

glastonbury LIFE

22 Glastonbury LIFE JUN 01

Neighbors

Gallatin is a key figure in the growing popularity of bluegrass and folk music

by Stephen L. Purdy

When first appointed director of the Connecticut Audubon Center in town in 1993, Judy Harper wanted very much to begin a folk music series there, and held an "open mic" night. She remembered that, while numerous area performers, mostly amateur, signed up, "there was quite a ripple of excitement that Amy Gallatin was coming."

Ms. Harper said she had heard of the bluegrass singer-guitarist, but didn't appreciate the level of her following. But at the event, as Ms. Gallatin began to play with help from back-up musicians, pulses in the audience increased and Ms. Harper knew they were all onto something.

"It was just obvious that they were so much better," Ms. Harper said.

The other acts were excited to be with Ms. Gallatin, who was already beginning to be known across the country and abroad. And in accordance with tradition at many types of folk concerts, all gathered at the end of the event to play together.

"All the amateurs just wanted to keep going," Ms. Harper said, "because they could play with Amy Gallatin."

She added that, despite her reception, the seasoned performer blended in and celebrated the others.

"She was just a nice person, and part of the total picture," Ms. Harper said.

It was a connection that reflected an overall level

of talent and personality that professionals and amateurs alike cite about Amy Gallatin. She is considered to be a key part of an expanding international scene for music loosely categorized as "Americana." Including sounds of folk and bluegrass, it reflects experimentation and crossover to "acoustic pop" while remaining true to American roots.

It's a cultural base that the Alabama-born Ms. Gallatin learned through long, personal experience. She has traveled the country and, along the way, absorbed people's lives and music.

More than 10 years ago and almost by chance, the journey brought Amy Gallatin to Connecticut. While she knew she would keep on traveling and performing, she also knew she had found a community in which she could settle.

With a home now in town, she remains firmly connected to both the music and her adopted region, and her career appears to be hitting the high notes.

Appearing at numerous coffee houses and summer festivals, Ms. Gallatin performs with her band, Stillwaters, which she formed in 1993 as an extension of finishing her first album, "Northern Girl."

She emphasizes that, with the band's blend of styles, including blues and bluegrass, she gives a lot of attention to lyrics.

"Many times there's a message," she said.

Most of the music is acoustic, which means that the instruments are not amplified. Microphones are allowed, however, for singers and instruments. Ms. Gallatin said she first mastered singing to a microphone, a big change, when first in the Hartford area and developing Stillwaters.

"It was like going from a manual typewriter to an electric," she said.

She added that they all need to watch the microphones' proximity to each other when used in front of instruments, so they don't screech in transmission.

John Urbanik, who is both the Stillwaters bass player and a sound technician, said this is a challenge especially at festivals, which can use a dozen bands and allow only a few minutes to reconfigure between sets.

"Every instrument is slightly different," he said. "To keep every instrument sounding good and feedback down is difficult."



Amy Gallatin performs with her band Stillwaters, featuring Kevin Lynch (left) and John Urbanik.—Photo by Brian Ambrose

JUN 01 Glastonbury LIFE 23

In addition to Mr. Urbanik, current regular members of Stillwaters are mandolin player Kevin Lynch, also Ms. Gallatin's significant other, and resophonic guitarist Roger Williams.

The resophonic guitar, invented in Hawaii and commonly called the dobro after its principal manufacturer, is played flat in front of the musician, its large cone emitting an open, wailing twang associated with traditional forms of country music. Ms. Gallatin said that not only is the instrument excellent at complementing her vocal techniques on songs with emotion, Mr. Williams is a master on it.

She added that he could travel the world and work, and is grateful for every concert that he plays with her.

"He's probably one of the top 10 resophonic guitar players in the world," she said.

It may be Amy Gallatin's voice that helps keep Mr. Williams nearby. Many say it is her own most important instrument.

"Her voice doesn't get compared to other people that often," said Mr. Lynch, adding that he believes

Gallatin, page 24

Gallatin/23

she has to feel a connection to a song before performing it. "She has to like it. Anybody does, or it's going to sound like she's just up there killing time."

Peggy Ann Harvey, who plays fiddle and has worked with Stillwaters, explained that she has especially enjoyed harmonizing with Ms. Gallatin.

"I think it's really interesting, and fun, to have female vocalists in a band, singing together," she said.

She and Mr. Lynch, along with others, agree that Ms. Gallatin is a perfectionist.

"We spend a lot of time working things out, getting the music to where it's very presentable and enjoyable for everybody," she said, "including the musicians."

Whether enjoying themselves, or focusing on those details, the key for those who work with Amy Gallatin seems to be interaction.

It was a collaborative effort that began her personal and working relationship with Kevin Lynch. Dobro player Matt Nozzolio, whom she met while first in the state and who introduced her to the music scene, introduced her to Mr. Lynch as she performed one evening in the early '90s.

