

Pin It Beneath Glass: Julie Byrne, May 28 at Rozz-Tox

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Few people would be surprised to find Julie Byrne working in the service industry. The singer/songwriter, after all, is in her mid-20s with one album to her credit, and it's hard for an emerging musician to make ends meet performing for small audiences and selling records one by one.

But if you see Byrne working at Rozz-Tox in the coming weeks, it's not for *that* reason. Instead, she's the first artist-in-residence at the venue, and her one-month stay in the Quad Cities – running through early June – will include a show on May 28.

The residency, Byrne said last week, originated with the idea of finding something to fill the gap between a two-month tour and her summer concert bookings. "I knew that going on such a long tour would be really wonderful and really exhilarating but also challenging just because there's no privacy and no space to reflect on these constant, rapid experiences – each day in a new place," she said. "So I was trying to figure out a calm, tranquil environment where I could exist

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after the tour to kind of take it all in and begin working on new material.”

Many people would return home, but Byrne sublet her room in Seattle indefinitely. So she contacted Rozz-Tox proprietor Benjamin Fawks about starting a residency program. (Byrne did a [Daytrotter.com session](#) and Rozz-Tox show last year and struck up a friendship with Fawks.)

In exchange for her performance and helping out a few days a week at the café, Byrne gets a free room – and the opportunity to recharge in a new setting. During her residency’s first week, she said, she’d been taking long walks along the river.

“It feels very peaceful to me,” she said of the Quad Cities. “Things seem to move at a slower pace here than what I’m used to, and it feels really reviving.” In other places she’s lived – Buffalo, New York (where she grew up), Chicago (where she recorded her album), and Seattle – “you have to work so hard to live.”

While the residency is intended to help an artist create, Byrne said that she’s not approaching her month here with concrete goals. “The beautiful thing about it is that there isn’t much structure,” she said. “I’ve been reading and playing more than I’ve been writing, because those kinds of practices inform how I approach my music or how I want to create. I can’t really sit down and write a song. It takes a long time.”

But don’t mistake her activities for leisure. “I read to develop a certain rhythm and language that I’m not really exposed to in my daily life,” she said. “I think it’s just constantly staying stimulated. When you get inside of the world of someone else’s language, this sort of intrinsic, innate movement starts showing itself in your day-to-day. The way that you process things is influenced by what’s in your mind.”

She added that her goal at Rozz-Tox is to “explore my own intention I’m approaching my time from an inner place of will rather than an outer place of action. ... I would really like to finish a couple songs that will be on my next record, but I want it to happen really organically, and I don’t want to put any time constraints on my creativity inside of this place.”

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That introspection is certainly reflected in her music – which is simple, intimate, and hushed to the point of being nearly hermetic. As Pitchfork.com [wrote](#) about her debut (which collected two cassette-only EPs): “Julie Byrne doesn’t sing her ice-crusted songs so much as murmur them beneath her breath. And ‘finger-picking,’ while accurate, feels far too percussive a word for her guitar-playing; it’s more like she brushes the strings with her fingertips, like wisps of hair obscuring her vision. ... Her album, *Rooms with Walls & Windows*, feels like a secret she’s keeping from you, even when it is safely in your headphones.”

With the exceptions of two instrumental pieces for synthesizer, the album is just Byrne and an acoustic guitar, and it does indeed sound as if she’s mostly singing to herself – because she was. After dropping out of college, she said, she was under-employed and living in a loft space in the Windy City. “Starting to record was really just a way to fill time in the beginning,” she said. “I didn’t record those songs with the intention of anyone outside of my pretty insular community to hear them.”

But when Drew Gibson – who was also living in the loft – offered to release the live-to-tape bedroom recordings on his Solid Melts cassette label, Byrne didn’t hesitate. “I was excited by the opportunity,” she said. “And I think a lot of those songs were written in a really trying part of my life, and it was good to exorcise them through music and release them to get them out of me that way. It was really cathartic.”

The songs on the album were recorded in 2010, roughly three years after Byrne began writing songs and playing guitar. Her father was “an incredible finger-picker, really fluid,” and he also sometimes sang at weddings. But multiple sclerosis made it impossible for him to play guitar, and Byrne said that “I became interested in learning a couple of years after he was unable to play. ... Now I think of it as an inheritance.”

Early on, she said, singing and playing for an audience “terrified me. And it was kind of thrilling. I would just become almost incapacitated by how nervous I was. Those kind of experiences, you know that those are the important ones, pushing yourself like that.” She added that shows allow her “to feel almost immediately connected” to an audience.

Rooms with Walls & Windows is unapologetically lo-fi, and Byrne said it reflects the “spirit of all those songs having been recorded where I sleep and work and live. It’s a real window. It’s a sincere depiction of what those times were like.”

Pitchfork's review said that "she sings everything in the same cloaked, low voice, and over the same skeletal arrangements, which gives even the mundane sentiments a portentous ring. Her version of folk ... mine[s] the uncanny from the everyday stuff lying around. ... Sometimes we locate more meaning in sound than in sense, and Byrne's album sits at the nexus where one melts gorgeously into the other."

The recordings have a cavernous character – positioning haunted solitude against vast space.

Mojo

[noted](#)

that Byrne's songs "unfold from bare folk simplicity to abstracted tales of homelife and longing that conjure up a simultaneous feeling of warm-cabin intimacy and a deep interior sadness."

Musicians typically say that they can't pick favorites among their song children, but Byrne gave the most concise and incisive explanation I've yet heard: "Each one was important to me as I was writing it. And I needed to write it at the time. So it's difficult to choose."

But she said she's particularly proud of "Marmalade," a reflection on her time in the Chicago loft: "It took me six months to feel like it was finished, and I think it included a lot of people and moments that can easily bring me back to that time. Or maybe it included details that I would have otherwise forgotten."

She said that although her melodies are simple and repetitive, the lyrics are often aiming for moving targets: "I want to be true to my experience, and if I can't figure it out quickly enough, my experience changes. So it's this constant evolution that I kind of race against to try to pin it beneath glass or encapsulate it."

She said she plans to begin recording her next album this summer in an old grain silo in her hometown in New York that's been converted into an arts space.

"It won't be as sparse," she said, and will include friends accompanying her – likely on cello, violin, reeds, percussion, and "ambient tape stuff": "I have some kind of structure for it imagined in my mind, but I kind of just want everybody to do what they feel, and then discuss it."

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While it will feature fuller arrangements, they will likely expand on Byrne's delicate folk rather than devour it.

"I've always wanted to play pop music – music that people can dance to," she said. "And I have started writing a couple of pop songs. But that would be a totally different project."

*Julie Byrne will perform on Wednesday, May 28, at Rozz-Tox (2108 Third Avenue, Rock Island; RozzTox.com). The 8 p.m. all-ages show also includes *The Room Outside*, and admission is \$5.*

For more information on Julie Byrne, visit JulieMarieByrne.com or SoundCloud.com/juliebyrne

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