

SOUND OFF

LISTENING TO LOCAL MUSICIANS

Harpist defies stereotypes by playing in jazz-fusion trio

BY TINA POTTER

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As a harpist, April Stace is cognizant of the connotations the tony instrument elicits.

While some peg the harp as a source of background music at upper-crust parties, others consider it the foundation of elevator music. It's such stereotypes that the classically trained harpist rails against — not with words, but with her playing style.

The angelic tones that emanate from the architecturally beautiful instrument are not lost on Stace, who began playing the harp as a child. Instead of playing the instrument in a strictly traditional fashion, Stace injects elements of rock and jazz into her repertoire.

In her teens, she performed with different rock bands, always as a harpist, which on the surface seems paradoxical. A pristine instrument that produces calming sounds is ostensibly out of place in the gritty, grinding rock 'n' roll world.

For Stace, the inherent challenges of adapting her style of music to her surroundings allowed her to grow as an artist.

"From the get-go I wanted to explore making the harp electric, which is pretty easy — you just put a pickup on it and it gets louder. I wanted to experience distortion," said Stace, 23. "I was trying out timbre stuff to try and get through the emotional spectrum."

"At the same time I was also studying classically and trying my best to be angelic. So I had two paths to walk down at the same time."

These days, Stace uses her

proficiency with the Celtic harp — one of three types she plays — as a member of the Seattle-based instrumental trio Harp 46.

Stace, along with drummer Nucleo Vega and bassist Posido Vega, are recent transplants from Maryland. (They've been in town since July).

"We wanted to move to the West Coast, and San Francisco was too expensive," Stace said, "so we decided that Seattle would be a good choice."

Stace recently talked about the allure of the harp and what it's like to transport the sizable in-

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strument from show to show.

Q: How did Harp 46 come together?

I met Nucleo in 1998 at the University of Maryland. We met because the drum studio was right across the street from the harp studio. We became friends and began to play music along with his brother, Posido, who is a bass player. We began to play together as a jazz trio.

Q: Tell me about the first time you heard the harp.

I was really young, probably 2 or 4 years old. I can barely remember it, I just loved the sound of it. The big ones, especially, are so beautiful. I just thought it was incredible. It seemed like magic.

Q: You began studying the harp at age 7, and within five years you were playing professionally. What drew you to the instrument?

The harp is a really kind of interesting instrument because it's really hard to sound angry on it. It's really hard to not play anything that doesn't make people think of angels. That was an inviting challenge for me to take this beautiful sound and expand the wide variety of emotions that you want to express. Also I just kind of love unusual stuff. Playing the harp is off the beaten path.

Q: Were you a natural harpist, or did you have to work at it?

I had grown up with music, since my parents were both musicians, so there weren't the usual musical challenges. I was kind of strong-headed, and getting me to practice the right way was a challenge.

Q: What was your first professional gig as a harpist?



COURTESY OF POSIDO VEGA

Seattle-based instrumental trio Harp 46 features Nucleo Vega, left, (African Djembe drum); Posido Vega, center (bass); and April Stace (Celtic harp).

I was playing background music for a charity event, a silent auction. I had six songs, so I played them over and over again.

Q: Are there challenges unique to the harp?

Playing in a variety of keys is a really unique challenge on the harp. There's also stereotypes of harps. I have to convince people that I'm not going to come in and play boring flatline music all the time, that I have something to say with my music.

Q: What's your style as a harpist?

It comes out of all the different styles I've explored at different times. I would say there's some jazz in there and some Celtic. Then there's the classical stream. It's a real hybrid of all the styles that I've grown up with. I just like to play things that feel something.

Q: What is distinctive about the type of harp you play, the

Harp 46

Featuring: April Stace (Celtic harp), Nucleo Vega (African Djembe drum) and Posido Vega (bass)

Discography: "Harp 46" (recently released debut CD)

Web site: www.Harp46.com

Next shows: Check Web site for updates.

Well, it was really kind of haphazard. We had been sitting on a lot of material for a while.

I told the guys that we are going to make a CD on this (certain) day, so let's start practicing for it. Once the deadline was set, we went in and put down the CD in one day. It was quite miraculous. I can't believe how well it turned out, considering the circumstances.

I think we've grown a lot since we've recorded it, so I'm looking for the chance to do another CD.

Q: So is it difficult lug a harp around?

The one I play on is a little heavy, but I can put it in the back of a car. The concert harp, which is what I got my degree in, is really heavy, which is why I got a minivan.

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