

The Magazine of the Boston Blues Society

The Boston Blues News



The Boston Blues Society is a nonprofit organization, dedicated to supporting the blues since 1988

Vol. XIII No. 4

★★★

July - August 2004



Lois Greco

**an interview with
Elmore James Jr.**

**Blues History Corner
Elmore James**

**Mojo Blues Bar
- the Florentina Cafe**

**Daniel Banks
- the kid drummer**

**2004 Blues Challenge
- two divisions this year**

as always...

**Blue Notes
Choose Your Blues**

**Free Classifieds
Reviews by Art Tipaldi**

Surrender: A Profile of Lois Greco

By Bill Copeland

Lois Greco should have a picture of herself in the dictionary next to the word taskmaster. She might also have her picture next to the word multi-tasking. This Rhode Island chanteuse has mastered the art of singing the blues during a performing career that has included professional acting and composing scores for television movies. But it is her singing that has really grabbed people's attention in the New England blues scene. Greco has been described as riveting, incendiary, and smoldering. That is what she is aiming for in her live shows. "I go for that very passionate, soulful thing. I don't want to be background music. Let's put it that way. I just put everything into it whenever I sing, my heart and soul, my gut."

All of her live reviews indicate that she jumps right in with a driving beat and strong melody. She does not sneak up on her listeners. "I know for me that's how I feel the music. I'm very drawn to that driving force," she said. "I like the dynamics of being really sensitive and sultry, and when they're not even expecting it, just kick right in with a very strong, passionate driving force. I like to combine the two things."

Ironically, Greco is a lean woman with the fragile appearance of a porcelain doll. "They usually say this big voice is coming out this little body," she said of her audience. This willowy dynamo actually possesses a four octave vocal range. "I feel like I have a porpoise voice." She was not born with all four octaves. She had to do a lot of work. "A lot of it came from experimentation and trying to emulate what I heard. As far as training, I really didn't do a lot of training. I did a lot of practicing in terms of experimenting with myself and listening to other singers and instruments, and I found my own technique. The only lessons I took was actually when I was in California. I was teaching voice at the Voice Works Institute. I basically took eight lessons to learn how to teach what I was already doing naturally. Other than that, I really did not train as a vocalist. It pretty much just started from the emotion of singing."

Music helps Greco to express all kinds of intense emotions. "I think because those are the emotions that make me feel alive, the singer explained. "I think it's the difference between walking through life or diving into it and experiencing the depth of all the emotions from intense pain to intense pleasure. I think to feel that incredible joy of life and the beauty of life you have to allow yourself to also experience maybe the dark side or maybe the sadness of life. Without one, you don't experience the other one fully."

Writing and singing her own songs started during her childhood, when she lost her first dog to a car accident. "That's when I became aware of how singing and writing poems was something [I could use to come to grips with painful events in my life.] ... For days after that I remember just writing this poem and sitting in front of my window looking outside, just singing this song about the loss, chanting and singing it over and over again to the point where my mother said, 'Lois, that's enough. That's enough.' I just said, 'No, it makes me feel better.' I didn't know why at the time or what it meant. That was the first time. It wasn't something somebody told me to do. It's just something that came out."

Greco was raised as a Pentecostal, and the Pentecostal church was where she learned singing and dancing in the spirit. "I experienced it there. I experienced singing it. I personally at the time was a little too shy to do that because I was just a kid. But I experienced seeing other people when they were filled with what they call the Holy Spirit. It was just them expressing themselves through this complete joy of this awareness. It's hard to explain it to someone who hasn't experienced it before. It may just seem like something that's just weird. But as a kid, it didn't seem real weird because it was something I'd see every Sunday. You kind of just get used to it. You see that this is what happens when people allow themselves to be completely open to experience this total awareness of the love of God, the joy of God.

Greco has blended her spiritual background with her music. "To me when I'm singing, a lot of times I'll bring that gospel influence into my music, and I'll feel that same type of awareness of God's love for me, of who I am right here at this point. It's like an unconditional love, and when you

become aware of that, then it's this total joy that you feel and it comes through in the music." Greco does not want to give the impression that she is a bible thumper hanging onto to a literal interpretation of every word in the scriptures. Still, she is very much a spiritual person. "It's not like I go to church every Sunday or anything like that. It's an inward awareness of a love of God and finding that in everybody that I meet, looking for the best in people, accepting people for who they are. To me, that's what I know God to be. I know God as a loving God, not as someone who is a condemning God. That's my strength. That's my spirituality."

Her CD "Surrender," released last year, was a debut of her own original material after spending many years in studio sessions singing on other people's albums. She produced "Surrender" herself, which should surprise nobody who knows her, since she is certainly a master of many trades. When I was living in California I ran a big



recording studio where I actually learned everything,” she said. “I actually even soldered the patch bay. I like to get right in there and do everything, all the electronic things, anything technical.”

