

Jersey Girls

QUEER GIRL ROCKERS FLOWER IN THE GARDEN STATE. BY STEPHANIE SCHROEDER



Aster Phoenix (left) sings about love gone wrong and Christine Martucci rocks out onstage

This New Jersey scene is a big to-do. No, it's not a pile-up on Route 3, that unfortunate part of the New Jersey Turnpike known for a treacherous merging lane—it's a March evening at legendary music venue the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, an artsy Jersey Shore town about 60 miles south of New York City. The star is Christine Martucci, a diva of the Jersey lesbian music scene headlining at the Paramount Theater in Asbury Park in July.

Martucci is a rock goddess with long flowing curly auburn hair, custom denim jeans and a sexy rocker grrrl T-shirt. She belts out her anthems more ferociously than Melissa Etheridge, though she's constantly being compared to that performer because of her smoky voice and loving devotion to her fans. But Janis Joplin and Bonnie Raitt come more quickly to mind when Martucci sings the poignant "There You Are" and "Waiting on the Rain," as well as her songs that honor her past as both a homeless youth and a member of the military.

Martucci was thrown out of her family home at 18 after coming out as a lesbian to her father. She ended up homeless, a queer throwaway, and some of her experiences are chronicled in her haunting song "Child Inside." She made peace with her father just two weeks before his death, but in the meantime Martucci found a home in the Army. "I am really passionate about the cause of homeless gay youth," she says. "I have experienced being disposed of because I am gay, and I understand the loss of purpose and self-esteem." Martucci

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— ASTER PHOENIX

regularly plays charity gigs to raise money for causes ranging from supporting cancer research to supporting the troops and their families.

Because of her experiences as a young person without resources, Martucci has taken it upon herself to mentor younger performers. "It's hard in this world, especially if you are different. But different is good. We need to embrace diversity, instead of being afraid of it," she says. One of Martucci's protégés (as well as her No. 1 fan) is Aster Phoenix, a 22-year-old singer-songwriter who often opens for Martucci. Phoenix plays manic guitar and sings hard songs about broken hearts and love gone wrong, but without the cheesy angst so common in lesbian art.

In fact, Phoenix doesn't identify as a lesbian. "I don't label myself," she says. "The only label I want is a record label." She's of the generation where hetero-flexibility and bisexuality are realities, not political sticking points. Phoenix only picked up the guitar at 19 and began writing songs "as a way to get through a particularly painful breakup." Phoenix has had no musical training or exposure to music theory; she's totally self-taught. She's nervous yet pleased about being interviewed—and she says she's the same on stage until she melts into her music. She's got a lot of bravado and a tough exterior, but Phoenix is really sweet and pretty, covered with tattoos, her hair streaked pink and blonde.

She's also got a philosophy about songwriting: "It's a therapeutic process to write out my feelings. I wake up hearing

TONETTE MADSEN (PHOENIX), ZENMASTER (MARTUCCI)

songs and write them down. I make myself vulnerable on stage by singing about stuff I am going through, and if people want to pay for my therapy, it's a good deal."

The crossover in the Jersey queer girl music scene is impressive, if sometimes confusing. The Christine Martucci Band has several new band members. Phoenix plays both solo, often opening for Martucci, as well as with her own band, Aster Phoenix and the High 5 Revolution. On occasion, Phoenix also fills in on guitar—or air guitar—for Kathouse, a Jersey-based all-female rock cover band.

Mare, Kathouse's lead guitarist and the default spokesperson for the group (including Gwen on bass, Jo-Jo on drums and Jaki on lead vocals), quips, "We are a band of ill-repute. A female version of Mötley Crüe." The tagline on the group's MySpace page is "We're not here for a long time, we're here for a good time." On the more serious side, Mare cites influences ranging from Jefferson Airplane and AC/DC to Janis Joplin and Melissa Etheridge.