Already known for his bluegrass work with the group Trevor Hollow and for his hosting of the University of Hartford radio program "Bluegrass on Saturdays," she knew his appearance was significant, and her own pulse quaked a bit.

Even more significant, he got up on stage and played with her and the band. Ms. Gallatin said that, right away, she noticed that this was a musician who wasn't playing simple chord transitions, but that he

blended in.

"I just went, wow, of all the people up on stage, Kevin has never played with me before, and he's going right along with the song," she said.

For his part, Mr. Lynch said he had observed her quietly for some time that evening before coming on stage. He sensed a unique voice and rapport with the instruments, plus that all-important openness to different styles.

"I like being able to play swing, then blues, then bluegrass, folk and ballads," he said. "Whatever sounds good to us."

Ms. Gallatin said that, when Mr. Lynch offered subsequently to collaborate on an album, she felt as if her prayers had been answered.

"I'd wanted that opportunity for so long," she said, "but there was nobody out west that I was hooked up with that could do that with me."

Despite his own talent, Mr. Lynch said that the key as an instrumentalist backing up a singer of such quality is to focus on the vocals.

"Whether you like it or not, whatever you're playing is background," he said. "You'll hear it over and over from people in band who know what they're doing. They'll tell you, less is more."

Bluegrass music, he added, is precise and helps with this lesson.

"It has to be fairly strict," he said. "You don't have to play the same thing every time, but you better play in the same place every time."

Certainly Ms. Gallatin's other key collaborative experiences have included her second and third albums. On "Sweet Gatherings," made in 1995 with Stillwaters, she branched out musically, using a cello and steel drums. The album is named after the

former ice cream shop in Old Wethersfield where the band often worked and where it held the album's release party.

"That was a great and busy time," Ms. Gallatin said. "It just seemed like the sky was the limit."

Although Mr. Lynch produced the first two albums, Ms. Gallatin went to Nashville in 1998 to make her third, "The Long Way Home," as a result of producer Rich Adler seeing her while in Connecticut.

Amy Gallatin appears regularly with Stillwaters at coffee houses, festivals and fairs throughout the northeast United States and abroad. Currently popular sites where they work include the Sounding Board Coffeehouse in West Hartford and the Strawberry Park Bluegrass Festival in Norwich. Worthy new festivals nearby, she added, include the Ossipee Valley Bluegrass Festival in Maine and the Prospect Hill Bluegrass Festival in Massachusetts.

Most connected to the topic say the popularity of Amy Gallatin and Stillwaters is one of the reasons for the rise in interest in Americana.

Ms. Gallatin said there are still two networks for the music, one for folk and one for bluegrass. She's at home in both worlds, getting radio play on both folk and bluegrass shows, adding this is not always the case.

"I have a foot in both camps, and it's great," she said.

Ms. Gallatin added that there is no one location where musicians of Americana congregate. For bluegrass, the network is linked through all the festivals in the region.

Mr. Nozzolio said there is plenty to hear, especially *Gallatin*, page 26

Gallatin/24

cially folk, if you are made aware of appearances.

"There's certainly a lot of offerings for different types of music," he said. "It's just a question of knowing where to find them."

Ms. Harvey, who also works as a pharmacist, said a customer recognized her at work as a performer she had seen, and approached her just to confirm her name.

"I meet people like that a lot," Ms. Harvey said.

Tracey Weiss of the Glastonbury Chamber of Commerce has helped promote Ms. Gallatin and thinks she has seen a trend towards her music forms since the mid-'90s. Ms. Weiss said she senses a pull back to interest in singer-songwriters, especially female, who draw on American roots. Perhaps it's a reaction to sounds so long infested with technology, she suggested.

"It could be a turn back to something simple and basic and wonderful," Ms. Weiss said.

Radio stations play a key role in both publicizing the music and enabling personal connections. She said WWUH-FM at the University of Hartford plays a major role with its folk programming six mornings a week, in addition to the Saturday bluegrass program.

She singled out Susan Forbes Hansen, host of the "Sunday Night Folk Festival" on WHUS-FM

in Storrs and and "Valley Folk" on Amherst's WFCR-FM as playing a big role in linking the community.

"A lot of the folk people I've met, I've met through her," Ms. Gallatin said.

Ms. Hansen, who has had Amy Gallatin and Stillwaters as guests on both shows, said, "I use her work in my programming as I do that of any performer that makes the cut. She has her own vocal sound. She's developed into an extremely entertaining and professional musician whose intelligence and wit shines through her performances."

Still, Ms. Gallatin explained that she walks a fine line between wanting to reach as large an audience as possible and being true to her roots. While she refuses to contribute to the trend of a homogenization of country music and pre-programmed sets driven by advertising, she said her interpretation of Americana is far broader than that of some artists.