Greco found the opportunity through happenstance. “I went there to Record a demo. I was so interested in wanting to find out about it. So, I actually got a job working at the studio, and that’s how I learned everything about recording and engineering.”

To make her debut album a good first effort, Greco formed a solid team of musicians. Her brother Earl Greco is her bass player, and he helps her with the arrangements. Skip Fischer plays drums. Henry Cox plays guitar. And “Hammer” Walters plays the keyboards. Her brother, Earl, is known worldwide for his advanced bass guitar techniques. He has worked in the studio with musicians from bands like Toto, Black Sabbath, and Quiet Riot. Likewise, drummer Fischer has toured the world with the likes of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and James Montgomery. Guitarist Cox has shared the stage with people like Elvin Bishop, David Johanson, Robby Krieger, and George Thorogood. Meanwhile, “Hammer” Walters has played at The Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, and he toured with Roomful Of Blues for two years.

Greco gives the band the freedom to put their creative input in a lot of the arrangements, as long as it’s going in the direction she wants. Greco said that they have intricate knowledge of the arrangements and are each incredible musicians in their own right. “I look for musicians who are musically well versed or well rounded that had experience in different styles of music,” she said. “I draw from so many different styles of music that ideally if I can choose musicians who also have had that experience with different styles of music, then when I create music they have something also to draw from, and we can work together creatively. We’re not just limited to one style.”

Greco starts her songwriting process with the blues as a first step. Even if the song sounds more like rock or R&B, or gospel, she probably found her way to it from a blues perspective. “If you had to describe it, the blues is the foundation of all of it,” she said. “It is to me, anyway. Blues is the foundation for gospel, for rock, for so much of that. It starts out at the blues, but I draw from the other different influences musically that I’ve had.”

Greco tapped Scott Tarulli, a Berklee professor and jazz guitarist, to play leads on her “Surrender” album. “I was looking for a guitarist. Somebody had mentioned him. He came and auditioned, and I thought he was great. So he became a member of the band. We worked together for a year before we even started the CD. He was somebody that just had that incredible ability to draw from all different styles of music and had like an endless amount of creative ideas and licks. In the studio, he could take 10 different solos and every one of them would be great. So he was somebody who for that CD was definitely great. He also was a very sensitive musician. A lot of the tunes on the original CD come from that combination of the sensitivity plus the real driving passion.”

“Surrender” opens with the inspired and driving song “Like A River”. Greco put a lot of her personality and spirit into that song. “A lot of that CD came from an awareness of God in my life. I think a lot of that was that gospel, joyful thing. I think one of the lines is, ‘I want a love like a river/pouring over me/coming down



from the heavens/gonna set me free.’ So it’s an awareness of an openness to something supernatural. It’s the part of life I would call the very joyful, positive, spirit of life. It’s allowing myself to open to that joy to come over me. It takes that form of love. It’s also saying that’s the kind of love I want in my life, whether with a man in a relationship or my relationship with God or my relationship with life. I want a positive awareness. I want something that is freeing, not something that keeps you in sort of a bondage. I don’t want relationships in my life that are not healthy.”

“Like A River” has a line that goes “A passive heart will never seize the day/But a burnin’ flame will light the fire and surely lead the way.” That seems to be Greco’s philosophy in life. “I’m not the type that can sit on the sidelines and watch the whole thing go by,” the singer said. “I’ve got to be the one jumping in and leading the way, and I like to encourage other people to do that. Whatever your voice is, whether it’s singing, talking, or you’re an artist, whatever you are, this is the one shot. Go do it. Just dive into it and do it with passion.” Her ballad “You Are” builds up nicely from a mellow verse to a more driving beat in the chorus. It would seem hard to find the inspiration for that in the studio where there is no audience to bounce her energy off of.

“A number of the songs have that consistent thing. I like to go to both ends of the spectrum where it’s that awareness of the fragile part of life. The part that’s very gentle and knowing that life can slip from your hands in an instant. So there’s a vulnerability there. And then on the other end of the spectrum, is what I call that conquering spirit. Although life is fragile, I’m going to grab it now. In that particular song, when I said ‘You are the angel that set me free’ that can refer to God or that can refer to a person. I think at the time when I wrote that, it was just more of a calling out to what I want. I want to feel that kind of love, that kind of acceptance.” At first listen “You Are” may sound like an ode to one’s beloved. But it is really about God. “When I wrote it, it was about God. But I was so afraid, thinking that if I write this stuff, people may think, ‘Oh my God. She’s this major Jesus Freak.’ A lot of things I write like

that—at least on that CD—I'd say are really inspired by my awareness of God."