The ladies of Kathouse describe themselves as two queers, a karate mom and the new straight girl. While Mare and

Jo-Jo identify as lesbians or queer, Jaki, who, along with Jo-Jo, was in the original all-female, heavy metal band Missdemeanor in the mid-'80s, is straight and married and Gwen, the new girl, is also straight. Jaki says she has a very supportive husband (with whom she also has a band), although she does have to work around her kid's busy school and activity schedule.

Both Jo-Jo and Mare ride bikes (motorcycles, that is) and generally appear to live the rock star life. However, as with all the Jersey girl performers, they have to schedule band practice and gigs around their day jobs.

These lesbian musicians are becoming more and more popular outside Jersey as well, spreading into the tri-state area, with Martucci also playing in the Southwest and Midwest and Phoenix doing shows in Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, back at the Stone Pony, the audience is rapt when Phoenix performs, warming up the crowd. Then Martucci takes the stage and the audience goes wild. Cheering and jumping on and off the stage, Martucci's informal fan club and regular followers, the "Tucci Train," are all over her as she belts out her newest song. She's known to have personal stage divers! Both Phoenix and Martucci are sensations. Now it's Kathouse's turn to take to the stage and rock the place. Everyone is having fun, most of all these fabulous musical women. It's just another party at the Jersey Shore for these musicians and their growing fan base. ■

Offbeat in Stumptown

"Keep Portland Weird" isn't just a local bumpersticker—it's a mantra for a city buzzing with creative energy. Portland, Ore., welcomes throngs of lesbian musicians. They launch careers, thrive and find

themselves settling down in Puddletown. Why choose this locale? Perhaps it's because two major cultures converge in the city: a vibrant music scene and a sizable, well-accepted queer community. Portland is enthusiastic about live performances, as evidenced by its great number of music festivals and venues. Many well-known musicians, from Sleater-Kinney and the Decemberists to Pink Martini and Courtney Love, got comfortable playing for Portland audiences before venturing out. And Portland's lesbian-friendly reputation has long drawn queer women to the Beaver State.

"I love Portland. It's easy to hang out with all different blends of people," says Lynn Frances Anderson, a sexy folk-rock and blues singer-songwriter who's been on the Portland music scene for nearly 20 years. She loves the small size of the city, and the enthusiasm she encounters there. "And, I think the weather in Portland does make for an influential atmosphere for writing," she jokes.

Anderson is working on her fourth album, which includes songs about the pain and betrayal she felt when going through her recent divorce. She's pleased to be working with veteran talent this time around—sharing the studio with musicians who have played with B.B. King, Tracy Chapman, Bob Dylan, Jeff Beck and Michael Jackson.

Why has a country singer like Ashleigh Flynn settled in the Pacific Northwest? "Because musicians are flocking to Portland. It's a creativity hotbed," Flynn says. "And this city is an overwhelmingly liberal place to be an out musician." For fans of the Americana sound, her recent album, *American Dream*, fills the bill. Accompanied by accordion, violin and double bass, Flynn's sweet voice is husky at times, with a tinge of Kentucky. She sings expressively, weaving tales about her travels.

Portland is also home to the successful dance punk band the Gossip, led by out and proud singer Beth Ditto, who personifies the catchphrase "big is beautiful." They have a huge fan base in Europe and their recent album *Live in Liverpool* reveals why. Ditto's vocals are a powerful, in-your-face testimony to making it on her own terms in the music industry.

Recent Brooklyn transplant Katie Sawicki has brought her gift of urban-edge folk music to the City of Roses. She finds Portlanders are open to her indie-folk sound. "I never could have developed my electric guitar sound if I was in my other cities. Portland just loves music. There's something about the vibe here, when the audience can sense you really mean it."

Sawicki sings in a breathy, lilting voice on one song, then fills the room with rich, melodic vocals on the next. Her latest album, *Time Spent Lost*, has flavors of Cowboy Junkies, Ani DiFranco and Sarah McLaughlin.

From the tried-and-true sounds of Lynn Frances Anderson, to the up-and-coming new music of Ashleigh Flynn, Katie Sawicki and the Gossip, the PDX music scene is busting with talented queer women, and they'll all carry a little bit of Portland with them, wherever they sing. [Myra LaVenue]



Katie Sawicki

