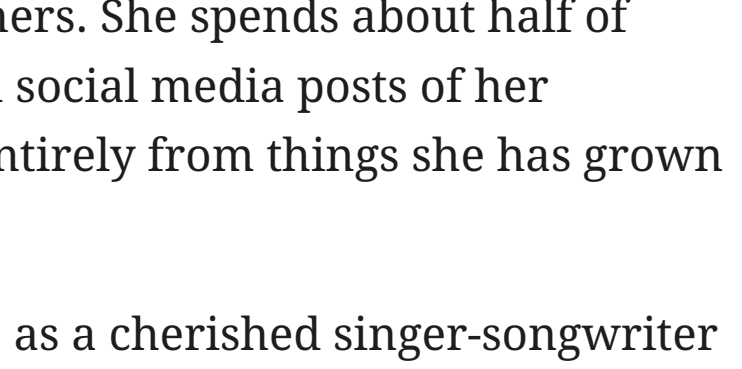




Finding Her Home: Dayna Kurtz Has Harvested The Fruit Of Years Cultivating Her Place In New Orleans Music

SEPTEMBER 28, 2022 by STEVE HOCHMAN



Dayna Kurtz is sitting in a rocker on her porch, mostly in the dark, clipping something with a pair of scissors.

"I'm cleaning garlic," she says. "It's been hung and cured properly and I'm very overdue and I am snipping it."

It's the end of a harvest-time day. She's been in the field tending to various gourds, squashes and melons, and now she sits with a glass of wine, sipping and snipping as she winds down with this one last task.

As you may have guessed, she is not in New Orleans.

"I'm in southwestern Vermont," she explains over Zoom.

The porch is on a cabin that was her parents' and now is hers. She spends about half of every year there, largely as a farmer. Perhaps you've seen social media posts of her cuddling a piglet or stirring a pot of a stew made almost entirely from things she has grown or foraged.

But the other half of the year she is based in New Orleans, as a cherished singer-songwriter and, of late, fronting Lulu and the BroadSides, whose debut album, following a live EP, is available in New Orleans now with a wider release coming soon. You may have seen her at Buffa's or Chickie Wah Wah, paired with guitarist Robert Maché, or maybe belting her vocal cords to their near-breaking point at Jazz Fest's Lagniappe Stage or BJ's neighborhood dive, while the BroadSides (Maché, bassist James Singleton, organist Glenn Hartman and drummer Carlo Nuccio, who passed away in August) stir a furious storm around her.

It does make for a bit of a contrast.

And then there's the matter of where, exactly, is home.

"My Vermont friends don't think that I'm really a Vermonter because I don't spend the whole winter here," she says. "And my New Orleans friends don't think I'm a real New Orleanian because I don't spend the whole summer there."

She laughs at how, weather-wise, she's escaped the harshest of each.

"So, I don't really live in either place," she says. "But I've been welcomed enough by both to make me feel like I belong."

New Orleans

Kurtz certainly belongs in New Orleans. She knew it from the very first day she visited in 1990, a little R&R stop while touring the Southeast as a solo artist trying to make a name. And someone else there knew it too. It happened on Rampart Street.

"A friend of mine sent me to the Funky Butt to see Henry Butler," she says.

The friend, Larry Baeder, a guitarist she knew from New York, where she was based then, had played with Henry in a pickup band for some gigs. Kurtz had been driving all day and was tired, but she took her friend's advice.

"So, I go see Henry at the Funky Butt, and my mind was blown," she says. "I knew nothing about New Orleans music. I knew very little about R&B that I hadn't heard on the radio that wasn't Motown-based. And I was like, 'Holy shit, this is amazing!' Then, during the intermission, I went up to him and introduced myself. I said, 'My friend Larry Baeder told me to make sure I saw you when I got to town and I'm so glad I did.' And he said, 'You sound like a singer.' I said, 'Well, I am.' And then he said, 'You wanna sit in?' And I sang 'In a Sentimental Mood.' And then he made me stay and I sang like four or five more songs. And after the show, Henry was telling me what to see. 'Oh yeah, you want to see so and so at Donna's, you want to see Irma.' Irma still had her club then, and I had no idea who Irma Thomas was! I didn't know any of this. I was completely in the dark."