"Surrender" features four songs inspired by her spiritual life. The rest is about relationships she has had and situations her closet friends have experienced. "That whole CD was a real step in faith for me. It was the first time that I just dove in and said, 'I'm going to do it all. This is a challenge here.' I will do every thing from writing the material to arranging to producing to designing the whole CD and panel inserts, every single thing. I paid for everything. My whole blood, sweat, and tears were in this. It was a total learning experience. But I had to have a complete faith to do it. Because I took that step in faith, it gave me the confidence that I can face any challenge."

"Your Heart's Not Free" is another standout cut. The singer is pleading with a very attractive suitor not to mislead her. Every verse in the song follows the same pattern of asking someone not to pretend to offer something he cannot deliver. What's clever about it is the way the singer sounds anxious to ward off someone she is obviously attracted to.

"I don't think that came from a real personal experience of mine," she said. "I think that was more me wanting to write something I could put myself into. I was being an actress too. I can put myself into imagining different situations."

Greco has a gift of empathy that helps her in her role of caretaker to people close to her. Being able to feel what other people feel gives her more material to write about. She knows what people are going through, and that helps her to write about their experiences. "A lot of times I'll write things where my friends are going through things. Friends will call me and I'll try to help them in relationships they have where someone's doing them wrong and hurting them. One of the tunes, "Love Won't Wait," that's one I wrote for a friend of mine, this girl, Joyce, who really loved this guy. One day he was really on fire, and the next day he was nowhere to be found, and it was just tearing her apart. So I vicariously experienced what she's going through, and I write a song about that feeling." Greco never stops trying to reach out to people, even if someone in need is not a close friend. "One thing I notice a lot of times I feel other people's pain. If I'm in a store and I see somebody that's in any kind of emotional pain or physical pain, my thing is right away I want to take them out of that pain."

The title song "Surrender (Love Will Find Away)" closes out Greco's Album with the most passionate vocal approach on the CD. She said she was trying to leave a strong impression on the listeners. The singer wanted to uplift her listeners' spirits with the inspiring theme that love conquerors all. "If the love is real and the love is there, that it will carry you through. It will find a way to conquer the situation. I wanted to leave people with that positive emotional feeling, that they can draw from that strength within them. "The tune works itself up into an incredible vocal crescendo. When asked if it is challenging to work up that kind of momentum in the studio, Greco said no. "It really wasn't. It was so real to me, the feeling. That was like a very effortless song. When you have something that you experience first hand like that, and it's real clear what you're singing about. It comes from your heart and your soul. It's not difficult to emulate that even when there is not an audience." The song

must have come to Greco in a dream. She only remembers waking up, feeling tired, sitting down at her keyboards, and writing the song. "That song I wrote when I was in California. In the middle of the night I remember just waking up, and it was like I heard the whole song in my head. I went over to my keyboard. I just sat there. And the song just came right out."

The crescendos in her vocal approach indicate a strong gospel influence. Greco often sounds inspired as well as inspiring. "I think I relate to that fire that you feel when you hear gospel. There's something I hear when I listen to real gospel singers, that energy that they put out is such an uplifting, positive, passionate, soulful, forceful spirit. That spirit, I am just drawn to so much because it just feels like life." Greco explained that gospel was invented by slaves who needed something to help them rise above the nightmarish bondage they found themselves in. They sang gospel, she said, to set their spirits free. "The Spirit of God is much more powerful than the situation they're in," she said. Greco is currently working on a new album that will have less of a gospel influence and more of a blues and bluesy rock feel. "I'm actually doing a version of Janis Joplin's 'Ball And Chain' and I've got a version of Tobacco Road, which is a rock-funky thing. I don't know who the original singer is." She's also re-recording a song from the Surrender CD. "I'm getting into the blues rock thing. The songs I'm currently doing right now. The message is not quite as much of the God thing. This is the get down."

Aside from an impressive resume in the music industry, Greco is an accomplished actress who eventually became involved with writing the musical scores for cable television films. She landed her roles on General Hospital and Days Of Our Lives and several episodes of television programs. The acting bug bit her in college. Though an art major, Greco took an acting workshop as an elective. She auditioned for and was cast in a lead role in a college play. Her photographic memory gave her an edge in memorizing lines.

Greco grew up in Warwick, Rhode Island. She graduated from the University of Rhode Island with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theater. A year later She went to New York City and was cast in an Off-Broadway show and then was cast in the lead role of Grease, first for a year in a national touring company, and then, for a year on Broadway. Getting her Actor's Equity card lead to her getting a Screen Actors Guild card. She went to California and landed a role on General Hospital. It was a brief role, but she did get to make out—in character—with soap and singing star Jack Wagner who played the role of Frisco Jones.

