



OH BEE-HIVE

If you were to do a search on Google entering the term “Beehive Queen,” Christine Ohlman’s name would come up first with some YouTube videos, photos and reviews before anything that has to do with nature, the Queen Bee, her troops and how they make honey.

WRITTEN BY ALEX DEFELICE



Photo by Tom Horan

The singer/songwriter/guitarist and bandleader of Christine Ohlman & Rebel Montez, Ohlman is also the featured vocalist in the *Saturday Night Live* Band. She's been sporting her trademark beehive hairdo (a tribute to Ronnie Spector) for many years, so much that it's become a staple of her stunning live performances.

She and her band—Michael Colbath on bass, Larry Donahue on drums, and Cliff Goodwin on guitar—have just come off the road and released *The Deep End*, their sixth CD and second on HMG Records. *The Deep End* is a textbook lesson in classic soul, blues, roots/Americana, and rock & roll. Co-produced by Ohlman and longtime John Mellencamp guitarist Andy York at executive producer Vic Steffens' Horizon Studios in West Haven, CT (as well as at studios in Nashville, NYC, and Woodstock, NY), the album spotlights gutsy and gritty performances from a slew of guests including Ian Hunter on the rockin' "There Ain't No Cure," Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame member Dion on the soulful Southern "Cry Baby Cry," and Marshall Crenshaw on the Motown classic "What's the Matter With You Baby?" Other guests include Levon Helm, G.E. Smith, Big Al Anderson, Eric "Roscoe" Ambel, Catherine Russell, and The Asbury Juke Horns.

"They are all friends of mine, so I fashioned songs for them," says Ohlman. "Dion loved 'Cry Baby Cry' when I first sent it to him years ago. I wrote 'There Ain't No Cure' with Ian in mind. *The Deep End* was a bittersweet journey for so many reasons. Rosanne Cash asked me if I'd written a lot of sad songs for this

CD and I told her I hadn't. The record is about love and the courage to fall into it, although there is a bittersweet song called 'The Gone of You' that is on the album twice—there's both a full-studio version and Andy York's evocative demo."

A TIME FOR HEALING

For Ohlman, the years leading up to the release of both *The Deep End* and 2008 career retrospective *Re-Hive* were filled with some emotional hardships. Her longtime mate Doc Cavalier, who had produced four of her albums, passed away. "His death necessitated a hiatus for me," says Ohlman, "and then in 2006 our long-time guitarist Eric Fletcher died suddenly."

After her break to regroup, Ohlman took up the task of compiling *Re-Hive*, containing the best songs from the previous four albums (*Radio Queen*, *Strip*, *The Hard Way*, and *Wicked Time*) plus some unreleased gems. This record marked her return to the battlefield of recording and playing rock n'roll in gin mills, juke joints, concert halls, and finer establishments everywhere. *Re-Hive* also set up the marketing efforts and publicity for the release of *The Deep End*.

MUSICAL ROOTS

"My parents were musically inclined," says Ohlman. "There was always a lot of music around the house between me and my brother Vic Steffens, who owns Horizon Music Group in West Haven, where we recorded most of the tracks to *The Deep End*.

Photo by Russell Sanders



On stage at the Mohegan Sun during an All-Star concert, 2009. Far left, Christine performing with Rebel Montez and Los Lobos at the Hamden Summer Concert Series, 2008.

**Wherever you may go
on a dark lonely night,
if you see a beehive
glowing in the distance
make sure you follow it.**

Vic and I started a band when we were in high school in Cheshire and our parents were always supportive, driving us around and letting us rehearse in the basement and keep the PA there.

“A producer named Bob Shad who was involved in jazz heard about us and we wondered, ‘Who is this guy?’” she continues. “It turns out he was legendary—he’d done field recordings of Ray Charles before Ray had developed his routine, back when he was still known as Ray Charles Robinson. Bob was also the first to sign a young girl from Texas called Janis Joplin with her band Big Brother & the Holding Company, and their first album was on his label, Mainstream, along with Ted Nugent’s first album with the Amboy Dukes.

“Shad got me to try and sing ‘Ball & Chain’ by Big Mama Thornton for his label. Come to find out, Joplin was jumping from Mainstream to Columbia and he wanted me to record ‘Ball & Chain’ before she did. Thankfully, that didn’t happen, although he tried. We ended up with a single in the Top 100, though. That band evolved into the Scratch Band, which G.E. Smith joined. G.E. then went on to join Hall & Oates. We played incessantly around the Northeast during the late ’70s and ’80s.”

Ohlman’s musical relationship with G.E. Smith has gone on for years. In the liner notes to *The Deep End* she calls it “the musical conversation without end.” It was this musical conversation, and some good timing, that led to Ohlman ending up as a member of the *Saturday Night Live* Band.

As she explains, “The phone rang one day; G.E. calling to ask me to do a gig with the SNL Band on Long Island. They wrote charts for the music and we rehearsed for two days. We then played a warm-up night at Stephen’s Talkhouse in Amagansett. Up



Photo by Tom Hovan



Photo by James Smith

Above, Ohlman and Levon Helm during a session at Helm’s Woodstock, NY studio for *The Deep End*. Right, The Beehive Queen on stage at Hartford’s Black-Eyed Sally’s. Facing page, a soulful moment during the 2010 Daffodil Festival.