And then there was light, of a hue you'll find only this city.

"If New Orleans wants you there," she says, "she kisses you on the nose. You know what I mean? She sends you beautiful experience after beautiful experience and I was like, 'You have no choice.' Like, 'This is not going to happen anywhere else for you.'"

Cut to 2022 and Kurtz is an established presence in New Orleans, living her half year there in the Bywater with her husband Garry Kirk, a union carpenter on movie sets whom she met in 2015 and married, fully costumed, in the midst of Mardi Gras Day madness in 2019. Oh, and they have a dog named, yes, Lulu.

But even there she has something of a split personality, beyond the geographical duality. For the most part she's been known as a singer-songwriter, equally powerful with songs of full hearts and broken hearts, often performing in duo with Maché. Lulu is a more recent apparition, with a clear intent.

"She kinda took over," she says of her alter ego. "It's sort of nice. I had a feeling she might."

The genesis was simple, and joyous.

"The big difference is that [Lulu's] existence is to make people dance," she says. "I wanted to play music that people could dance to. For my solo stuff, whenever I played a waltz, couples would get up and dance to it and it felt so good. Because I love to dance. I had been learning how to partner dance, blues dance and swing dance. I love dancing to live music."

Yeah, but she loves making people cry as much as she loves making them dance. Need proof? Listen to "The Hole," from her last solo studio album, *Rise and Fall*, recorded in 2015, which followed a divorce and the death of her father. The latter is what "The Hole" is about, burying her dad's ashes.

I'm wearing your boots and I'm digging a hole in the ground.

There are happy cries too, as that album also came after she'd found new love. For that there's "How You're Holding Me Now."

Like it would hurt you to let me fall down.

It's okay. Take minute to wipe your eyes.

"I love my depressives!" she says of the fans who have gravitated to these emotions in her songs. "I'm one, you know. I know how important it is to connect with music on that level. I've done it. I needed it myself and I did it for a long time. People ask, 'Why do you have so many sad songs?' And the reason was because it's really difficult to write happy music that isn't trite. It's a lot easier to dig deep when your heart's been broken."

But New Orleans taught her otherwise.

"Writing joyous music or even heartbroken angry music that makes somebody want to dance—New Orleans does that better than anybody," she says.

The result is that she gets to show more of her true self now.

"Music has got to make me want to dance, fuck or cry, or I want nothing to do with it," she says. "And I've made people cry for a very long time."

And it's not like Lulu just suddenly sprung from nowhere. Her catalog has plenty of grinding, gritty R&B-rooted songs in it. The two-volume *Secret Canon* albums of 2012 and 2013, which shined a light on some lesser-known songs from the '40s, '50s and '60s, stand as proto-Lulu sets, and the nearly concurrent *American Standards* album of her own compositions showed she could already write in the style.

She just never had a band to bring that all to the stage, hence the BroadSides.

In many ways, it's the culmination of the series of changes dealt with in that last album. Before that, she was reluctant to plant herself too firmly in New Orleans. She'd never had a place of her own there in all the years she'd been coming regularly, often for extended stays. But life, and death, led her to make it home as much as New England had been—she and her first husband lived in Brooklyn while spending time in Vermont.

"My father died, my first marriage ended," she says. "I upended everything. I moved to New Orleans, and I fell wildly in love with the man that I'm gonna grow old with, and I say that with some surety. And middle age—holy shit. So, a lot was happening, and I felt kind of connected through all of it, which was really nice. There are periods of time that are really heavy when you don't feel connected to the powers, you feel out of sync with things or you're misplaced or living in the wrong place and you don't know what to do and you feel kind of lost. Things like grief are hard. And there are ways to grieve that are avoidant, and ways to grieve that are beautiful. Most people do both. But that particular period of time when I was writing the record—and I wrote it in a very small amount of time—was one of those times where I felt kind of clarified by grief, and then wide open to everything, including love."