She added that she's getting help from mainstream country performers such as Ricky Skaggs and Dolly Parton, who have been returning to roots in bluegrass through recordings that are well-received commercially. Respect for bluegrass, she added, has shown up in other popular culture, such as its use on the soundtrack for the currently popular film, "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?"

Meanwhile, she has discovered just how open Europe is to Americana, introduced in the early '80s

in The Netherlands. She remembers that Stillwaters' first European performance, at a Brussels bar called Tooglinblik, was as notable for its unlikely setting—they hardly ever play bars, anywhere—as it was for its connection to audience.

"They were drinking and partying and smoking," Ms. Gallatin recalled her worry as they began. "But I'll tell you, when we started the music, they shut up."

At an engagement with other bands (including a Swedish country band) in Oostee, Germany, the event ended with a "feel-good jam" where all band members were on stage performing John Denver's song, "Take Me Home, Country Road."

"They were singing along, standing on the tables," Ms. Gallatin said of observers.

Adulation of Americana, she suggested, can go beyond the copying of culture.

"It's like they embraced the myth," she said.

With Germans particularly fond of western style, she explained that it isn't uncommon to see dancers wearing chaps leg coverings and coon-skin caps.

"One guy had turquoise jewelry and belt, had obviously been to the American southwest," she said.

European popular radio programming is not nearly as subjected to the syndrome of pre-programmed sets tailored for market groups. Overall styles might prevail at given stations, but there is still a far greater cross-section within each.

"It's really refreshing," she said. "You might hear a Patsy Cline song, then an Amy Gallatin, then a Garth Brooks, followed by a straight-ahead bluegrass song."

She was certainly familiar with them all. With her musical interest beginning with listening to John Denver and Joan Baez while in high school, she combined this with a passion for social issues.

Although she studied in California to be a radio reporter, she soon became disenchanted by the medium, and began traveling and performing. She supported herself by waiting tables, including at Cold Foot, Alaska, which she said is billed as "the northernmost truck stop in the world."

She said there's nothing like Cold Foot for the necessary exposure to the rough side of American life, "truckers, plus fugitives, felons, and con men" all part of the fabric she would later bring to performing.

Life improved when, at dude ranches in Idaho and Montana, Ms. Gallatin cared for horses and sang for tourists.

"I was a wrangler by day, and I'd sing around the campfire by night," she said.

Her first real professional engagement was singing at Lone Mountain Ranch in Big Sky, Mont. At "sleigh ride dinners," she said, performance was all acoustic, since it was held in a cabin in the woods without electricity or running water.

"It was great training, on being comfortable in an intimate venue," she said, "and not being dependent on a microphone."

It was during the summer of 1990 when, having performed in Europe, she returned to New York short of funds. In need of a place to stay, she came to stay with a friend in Glastonbury. It was the unexpected side-trip that led to meeting Mr. Nozzolio and seeing the richness of music in central Connecticut.

She remembered key festivals that got her hooked, including the Mineral Springs Footstompin' Bluegrass Festival in Stafford Springs, where her band now plays every July 4.

"That's one of those great small, family festivals, with a great vibe and great picking," she said.

She was amazed at the talent.

"This area is really a hotbed for this kind of music, and people who live here don't always realize that."

Despite her growing success, Ms. Gallatin is a working artist and her pocketbook remains lean. While settling in the Hartford area, she even worked for an insurance company for a while to pay the bills.

As usual, she drew on the experience.

"It's another slice of life you can bring to your mind set. Now I've done corporate things, 180 degrees away from Cold Foot, Alaska."

She's almost able to make a living from perform-

ing. Income is flush in summer, lean at other times.

"It's kind of feast or famine," Ms. Gallatin said.

Although money is tight during down times, she chooses not to get a full-time job in the business world. Her energies are better used in work on bookings and publicity, including attention to an extensive web page.

"I don't want a day job that's going to compete with the creative energy that I have," she said.

Peggy Ann Harvey salutes her friend and co-musician for her dedication beyond the music. Drive and ambition operate along with her talent, Ms. Harvey said.

"She spends a lot of time getting gigs, calling promoters and exposing more people to the music."

Ms. Gallatin recently bought her own house and feels connected to the town.

"I loved the rural feel here, the summers here," she said.

And the town enjoys Amy Gallatin. While Ms. Harper regularly hires her for coffee houses at the Audubon center, the chamber's Tracey Weiss added Ms. Gallatin appears regularly at the town's Apple Harvest Festival, held in October.

While she admits she takes big risks, Amy Gallatin said that her work reflects her dreams.

"When I was out west and doing the wrangler thing, I can't tell you how many successful people told me, you're so smart to be doing this now." **GL**