

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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In April 2008, Seattle alternative-weekly paper *The Stranger* [dubbed](#) Shenandoah Davis its artist of the week, writing that “fans of Joanna Newsom have a local act to love.” The comparison to the idiosyncratic harpist/singer/songwriter was flattering, but there was one problem: Davis had never played in public as a solo artist.

She began to get inquiries about shows, but she was unseasoned as both a songwriter and performer. “I remember very distinctly that there was one show that I was so nervous about I canceled it maybe half an hour before – the second show I was ever supposed to play,” the 26-year-old Davis said in a phone interview promoting her September 16 show at Rozz-Tox.

So started a steep learning curve for Davis, who began playing piano as a toddler and has a degree in opera performance but has been writing her own songs for less than four years.

She released her debut, *We; Camera*, in summer 2008, and *Seattle Weekly* [called](#) it “artful, harmonic music” blending “classical sounds and modern pop.” She toured over the past three years and last month unveiled

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The Company We Keep

. “With piano, horns, and her slightly quirky – and gorgeous – voice, Davis flirts with whimsy and vaudeville, but her songs still remain more thoughtful than theatrical,”

The Stranger

[wrote](#)
of her new album.

“I think the songs on *The Company We Keep* are much more specific, and when I was writing them I felt much more comfortable with my own experiences and the idea of sharing my experiences with other people ... ,” Davis said. “When I was writing the lyrics for *We; Camera*

three years ago, ... that kind of vulnerability was really frightening to me – that anyone who wanted to could go download a song off of iTunes and hear a story from my life.” She called her first record “a lot more vague, and the experiences that those songs were written about were kind of blown out to the more universal kind of idea, because I was afraid of directly communicating what I wanted the songs to communicate.”

The fear, she said, dissipated as she performed more. “That moment came just from being on tour a lot and playing a lot of shows in front of strangers and hearing feedback from a lot of audience members ... ,” she said. Courage, she added, came from people telling her that their favorite moments came in slower, unguarded songs.

She called *The Company We Keep* a collection of a dozen “snapshots”: “It’s the idea that when a relationship ends, regardless of the way that it ends, you take away from it the memories and shared experiences that are impossible to re-create.”

Reviewing the album, Ball of Wax Audio Quarterly [said](#) that Davis is “one of Seattle’s most talented singers, and she’s also one of our best songwriters.” But it started with the same comparison as *The Stranger*, saying Davis “sounds like Joanna Newsom without the cringe.”

For those who *like* Newsom, I’d say that Davis shares her thin, agile warble but generally chooses to restrain her vocals. And, crucially, Davis’ musical settings – often anchored by cello, keyboards, or piano, a contrast to Newsom’s harp – tend to be earthier and more grounded, and reference the classical and early-20th-Century-popular-music traditions. That makes them more accessible but still unlike just about anything in the contemporary music landscape.

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Despite her degree, Davis' voice doesn't sound particularly operatic, which she explained simply: "I don't feel like I'm naturally an opera singer." She had no formal vocal training prior to college and hadn't taken piano lessons since she was 11 or 12. "I knew that I wanted to study music in college but ... I just felt like I wouldn't be able to get into a music school with a piano audition," she said. "But there are so many components to singing other than what your voice sounds like ... that I thought there was a better chance that they might let me skate by on the singing" She was correct.

Still, she said, opera informs her songs. "One of the things that I like the most about opera music is how big it is and how melodramatic it is," she said. "And that's something I do try to adopt a little bit when I'm writing songs. But I feel like that does not need to be carried over into the vocal side."

Shenandoah Davis will perform on Friday, September 16, at Rozz-Tox (2108 Third Avenue in Rock Island). Doors open at 8 p.m., and Sub Atlantic opens. Admission is \$5.

To listen to Shenandoah Davis' The Company We Keep, visit ShenandoahDavis.BandCamp.com . Her Daytrotter.com session can be found at [RCReader.com/y/davis](http://Daytrotter.com/session/RCReader.com/y/davis)