She and Maché found strong receptions in both in the U.S. and in Europe, where she has long had a solid fan base. Their performances have been documented in two albums, *Here Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*, recorded in various concert settings.

Lulu and the BroadSides, though, has taken Kurtz to new dimensions. The songs are inspired and superb, whether the juke-joint jump of the opening "That's a Pretty Good Love," originally a mid-'50s B-side by Big Maybelle, or in Kurtz's own compositions, among them the gleefully lusty "A Grade," double-scooped entendre-laden "Ice Cream Man" or the tortured-soul yearning of "How Do I Stop," the latter now made into a performance video serving as a tribute to Nuccio. There are even epiphanies in takes on songs by Nick Cave and Iggy Pop. And the musicians—well, the combo of Maché (the Continental Drifters), Singleton (*Astral Project* and countless collaborations from straight-ahead to the avant-garde of jazz), Hartman (the *New Orleans Klezmer All Stars*) and Nuccio (also the Drifters, Fingerhew, *Tori Amos* and someone named Bob Dylan, not to mention being the guy behind the "Who Dat?" song) makes as powerful, controlled (and uncontrolled) fire as you will encounter.

It's a dream come true for Kurtz.

"All I've ever wanted was to be a New Orleans musician who got to play with the best in New Orleans musicians," she says. "For years and years and years it was like, 'I want to be in that number.' I just want to be among these people. They're the best musicians I've ever seen and they're in it for the right reasons. I loved how open musicians are there, that everybody plays everything. New York musicians are so terribly specialized. If you play with a rock guy, that's all he does and he's just going to fake it with the jazz, or vice versa. But in New Orleans, as long as it's basically blues-based, you can trust any of them to play in a zydeco band. It makes the best frickin' musicians. And there are so many more gigs. New Orleans musicians play and play, a wider range than any musicians I've ever heard. And they're the best, deepest musicians I've ever played with. And that's all I wanted, to be good enough to play with them."