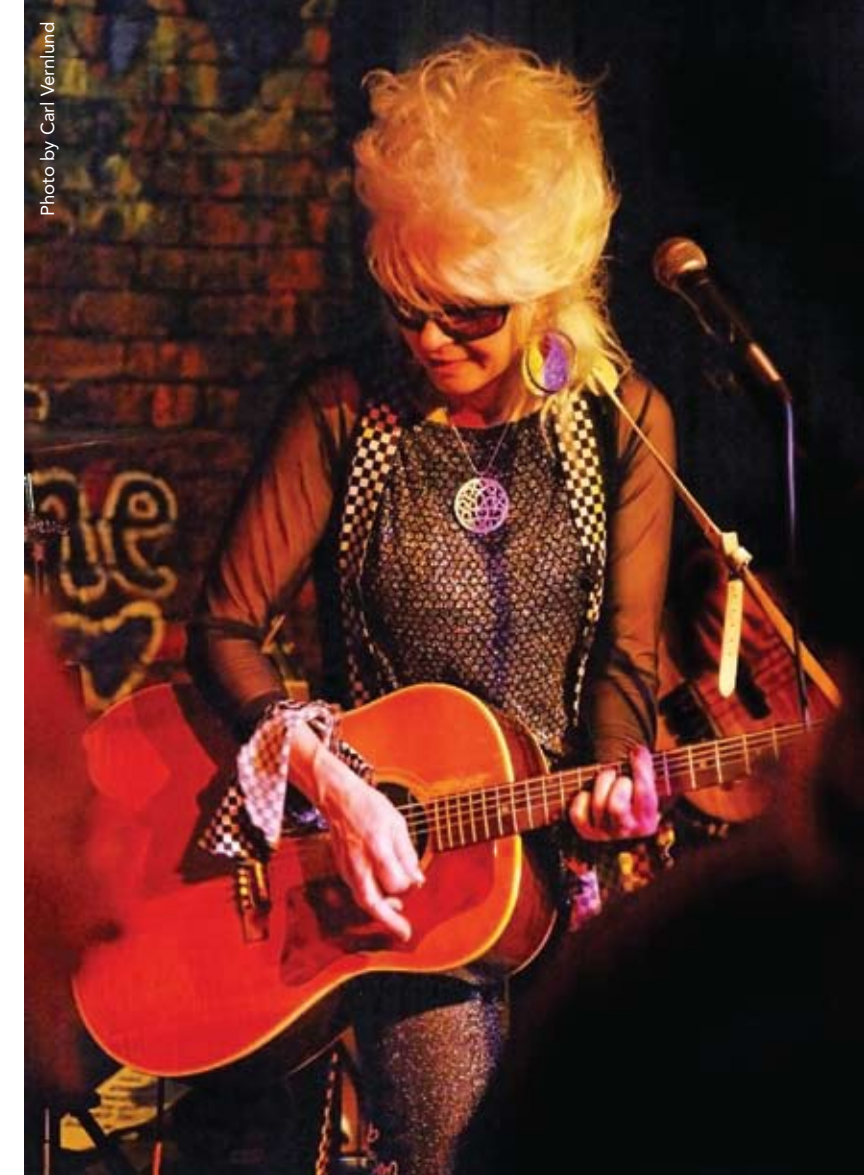


Photo by Carl Vermlund

to this point, no one had told me what the *real* gig was. The next day turned out to be Lorne Michael’s [the producer of *Saturday Night Live*] wedding. Jack Nicholson and Tom Hanks were wandering around.”

The following week was the kickoff of the 1991-92 *SNL* season. Midweek, G.E. called. “He said, ‘Guess what? We got up to the bandstand on the show and Lorne asked, ‘Where’s the girl from the wedding? She was great. Get her down here.’”

“So from that week on in 1991,” Ohlman says, laughing, “I’ve been in and haven’t left. The band has remained remarkably stable.”

Some of her best memories from the show include the time Paul McCartney came out at dress rehearsal, which is done in the late afternoon. “He did a five song mini-set for the audience that was there for rehearsal. Chris Farley and I waltzed around to ‘Hey Jude.’” She sang with Al Green at the 25th anniversary show, and later that night—at the Top of the Rock—she, Steven Tyler, John Goodman, and Dan Ackroyd broke out into a Blues Brothers-type version of ‘Mustang Sally.’

THE ICING ON THE CAKE

It’s not just Ohlman’s solo career or her lengthy stint on *SNL* that have kept her going. It’s also the amount of session work, creative songwriting, and guest appearances on other people’s albums. She was graced with the invitation to play Bob Dylan’s 30th anniversary bash (known as “Bob Fest”) presented by Columbia Records at Madison Square Garden. Ohlman and Sheryl Crow served as the primary backup singers for the three-hour-plus extravaganza.

“A week later, Rebel Montez and opened for Dylan in Springfield and he thought G.E. was with me. I told him it was

my band,” says Ohlman. “His entire road crew was shocked because he never talks to anyone on the road and they were impressed that he wanted to chat with me about Bob Fest!”

“I also recently performed at the 2010 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival on behalf of the New Orleans Musicians Clinic and Assistance Foundation. They provide health care to NOLA’s huge community of musicians, singers, songwriters, and their families. Dr. John, who just moved back to New Orleans, is also involved.”

While Ohlman is busy making touring plans with Rebel Montez and basking in all the accolades she is receiving for *The Deep End*, she is also gearing up for another season of *SNL* and no doubt more session and charity work. She has plans for a new album in the works. “It’s tentatively called *The Grown-Up Thing* and it’ll have more of a soul and gospel focus than *The Deep End*.”

So the next time you see a beehive glowing in the distance, make sure you follow it. Just like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, when you come to that glowing beehive you’ll have found some of the best music, some of the greatest songs, and a person with a soulful, rich voice that keeps that beehive humming along. □

Christine Ohlman & Rebel Montez’s fall touring schedule will include The Warner Theater, Café Nine, The Turning Point, The Fairfield Theatre Company, The Wolf Den at The Mohegan Sun, and Black Eyed Sally’s. For further information and the full calendar, including a list of Ohlman’s solo and charity concert appearances, check out www.christineohlman.net.