

Written by Mike Schulz

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While listening to Kelley Hunt perform – the singer/songwriter’s joyously smoky, soulful blues vocals a perfect match for her funky and fiery piano skills – it’s easy to imagine that the Kansas-based musician never lacked for confidence. As she admits during our recent phone interview, though, she actually did. She just didn’t tell anyone.

“When I was about 17, I was in a band with my brother’s friends, and these were older guys – like 21 or whatever,” says Hunt with a laugh. “I wasn’t singing at all; I was just playing these keyboards that they had. And one night we were playing for an event at the college in Emporia, where I grew up, and we were being paid, and the gal that was supposed to sing just did not show up. And it was time to start, and the guys looked at me and just said, ‘Oh my God, we hope you can sing.’”

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“I was pretty much horrified,” she continues. “I mean, I knew I could, because I was doing it in school, but never in this kind of setting. So at that moment, I just made a conscious decision: ‘I’m going to pretend like I’m all about this, and I’m going to pretend like I’m

not

scared out of my gourd.’ And I just slammed it out for a couple hours, and I remember thinking, ‘Well, (a) nobody here even knows there’s anything different, (b) the singer’s fired, and (c) I now get paid twice as much.’”

Laughing, Hunt says, “I just stepped into it brazenly and naïvely, and just assumed that it would all work out.”

Good luck finding a blues fan, or blues-music critic, who thinks it *didn’t*. Since the release of her self-titled debut album in 1994, Hunt has wowed concert- and festival-goers nationwide with her glorious, unrestrained singing and piano-playing, whether on poignant, impassioned ballads such as “Love” (from her 2009 CD

Mercy

) or foot-stomping, boogie-fueled anthems such as “I’m Ready” (from her latest offering, 2011’s *Gravity Loves You*

).

Hunt’s reviews, meanwhile, have found *The Onion* praising her “socially charged lyrics with a voice that’s part powerful gospel yearning and part bawdy soul-shouter,” and

Blues Revue

magazine writing, “Hunt’s vocals and captivating piano-playing work together to lift each composition to gravity-defying heights.” Not bad for a musician who insists that her entry into the blues scene “really wasn’t by design. It’s just kind of what seeped into my bones. I couldn’t help it.”

A resident of Lawrence, Kansas, Hunt says that during her childhood in Emporia, “I was surrounded by music my entire growing-up life. My folks listened to a lot of jazz and blues and R&B, and my older brother and sister brought everything into the house from Jimi Hendrix to Howlin’ Wolf. It was all happening in our house.”

Consequently, Hunt’s early affection for the blues, she says, “came party through osmosis, I think. I also heard a lot of gospel music growing up, and sang in church when I was younger, and there’s such a heavy thread of that in the blues. I love that full-out approach of singing with

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your whole soul, and I think there's a dose of that in all kinds of music. I'm really attracted to that."

She was also, by age three, enraptured by the piano. "My parents got an old upright piano that was refurbished from a player piano," says Hunt. "It was so beat up that the black keys were worn down, so my dad painted them turquoise blue. My parents thought my sister and brother would probably play, but I had to have my hands on it, and pretty soon – once they realized that, every day, I was asking to be put up on the piano bench – everybody else fell away from playing it. It became clear: 'Oh, this is for *her*.'"

As a youth, Hunt continued to play the piano and sing – she performed in her first band, at age 16, "to help make money to go to college" – and her nascent songwriting skills inspired her to pursue a music-composition major at the University of Kansas. "But even though I was in the school of fine arts," she says, "almost every weekend I was doing some performing, either by myself or with a little band, and that's kind of when I realized I didn't want to *stop*."

Hunt says that after two and a half years of undergraduate studies, including her addition of a minor in voice, "I had to decide if I was going to be a music therapist, if I was going to go into opera – I was singing almost *all* opera at KU, which was great training – or if I was gonna teach. And I just sat down with my folks and said, 'You know what? I can't do *any* of those things.' And astonishingly enough, they said, 'Well, then, what would you like to do?'

"So I made the choice to go into the full-time performance mode," says Hunt, who – with her parents' blessing – consequently dropped out of the university. "I immediately started writing on a full-time basis, and my parents helped me get some equipment so I could support myself performing, and that was my *own* little graduation."