Her various acting roles lead Greco to jobs writing the film score for whatever she happened to be working on. She still gets royalty checks whenever they run. In fact, she sometimes doesn't even know when they're running until she gets the check. "I worked for a company called PM productions, a film company," she said. "I wrote constantly for all their films. Their films are ... aired on HBO, Cinemax, and USA. I did the soundtracks. In some films, I would do maybe eight songs, all in a different style, everything from Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, Barbara Streisand, Aretha Franklin. I'd have to sing it in that style. I got a lot of work for it because they didn't have to hire different singers. I got a lot of session work for commercials."

One of her most exciting projects was a radio play called "Reach For The Stars," on which she collaborated with the celebrated film and television actor and director Martin Landau. "Everybody he works with, he allows their creativity to be apart of whatever project he's involved in," the singer recounted. "He doesn't just totally take control. He really encourages your opinion." The strong, positive working relationship ended up becoming a friendship. "He came to my home recording studio. He was recording a character in a radio version of this play that we were doing. We did a live radio version. He played one of the characters. I had to record him and direct him in this particular production. At some points he was actually insecure. He kept asking me, 'Are you sure this is good enough? Are you sure I'm doing this right?' And I'm like, 'Wow. This is Martin Landau asking ME if he's doing it well enough.'"

Greco did form a band in LA with her brother Earl and they played out in the club scene for a number of years. However, things were not the same as the local music scene in New England. "You can't make a living doing the club scene," the singer explained. "There's a lot of clubs where you have to pay to play. You buy a certain amount of the tickets to guarantee that amount. On the east coast I can actually make a living doing the club scene. Over there, unless you hook up with something like a Ramada Inn, when you play in Los Angeles it's more like you're doing a showcase. Record companies may come in and you're setting up specifically. You're not doing it to make money. You make a living there doing session work."

The blues chanteuse returned to her native Rhode Island and set up shop in her home studio in East Greenwich. Currently, Greco is hosting the Wednesday night jam sessions at Mulligan's at Joe Angelo's Café in Brockton. Having Greco host the blues jam was the brainstorm of her booking agent, Paul Papetti. "I'm doing the blues jam," she said. "I don't know what's happening in the summer months. I think the weekends are stopping. The blues jams are still going to be happening because they've been going well." The blues jams run on Wednesday nights from 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. They are part of Papetti's effort to revitalize downtown Brockton by establishing an upscale venue. Papetti picked Greco to host the weekly event.

"I just encourage musicians and singers of all levels to come on and participate," Greco said. "I try to create a really comfortable environment for everybody, no matter what level you are. You have to choose which people you put with which people because they're all people just sitting in. That's important to a lot of musicians. When you've

got guys who are really high level, they want to make sure that when they go and jam that they've got people somewhat on that level. At the same time, when you have people that are maybe not professional musicians or singers, you don't want to put all people who are not professional in the same thing because the whole thing will fall apart. It's really this fine balance you have." Papetti and Greco are hoping to eventually hold a summertime blues festival in Brockton.

Aside from her originals band that plays out in support of her "Surrender" CD and other original material, Greco fronts another band that belts out blues standards in blues rooms and biker bars. She works



with lead guitarist Domenic Frizzi from The Cat Sass Blues Band, with whom she shares the lead guitar duties. She picked up the guitar for

The first time two years ago, and she's already taking solos. Her second band, which she also fronts under own name, doesn't rehearse as much as her primary band. She just does it for fun, and so blues fans can have fun along with her. "It's an off-shoot of that (originals) band. It's a smaller unit. It's mostly rock and blues covers, older blues and rockin' blues," Greco said. "It gives me an opportunity to play a lot of guitar. Domenic is great. He's a wild man. I did that gig with him last week at The Mojo Room in Cambridge. It went great. He's completely uninhibited, and that's what happens when we work together. We always end up getting to this level, this frenzy. We'll run around the room trading guitar licks. We always bring it to this crescendo with thunderous applause, people going crazy."

Frizzi encourages her to perform on that level where players are completely uninhibited. It's about that moment of just letting go and putting a lot of effort into her guitar playing. "It's spontaneous combustion, for sure," she exclaimed.

Greco continues to live a life of music. She still composes for television in her home studio. She plays out with two different working bands. And she is working on a second album under her own name. She will probably do well on the New England blues circuit and maybe even on the adult contemporary charts. She is a fireball.

Visit Lois Greco on the web at www.loisgreco.com

(editor note: Mulligan's in Brockton no longer has blues on the weekends. They are still providing the Wednesday jam at the time of printing)