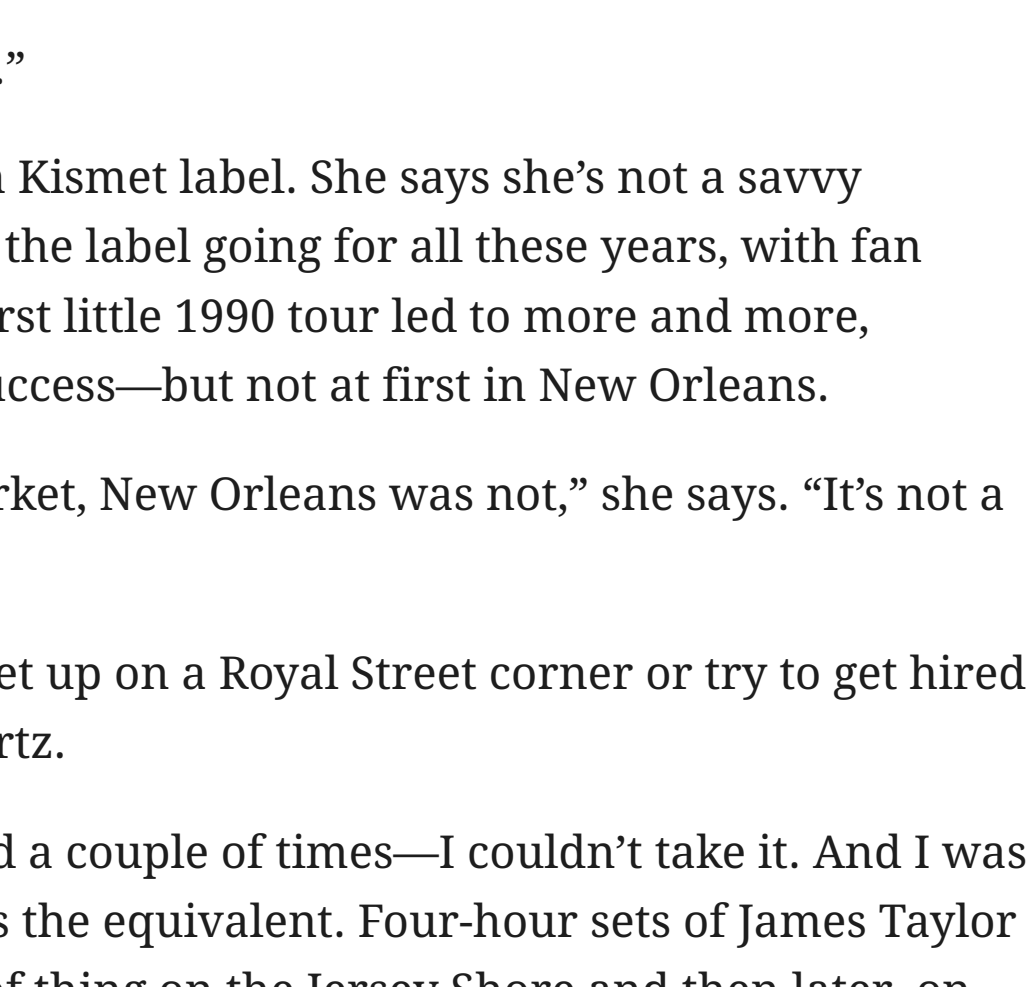
Beginnings

The road to this was long and, as the song says, winding. Kurtz grew up on the Jersey Shore and in her youth started singing around the region, before attending the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She stayed in the area for a bit and in 1990 went with a friend to Georgia to work in the kitchen at a women's music festival. While there she played a coffee-house night for the workers, which led to her being given a main-stage slot at the festival, which led to several promoters giving her opportunities to book what became her first tour, driving around the South. It was then when she made her side trip to New Orleans, staying for a week that started with the Henry Butler encounter and a little songwriting time and getting to know the French Quarter.

"I didn't know anybody in town and I kind of immediately was like, 'I have to live here,'" she says.

That didn't happen then. But the next year she booked a gig at Kerry Irish Pub, and the door was opened. She was still based in Northampton, Massachusetts, cooking for a living.

"It hadn't occurred to me that I could do music full time yet," she says. "It was really hard to get gigs in Northampton."



She did start releasing records, via her own Kismet label. She says she's not a savvy businessperson, but she's managed to keep the label going for all these years, with fan support via her Patreon profile. And that first little 1990 tour led to more and more, especially in that region, with increasing success—but not at first in New Orleans.

"Though the South always was my best market, New Orleans was not," she says. "It's not a singer-songwriter town."

Where many new musical arrivals would set up on a Royal Street corner or try to get hired in a French Quarter bar, that wasn't for Kurtz.

"I've never been a busker," she says. "I tried a couple of times—I couldn't take it. And I was a bar singer for many, many years, which is the equivalent. Four-hour sets of James Taylor and Beatles songs for drunk tourists, kind of thing on the Jersey Shore and then later, on the road. I did that all outside of New Orleans. I paid a lot of dues, and I've played with New York musicians and none of them are slouches. They're all excellent."

Instead, she dug into New Orleans blues roots and jazz and let that filter into her songwriting.

"And I was falling in love with Johnny Adams and Irma Thomas," she says.

Crowds at her club shows were small, she says. But it was the right people, it turned out.

"The same eight musicians would come out to see me play," she says, laughing. "And that's what happened. I just wound up making a lot of friends."

Best of all, the musicians wanted to play with her.

"I didn't wind up finding a crowd at all until I started playing with a band," she says.

Things were happening to the point that she planned to move to New Orleans in 1999, but a few hitches interfered.

"I got in a terrible car accident and met the man I married [for her first marriage]," she says. "Like the universe went, 'No, not yet.'"

So, she and her first husband settled in Paterson, New Jersey, with New Orleans still just a place she went to play music for stretches. Looking back, she thinks it was probably for the best.

