

Starting from the Bottom (Again)

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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The story of Mary Cutrufello is not exactly a rarity in the music business. It's the tale of an artist who draws a lot of attention from major labels, comes this close to achieving her dream of superstardom, and then watches in disbelief as the bottom falls out. The difference is that Cutrufello is eager to start the whole process over.

 In Cutrufello's case, her label Mercury was swallowed up by Seagram in 1998, shortly after her major-label debut was released, and then her dreams of being a rock star were dashed – temporarily, at least. She'd had a sip from the fountain of rock stardom – having appeared on <l>The Tonight Show</l> – and then it dried up.

 Cutrufello was released from her contract, and for a year she toyed with the idea of going to grad school, and hanging up her music dreams. Few people would have blamed her if she did.

 But during the year she took off to consider her option, something nagged at her. "There's always that guitar in the corner," she said.

 The guitar won that battle, and Cutrufello is back on the road. She'll perform with her band on Thursday at 10 p.m. at RIBCO.

 It's not surprising that making music drew Cutrufello back. The amazing thing is that far from being bitter, Cutrufello is eager to return to a major label. In an age when independent and vanity labels are all the rage and when denigrating the major labels is so easy it's not even fun, she still wants to play with one of the big boys.

 "I know that it can happen, and I know that it can happen for somebody doing the kind of music I'm doing," she said. "It's a market that's best served by a big ol' record in the classic mode." A major label can offer "massive promotion and massive penetration."

 Cutrufello has heard the disbelief that often greets her interest in jumping back on a major label, but she doesn't find it all that strange. "I'm kind of justifying wanting to play for the Yankees," she said. "For what I do,

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why not?

 “My experience had nothing to do with inherent flaws in the record industry. It was about multi-national companies beating each other up.”

 Cutrufello’s music has most often been compared to the straight-ahead working-class rock of Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp, but a better comparison might be with Melissa Etheridge. Cutrufello’s voice has plenty of sandpaper and soul in it, and she often compresses it into a growl. Hers are elemental songs, built on catchy riffs and sold by Cutrufello’s fiery, heartfelt delivery.

 The guitarist, singer, and songwriter has been working with her band on demos, and she said that’s she’s about ready to record some music to shop to the labels, which is important considering that her Mercury album is nearly five years old. The new demos are a bit more intense than her Mercury debut, and also a bit more straightforward rock and roll.

 Cutrufello had spent her whole life on the East Coast and graduated from Yale before re-locating to Texas in 1991 to write and perform country tunes. By 1997, she had returned to her first love – anthemic rock music – and began grabbing the attention of people in the music industry. That led to her courtship by a number of major labels.

 Unlike a lot of artists, she wasn’t interested in a massive advance; she wanted the label’s support: money to tour and promotional muscle.

 Mercury offered “far and away the best package,” Cutrufello said. “There was a reason we chose that label.” Mercury solidly backed <I>When the Night Is Through</I>, but the merger with Seagram led to a changing of the guard, and the new people weren’t nearly as keen on Cutrufello. She was released from her contract and began her soul-searching.

 But when she decided that she still wanted to perform music for a living – “to get on stage and make a connection; it’s an incredibly powerful thing” – she had to start at the bottom again. And that’s what she’s doing from her new home base of Minneapolis.

 “We were on the radar long enough and hard enough that everybody remembers,” Cutrufello said. But “you still have to show you’ve got the goods.”

 It’s a long way from major-label tour support to doing it yourself again, but Cutrufello claims to like the seemingly menial tasks of booking, touring, and public relations. (She sets up her interviews herself, for example.)

 “I’ve had some moments of, ‘God, I haven’t had to do this in 10 years,’” she said. “Certainly I’m saving money by doing it myself, but ... I’m indulging my enjoyment of the hands-on part of it.”

 And while her Mercury experience cast doubt on her future in music at one point, you shouldn’t expect Mary Cutrufello to go quietly away if she hits a bump in the road.

 “I’m afraid I’m a lifer,” she said.