

“Bring It Back to the Heartland”

Stephanie Urbina Jones' new album, *Fiery Angel*, encapsulates that “Texicana country rock” sound

By Tom Geddie

CAN LIFE GET ANY BETTER FOR STEPHANIE Urbina Jones? A couple of days after her gig at Poor David's Pub in Dallas, she was on the beach with her family in Galveston when she messaged me to see if we could delay our interview for an hour. Sure, I said. Later, during the interview, the family was cooking dinner for her.

Urbina Jones had recently returned from a performing tour of Spain, Scotland, and Switzerland, and has now toured in Japan, Amsterdam, France, Germany, and Mexico.

A couple of days after the beach time with her family, she was in San Francisco with one of her best friends, Sherrie Phillips, for another show, touring the Golden Gate Bridge, walking on the pier, seeing a surprise air show by the Blue Angels over the bay, feasting on sushi, and stopping for a hot fudge sundae at Ghirardelli Square.

Sometimes, this is the life of an “overnight success.” One who's toiled at her craft for years through the good times and the bad and all those times in between.

“I am obviously in probably what's the highlight of my life right now,” she said, laughing, when asked the question — “Can life get any better?” — I opened with when we caught up after her beach time with daughter Zeta, who's 11, and her dad, Charlie Urbina Jones, and his wife, Linda.

“I only dreamt of this, and now I'm living it,” she said. “When my grandmother died in 1996, I was writing songs at Sony. She said I was going to take my culture and heritage all over the world but I couldn't imagine it because I was so very insecure. That was the beginning of it. “It's taken quite some time to live that dream, but as I stood on a

stage in Japan it was very hard not to cry. It all happened very organically. I had to work through a lot of stage fright and create my own style, my own way of communicating. It's always evolving. Now I feel I have created a special soup that represents our culture, our Mexican-American-Texas culture. It's really amazing to watch it land on people's hearts.”

The new album, *Fiery Angel*, encapsulates that “Texicana country rock” sound, growing out of, as the news release with the album put it, a “journey that brought her through the wreckage to the resurrection of her heart and eventually to the *revolucion en her corazon*.”

I can't help thinking of one of Urbina Jones' earlier songs, “I'm not a Pinata,” both for the stereotype it denies and for the hardships she went through.

The “resurrection” and “*revolucion*” of Urbina Jones got a boost when Craig Wayne Boyd sang one of her songs, “My Baby's Got a Smile on Her Face,” on “The Voice;” the song debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot Country Chart.

“It really changed everything for me, in my beliefs,” she said.

“We live on dreams. I've lived on dreams, and I've followed my dream and followed my heart, and wondered if I wanted to continue. I kinda thought I was at end of my time as an artist in this capacity, so it (the success of that song) refueled my dream

and made me realize anything can happen. It's like fuel if you believe in your dreams; the universe kinda comes in and supports them. And it seems like things lined up in that moment. When I'm singing, some fire comes through me and I know I'm right where I'm supposed to be.”

Part of Urbina Jones' journey includes Zeta, the daughter she cherishes, and losing Zeta's father before finding her new husband, Jeremy Pajer, who works “in the recovery field helping people change their lives.”

She is philosophical about the lost marriage.

“We just couldn't fit our lifestyles together. When it was clear that I was going to be an artist, that wasn't the life he wanted. I had unresolved issues that came into play in our relationship,” she said. “Part of my healing is to take responsibility, even during that time period while I was trying to heal and become a more capable partner, wife, friend, lover, I was not able to get there in time in that relationship. I tried to heal as fast as I could, but I wasn't able to be the person I am today. So I think, after a long time, that was too frustrating for him. I wasn't able to rise to the occasion. Forgiveness is important, for us to be friends.”

Turmoil and emotion

SOME OF THE SONGS ON *Fiery Angel* deal with that turmoil.

“Before, I just wasn't ready to share this,” she said. “Now there's a depth — and a transparency — that was hard for me to share even six months to a year ago. I guess I hadn't cleared through the emotions I was sharing through the songs. Now I feel like I'm on the other side. Sure, there will be more journeys. And this is a great time to be sharing.”

“Every song on *Fiery Angel* has an emotion tied to it. The album is a journey through emotions, and is infused with the hopes and dreams of my future that I had while I was writing it, and now I'm living it. I was so depressed, but when you have these moments of sunshine, you've got to dance.”

The first single from *Fiery Angel* is “Bring It Back to the Heartland,” which Urbina Jones wrote with frequent writing partner Mark Marchetti.

“Never before has a song I have sung hit such a cultural nerve and brought people to their feet,” she said.

