at San Francisco State as a music major. That's when I really started playing piano and writing music full-time."

Didn't you begin performing jazz in the Bay Area? "I was in a couple of jazz ensembles in school. I got into Dave Brubeck; Brad Mehldau is my favorite pianist. The group I sang in, in college, was taught by a lady who had toured with Bobby McFerrin in his vocal group, Voicestra. Then, at night, I'd go play little coffee shops and try to hone my songwriting. In 2002, I moved to Cal State Northridge."

Why? "I was in a really bad relationship -- it had nothing to do with music -- and I wasn't as creative as I knew I could be. It wasn't the right environment for me. Northridge has one of the best music departments in Southern California. I was going to go to USC, but I liked Northridge better. It was really great; I made so many contacts in the music industry in L.A."

So, you were pursuing classical music by day and pop music by night. Were they two different worlds, or did they ever meet or merge? "My teachers usually got mad at me. Because I'd be up all night playing at rock gigs and then come in the next morning, and they expected me to have a crystal-clear opera voice. They wanted you to do one thing only and I wanted to do everything -- musical theater, pop, opera. Luckily, my teacher had been on Broadway as well as in many operas, so she understood the love of both."

You also got a few acting gigs. Which was your first one? "My first big one was `Boston

Public' in 2003 or 2204. I was on 'Baywatch' before that; I ran past David Hasselhoff, I was the girl that he tickled. I ran on the beach and he tickled me, and I ran away."

Why did he tickle you? "That was just my character. I was the 'cute girl on the beach.' The show's not really deep."

It sounds kind of creepy -- David Hasselhoff tickling an underage girl. "Yeah, I think a lot of the storylines were creepy. I was part of the Surfrider Foundation in that episode and we were trying to save Diablo Cove. I got pneumonia because we were on the beach for nine hours."

When and how did you become a member of the Screen Actors Guild? "I did the 'Boston Public' job and got my SAG card. I had a friend that knew the vocal contractor for 'Boston Public.' They invited me to audition and I got a role as a 16-year-old high school student, singing 'My Boyfriend's Back' in the school talent show. It was really fun."

Did you get typecast for roles where the character was a 16-year-old girl? "It sounds like it. You kind of get placed into one of two age groups -- you are either a teenager or an adult, and I guess I'm still in the teenage group, which is good. I'm not going to complain. One of the other girls in the high school talent show was 30. I was on MTV's 'My Own' show I remade the Natasha Bedingfield video for 'These Words.' It was a lot of fun.
"They came and interviewed me. They said: 'Tell us your name and age, and show us your apartment.' I said: 'I'm Delaney Gibson, I'm 24 and this is my apartment.' And they said: 'No, no, no! That won't work. Just say you're 21,' because 24 is too old for their audience, which is really sad."

In 2004, you performed as part of a choir at the Kodak Theater in Los Angeles, with Barbra

Streisand and Barry Manilow, at a fundraising concert for the Democratic Party. What songs did you perform with them, and what were they like to work with? "We did a bunch of patriotic songs, like 'God Bless America.' It was a fantastic evening and they were both great to work with. We didn't have much contact with Barbara Streisand, but Barry Manilow came up and talked to us, and thanked us for being there. Barbra Streisand had it marked off so that nobody could walk past her dressing room. So, we had to go outside the building and walk around it to get to the side of the stage we needed to be on."

Your album, "The Worst Kind of Way," cost \$40,000 to make. Apart from your investors, who put up a total of \$5,000, how did you underwrite it? "I worked full-time, doing graphic design for a year, plus my music jobs, and saved all the money I could and put it toward my album. That, and a little credit card debt, and you're good to go. It's major-label quality. All I need is a big label to put its sticker on it. That was my goal ... to make an album they could pick up and wouldn't have to redo. All they'd have to spend on is publicity."

"I Think I Have OCD" and several other songs on your albu have a nice country music tinge. Where does your affinity for country music come from? "From listening to Dolly Parton at such a young age, and Emmylou Harris and Patsy Cline. I also love all the folk singers, such as Joan Baez. All that old stuff has such a sincerity to it, which I think a lot of music is missing."

Are there any similarities between country music and opera, vocally speaking, that people might be surprised by? "I don't think there are too many similarities, although country music uses more of your vibrato than pop ... and there's a lot of vibrato in opera. There are American operas by people like Aaron Copland, which is very Americana/folk, so I can hear some

similarities with country, but not with Puccini."

Do you ever perform opera or classical-music gigs now? "Usually for corporate events or private parties, where I've done everything from Kurt Weill to Puccini to jazz standards. And if you would like to hire me, I'm available."

Given your operatic training, are you overqualified to sing pop and rock? "No. It can get in the way of things, because sometimes you can be a little too precise or have too much vibrato. Sometimes in classical music, people don't find their soul. And that's what I love about folk and alternative music ... you can really put your soul into it."

What's worse: Playing gigs with a rock band in a bowling alley in Eagle Rock, or getting tickled by David Hasselhoff on "Baywatch?" "I'd have to say: David Hasselhoff. I think I got paid more for the bowling alley gigs. Plus, I got to bowl for free and I got free Chinese food from the restaurant next door. And the band was really cool; it was called Rock Inc. and the same members had another band called Swing Inc. So, depending on the gig, we were either a Top 40/classic rock band or a swing jazz band."

What's next for you? ""Releasing my album, trying to get it out there as much as possible, and -- hopefully -- getting it picked up by a good label. And to keep working at songwriting. I really have good hopes for this album; I'm very proud of it."

Do you have any advice for young singer-songwriters hoping to make a go of it in music? "Yeah. You have to work every hour and every second of every day at your craft, whether it's networking, writing music, talking to people or whatever. There's always somebody who will be better than you, so you have to give yourself every opportunity and love what you do, because there are nights when no one will be in the audience. And try to be as humble as possible."

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