Discovering that "especially if you're driven, and you're focused, all kinds of opportunities open up," Hunt says, "I just started working right away, getting every kind of performance opportunity I could get. I would just put myself out there in any way possible," and wound up supporting herself through solo performances, jam sessions with other bands, and teaching songwriting workshops for area school systems.

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“I look back now,” she says, “and I wonder, ‘How on Earth ... ? I started when I was 20 years old, and I was by myself How the hell did I *do* that?’ But it worked out!”

Her professional breakthrough, though, really came with 1994’s *Kelley Hunt*, the solo album that Hunt says “came about because I was newly divorced, and I was a single mom, and I was in shock. So I had a moment of thinking, ‘Sink or swim – what’re you gonna do?’ And I thought, ‘Screw this. I’m swimming.’”

She met Out Loud Talent manager Al Berman, “whose company was doing booking and promotions and all kinds of things for artists,” says Hunt. “I said, ‘Look, I want to do a CD of all my own music, and these are my goals ... ’ and everything. He said, ‘Well, if you could have anybody produce it, in your wildest dreams, who would it be?’ And I thought of Mike Finnigan.”

An acclaimed, Blues Music Award-winning vocalist/keyboardist – and fellow Kansas native – who toured with the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Joe Cocker, and Etta James, Finnigan met Hunt a few months prior to her Out Loud Talent meeting. “I *loved* him,” she says. “And I had given him a tape of a bunch of my songs – just me playing the piano and singing – and it turns out he *kept* it. So when Al called him, he said, ‘You know what? I’m *up* for this.’ So I went out to L.A., and Mike put together a stellar list of musicians, and it was during the hardest time of my life.

“Which turned into the *best* time of my life,” Hunt adds. “Fortunately for me, the stars aligned, and I got the help of a lot of really soulful, wonderful people in the business, and I just went from feeling very crushed and grief-stricken to, ‘Oh, this is my opportunity!’ I’d call my mom and say, ‘Holy shit, guess what! Aretha Franklin’s guitar player just came in and asked me what I wanted to do on a song!’ It just freaked me out. And I ended up thinking, ‘Yeah. I can *do* this.’”

Five albums later, Hunt and Berman continue to collaborate, serving as co-producers on Hunt’s last three CD releases – all of which have been recorded and mixed analog, with only minimal time spent in digital studios.

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“I think the main perk of analog is the warmth of the sound,” says Hunt. “That and the immediacy of it. When I record, one of my favorite things to do is to have everybody there at the same time. It doesn’t always mean we can be in the same *room*, because I’m usually playing an acoustic grand piano, but it means we can hear each other and many times
see
each other, and I love the immediacy of that. And I love the surprises that can happen.

“For example,” she continues, “on the *Gravity Loves You* CD, there’s a cut called ‘Shake It Off Right Away.’ It’s just a throw-down, crazy, over-the-top boogie number. It’s just ridiculous. While we were recording, we were all just going, ‘God almighty ... ! Strap in!’, like we were shot out of a cannon. And toward the end of the track, I start

laughing

. I mean,

everybody

is, forgetting that if this one’s the keeper, that sound’s going to be on the track. And we kept it in. If I would’ve taken that out, it would’ve taken out some other stuff, too, that I wanted to keep, so I just went, ‘Who

cares

? That’s what was happening!’ I love those happy accidents.”

Blues fans can likely expect more happy accidents – and more of what the *Kansas City Star* call s the musician’s “versatile piano skills and uncommonly dexterous voice” – when Hunt performs her Saturday-night set at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, her first return to LeClaire Park in four years. (“God, it was

so

much fun,” says Hunt of her last Davenport engagement. “I can’t wait to go back.”) Unlike with her accidental vocal debut at age 17, though, they can expect them without the accompanying butterflies.

“Music is more fun now,” says Hunt, “because I’m much more relaxed about it, and I understand that, ‘Hey, if I drop dead tomorrow, I’ve already had the time of my life.’ And I plan on doing it every night *as if* I was gonna drop dead tomorrow, you know? It was really, really fun when I was younger, but now I’m not
horrified. I’m not paralyzed when I get up there.
I’m just gonna
enjoy.”