“It is not about politics, religion, or corporations. It's about people and bringing back the heart of what made this country great: hard work and perseverance and dreams that have wings. I've never experienced so much

apathy, hopelessness, and division in this country. It makes me sad and fearful for my daughter's future and everyone else's.”

“Vamonos,” written with Marchetti and Will Robinson, is a “Latin country anthem about living your life with your heart wide open,” she said. “My co-writers encouraged me to stop focusing on the bad and imagine a better life. Zeta was watching ‘Dora the Explorer’ all the time and out popped ‘Vamonos’ full of fun, passion, looking on the sunny side of life, with a great groove. This song is a window to my world today.”

“Life's too Short,” written by Marchetti and Rodney Clawson, was one that Urbina Jones couldn't write. “I wasn't emotionally ready to let go of the dream of my perfect family falling apart, so he took the idea to hit writer Rodney Clawson and they killed it! Once I heard this Ronstadt-inspired country rocker, I loved it. It helped me to move on and gave me the strength and permission I needed to finally let go and look towards my future.”

“Hold Me 'Til the Lonelies are Gone” “was a lullaby that I wrote to get me through my dark night of the soul. It was my medicine and reminded me every day that I was not alone.”

“Rose in the Wreckage,” written with Willie Mack, “took me through the wreckage I was living at the time, but brought me back to life and feeling more alive. As true as the song sings, with every day that passes, I'm still rising like a phoenix up out of the ashes.”

“The Resurrection of My Heart” is another co-write with Marchetti.

“At the end of my marriage I was lost and needed forgiveness — from me, from him, and from the God of my understanding. I had promised to love and had not fulfilled that promise all too well at times. I was searching for salvation, deliverance from the dark, and the resurrection of my heart. Thankfully, this song led me to the peace I needed.”

“I Wanna Dance with You,” written with Marchetti and James Slater, captures, she said, “the spirit of living and loving life . . . We sat in the sunshine on James' porch and called in this fiery, fun one. It is to date one of my favorite songs to sing.”

The one cover on the album is Kris Kristofferson's “Help Me Make It through the Night.”

“We recorded this song in one take, top to bottom, live in the studio,” she said. “It was a magical moment that you live for when the artist, musicians, and song are one. Having grown up in the honky-tonks of Texas, I have two-stepped many a night to this song that captures longing and lonely like no other.”



Her heart was called to Mexico: Stephanie Urbina Jones

“He reminds me of Texas” is another co-write with Marchetti.

“One day Marchetti and I were sitting on my porch in East Nashville searching for an idea worth writing. Out of nowhere a long tall cowboy with tight jeans, boots, and a hat walked across the street. I have no idea what he said; all I remember was I turned to Marchetti and I said he reminds me of Texas, and we were off and running.”

“Run Out of Road,” written with Marchetti and Jack Williams, is a reminder to “never underestimate a woman scorned, especially one who can write a song,” she said.

“I unleashed my anger on this Ronstadt-inspired country rocker. I was filled with fire, pain, and yes some revenge, and it felt good to get it out of me and into this song. If you've ever been left, hurt or betrayed, this one's for you! Roll the windows down, hit the highway, and sing it at the top of your lungs!”

The title song, written with Marchetti and Scott Boland, celebrates, in its way, Urbina Jones' new marriage.

“After the fire of my divorce, when I least expected it, I met my husband Jeremy,” she said. “As the song says, we let ourselves free fall into the mystery and he brought a whole new meaning to this song as I continued to burn away all that did not serve me and fall in love again.”

“*Revolucion*” grew out of reconnecting with her Hispanic heritage after her grandmother died.

“My heart was called to

Mexico. It was there that *mi corazon* (my heart) came alive and I was given a vision for my life to go from being a songwriter to a performing artist; celebrating this beautiful culture in song. ‘*Revolucion*’ was the very first song I wrote in Mexico that kicked of my new life and career. I returned to the states, mortgaged my house, and have never looked back!”

What's ahead for Stephanie Urbina Jones, aside from touring with *Fiery Angel*?

“I have an untold story in me,” she said. “Songs are written for the next project. The songs have been ‘writing me’ for the past few years, and that's part of the fuel of telling this story, leading to the next one. I'm excited about it. I feel the music, and that's a lot of what people hire me around the world to do. I want to do it.”

“For me, it's never too late to dream. Life just keeps getting better. I wouldn't go back a moment, a day, a year. I've made peace with any regret I've ever had.”

How long will the dream go on?

“I feel passionate about *Fiery Angel*,” Urbina Jones said. “I also feel grounded about it. I don't have an attachment to where it might take me. My attachment is to loving it, enjoying it, sharing it, being grateful for it, and riding it out. When I'm done spinning this, we'll see where I go from here. I have no idea, and for once I'm okay with that. I used to have to *know*.” ■

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