"Glenn would not have been Glenn then, and James would not have been James then," she says. "We would've all been young together, would've made terrible mistakes."

She laughs again.

"Like slept with each other. It's better that I didn't go, that I got to come after paying my dues elsewhere. But there's no greater compliment than to land in New Orleans and get to play with some of the greatest musicians in town. I've never felt more grateful about anything in my life, except for my husband."

The real commitment came a few years later.

"The day my ex-husband and I decided to call it quits, he looked at me and said, 'You're moving to New Orleans, aren't you?'" she says. "And I said, 'Tomorrow.'"

To this day, she has to pinch herself.

"I'm still a little giddy," she says. "Like I don't think I'm cool enough to be in New Orleans, enough to be a New Orleans musician. I'm still a little dorky about it. I still look around and go, 'How did I do this?' I know it's not charm. I'm not a charming person. I don't think I've fooled anybody. Like they actually think I'm good enough to be with them!"

Some who saw her way back when she first started to come to New Orleans, though, are not surprised at all. They could see right away that there was a place for her in town, or that she could make a place. WWOZ show host Dean Ellis, also a transplant from New Jersey, was one of four people who saw her at the Mermaid Lounge in the early '90s. Some of the details are fuzzy, but the impression he had of Kurtz is clear.

"I remember there was a storm outside, one of those New Orleans late fall or something killer storms," he says. "That was one of the reasons there was hardly any there. It felt like being in one of those end-of-the-world stories and being one of those barflies—and you don't care because Dayna was playing. I think Robert and James may have been playing with her, or it might have been just her. The point to me is Dayna's talent and why she is a true New Orleans musician. Her gigs are at once intimate and performative. She could play a little place like that or a big stage at Jazz Fest and you feel the intimacies."

It's been a slow and steady build, but it's brought Kurtz to a place of confidence and recognition, with a promising future not just in New Orleans, but well beyond—and this past June the BroadSides even got a gig in New York as part of Lincoln Center's outdoor Social Dance concert series. It was, Kurtz says, amazing to return to her original home territory as a bona fide New Orleans artist.

But that also brings some tears, as it's a future without Carlo Nuccio, in many ways the heart of the BroadSides, as he was in so many other bands. (He was to sock to make the New York trip, his place taken for that show by Randy Crafton, the Lulu album's producer.) It's almost too much for Kurtz to contemplate.

"I don't feel really present with grieving Carlo yet," she says on her Vermont porch. "I think partially because I'm not down there. I kind of haven't really dealt with it yet. I miss that bastard, though. He was irreplaceable as a drummer, but it's also like they just don't make [people] like Carlo anymore. You know, they never made them like Carlo before him, either."

A little later, after she's moved inside to continue the chat, Carlo comes up again in the context of Kurtz having resumed songwriting following a little break.

"The quarantine shut me down," she says, adding that her mother had died not long before that as well. "Psychologically it was just... you know. And I put [my emotions] all into my yard."

