

Written by Mike Schulz

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Toward the end of our recent phone interview, I ask Davina Sowers – the lead vocalist, pianist, and bandleader for her five-person outfit Davina & the Vagabonds – what her plans for the future are, say, five or 10 years down the road.

She answers with her own question: “You mean, aside from world domination?”

I’m fairly certain she’s kidding. But considering Sowers’ rise to professional and popular acclaim over the past eight years, there’s plenty of evidence to the contrary.

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A Pennsylvania native now residing in St. Paul, Minnesota, Sowers' career in music, as she tells it, began rather inconspicuously, when the singer/songwriter was performing as a street musician in Key West, Florida. Yet since relocating north in 2005, Sowers has not-so-slowly and surely emerged as one of Minnesota's – and the country's – most exciting and accomplished blues artists, touring extensively with her ensemble of Vagabonds and earning much critical praise in the process.

Describing Sowers as the “hardest-working blues woman in Minnesota,” the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* raves, “Two things remain consistent at all her shows: her throaty but cushion-y voice, which has a sort of hard-mattress comfort to it that’s part Bonnie Raitt, Etta James, and a little Amy Winehouse, and her band’s rollicking New Orleans flavor, driven home by dueling horn players and a bayou-thick stand-up bass.”

*Downbeat* magazine, meanwhile, states, “Davina zips to near impossible heights in a divine declaration of romance” – and that romance might just as well be between Sowers and her music.

“Really, I just want to keep doing what I’m doing,” she says, more seriously this time, about her future plans with the Vagabonds. “Traveling, and meeting the people that we’re meeting, and just getting our music out there. That’s my ultimate goal. It’s *always* been my goal.”

Sowers says that as a child, her interest in music originated both with piano lessons, which she began at age six, and with her mother’s record collection. “She was a folk singer,” says the artist, “and she taught me my first few chords on the guitar, and taught me so much about all different types of music. I grew up with a lot of traditional folk – like ’60s and ’70s folk – but I also stole all of her Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath vinyl. You name it, she had it.”

And part of what she had was an extensive collection of blues music, which Sowers quickly grew fond of. “I was a huge Muddy Waters fan,” she says. “I loved Little Walter and some of the harmonica players from back in the day. I know that people consider Billie Holliday jazz, but to me she was a full-fledged blues singer. She taught me a lot about the bending of notes, and that *feel* of the blues – that makes-you-want-to-dive-off-a-cliff feel of singing.

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“But I also got into people like Professor Longhair,” she continues, “and that New Orleans kind of throw to the blues. And there was Big Joe Turner, and Pinetop Perkins, and Sonny Boy Williamson ... .

“You know, I think a lot of girls stand in front of their mirror with a hairbrush and sing like it’s a microphone, and that was definitely me. Music definitely shaped me. It got me in trouble, it kept me *out* of trouble ... . There’s all different types of things music can give you, and I probably went through all of them. Music has always been a dream.”

Yet it wasn’t a dream that, immediately after high school, Sowers sought to make a profession in. “The only career that I pursued for a while was life,” she says. “I traveled the United States and did a lot of hitchhiking, and was definitely a kind of gypsy for a pretty long time.”

It was during the early years of the millennium that her gypsy lifestyle landed Sowers in Key West, where she first began augmenting her income with the street art of busking, singing for whatever donations she could amass.

“I was in the service industry quite a number of times,” says Sowers. “But I also did a lot of busking. It’s kind of difficult, of course, in certain areas. Not every area is a *tourist* area, you know what I mean? And it’s a ‘weather permitting’ kind of thing. I don’t see a lot of buskers in Minnesota.

“But Key West was where I made pretty decent money being a street musician,” Sowers continues. “I played a *lot* of music, and it was a lot of fun – a completely different feel than running a full-time business as a band. A whole different can of worms.”

Key West was also where Sowers met future husband Michael Carvale, an upright bass player – and eventual member of the Vagabonds – with whom she moved to St. Paul two weeks after their 2005 introduction. (The pair has since divorced, although Carvale remains with the band.) But while the Minnesota busking scene may have proved lacking for her, she states that, musically speaking, little else did.

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“The Twin Cities has a huge, amazing entertainment community,” says Sowers. “An amazing *musician* community – just so many wonderful musicians that come from that area.” So the artist went about finding some.

Saying, with a laugh, “I didn’t want to work as a waitress at Applebee’s anymore,” Sowers decided to instead take a stab at being a bandleader, and she and Carvale recruited a trio of gifted up-and-comers for the blues ensemble Davina & the Vagabonds. She admits, however, that finding the musicians proved somewhat easier than getting them all on the same musical page, at least initially.

“It took a little bit of time,” says Sowers. “Dan [Eikmeier], the trumpet player, is really into, like, Paul Westerberg and Anti-Flag. He’s kind of a punk rocker. Ben [Link], the trombone player, is into really weird, avant-garde jazz. And our drummer Alec [Tackmann] is into Foo Fighters, but his tastes are all over the map. So it took some time for us all to be like, ‘Oh, okay, *this* is what we’re doing.’”

But the quintet’s disparate stylings, says Sowers, eventually meshed, and in a big way. “I can’t get over how lucky I am to have such wonderful musicians. They’re four phenomenal, lovely players, and just a well-rounded bunch of great guys. We click really well, and when we’re on stage, they’re pretty fun to hide behind every once in a while, you know?”

The band’s professional bookings began with weekly engagements at the Minneapolis venue Whiskey Junction. “But being a bandleader,” says Sowers, “I slowly learned that you’re gonna *keep* your guys by either keeping them busy or paying them appropriately. Preferably both. So that became my goal. I just hustled and got gigs, and I really just conquered the cities. I mean, I was booking myself and the band 300-plus gigs a year for, like, four years, and then we picked up an agency, and now the agency keeps us busy and has us touring around the world.”

Of her band’s recent travels, says Sowers, “Romania was cool. We were in the Sighișoara hills, near Transylvania, and that was pretty neat – there was like a light snow when we were there, so it was like a big Tim Burton film. Just really odd and cool. We’ve been to Switzerland and Belgium, and Amsterdam, and the UK and Norway. We’re actually going *back* to Norway, to this

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place called Hell.” Seriously.

“It’s a place called Hell, Norway,” she continues, “and at the train station by the festival set-up it says, ‘Welcome to Hell.’ But we’ve been so many different places, and Europeans really love Americana music. It’s cool to see them know some of the covers that I do, and it’s *really* cool to see when they know some of my originals, too. That’s pretty crazy, actually.”

But listening to Davina & the Vagabonds’ energetic takes on the blues – particularly in up-tempo, Sowers-penned songs such as “Finally Home” and the rip-roaring “St. Michael Versus the Devil” – it’s easy to understand their worldwide appeal, and why Minnesota’s *City Pages* considers Sowers “in a league of her own.”

“I’ve written some pretty sad-ass songs,” says Sowers with a laugh, “but performing the blues, and hearing it, definitely does make you happy. I think a lot of blues songs can be joyous, and it’s cool to be able to communicate that joy.

“You know, it’s easier for me to be on stage than not. It’s *so* much easier. I’m so awkward, and such a geek, and that’s the only time that I can really *not* be.”