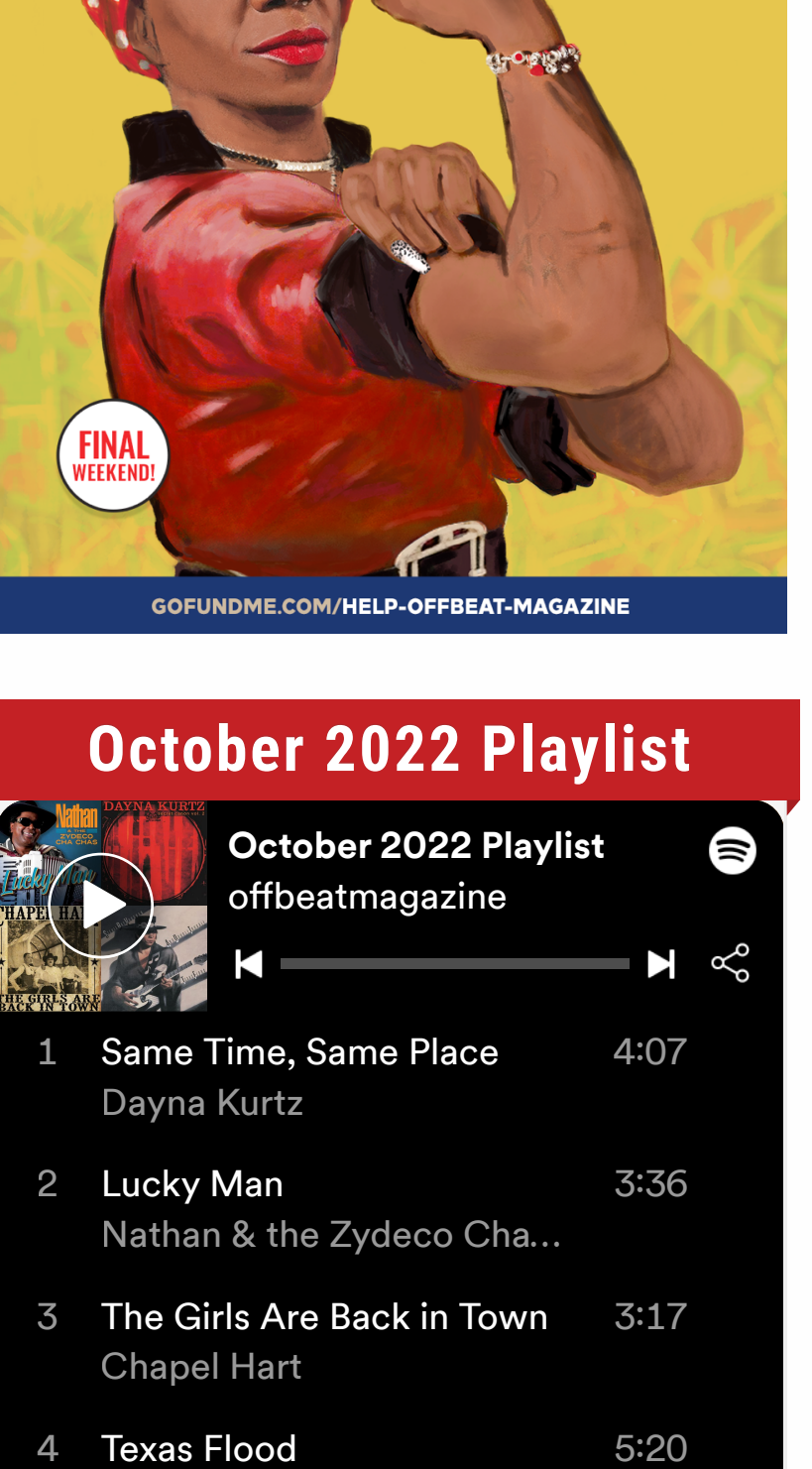
But when Carlo was dying, she found herself needing to write again, starting with a song inspired by him.

"Do you have time for one very quick Carlo story?" she asks. "Carlo and I used to fight like siblings. And Carlo once got really, really mad at me because on stage I called a song 'an original.' He's like, 'First of all there's no such thing as an original. All this has been done before.' And I'm like, 'I thought being cool was not giving a shit what people think. Why do you give so much of a shit? People think you're cool that you don't use that word? And we had this little back-and-forth about 'original.'"

And surely you can see this coming: "I'm so tempted to call the song that is clearly about Carlo 'The Original,'" she says, with a hearty chuckle. "I'm just kinda like, 'Oh, haunt me!' He would think it was hilarious that I actually had to get the last word in."

DAYNA KURTZ

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October 2022 Playlist

Track	Artist	Duration
1	Same Time, Same Place Dayna Kurtz	4:07
2	Lucky Man Nathan & the Zydeco Cha...	3:36
3	The Girls Are Back in Town Chapel Hart	3:17
4	Texas Flood Stevie Ray Vaughan	5:20
5	New Orleans Kenny Neal	4:01
6	The Zone Johnny Vidacovich	5:00

