

Former Grammy winner Cole to grace Bull Run stage Jan. 19

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SHIRLEY — In the midst of a tour that in the last week has opened the door to her soon-to-be released sixth studio album, “Raven,” singer/songwriter Paula Cole will make a stop at the Bull Run Restaurant on Saturday, Jan. 19, with the concert beginning at 8 p.m.

For Cole, who first gained notoriety when she performed during Peter Gabriel’s Secret World Live Tour in 1993 and 1994, followed by the release of her debut solo album “Harbinger,” in July 1994, her latest album offers a few jewels that exhibit a willingness to step outside her comfort zone.

With a career that has largely been focused on her voice, and her prowess on the piano, Cole said, “I’m willing to try a lot of things ... there is one thing (that stands out), in that I am playing guitar on this album.”

Offering fans a taste of that new skill set just last week, she said, “I played one song with guitar in Cambridge, and that was the beginning of the unveiling of my new songs.” She added that she plans on “debuting a few (Raven) songs live” during the Bull Run show as well.

But before fans of Cole start to think that she has suddenly morphed into a completely different artist by her playing guitar, the piano is still very much tied to her music.

“With most of my songs coming from my piano,” she said, “(For the Cambridge show at Club Passim on Jan. 4) they moved in a baby grand piano, even though they said they hadn’t had one on their stage for 15 years.”

To Cole, though, these recent performances, along with her stop next week at Bull Run, followed by four future dates at other spots through the middle of May — even if labeled as such — aren’t seen as part of a “tour” in her eyes.

“I don’t think of it as a tour, as I’ll always be singing,” she said. “I’m out there practically every weekend, and I think of it as a coursing constant.”

Pointing out to how much things have changed from earlier in her career, Cole said, “I used to tour on a bus, but now I play more of an extended weekend style. That prolongs everything, but now that I’m more independent, I figure that can speed up everything.”

And when Cole uses the word “independent,” that holds special meaning with regard to her upcoming album, which she is releasing on her own, without the assistance of a record label.

“I had done that over and over again (signed with different labels), and I was a free agent,” she said. “It was scary, but my fans were there for me, and I will be there for them.”

That support was exemplified when Cole opted to coordinate a self-funding campaign through the website Kickstarter, seeking to collect the needed funds to release a new album.

“The recording aspect ... the audio aspect ... I usually produce (albums) myself, that comes naturally, so that was no problem,” she said. “At 44 years old, I thought it was time to learn these other

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— Paula Cole, on which songs she considers her favorites on the upcoming album, ‘Raven’

aspects. I am definitely a novice, and there is a learning curve, but I don’t need Beyonce dollars (to finish an album).”

While admitting that only a “small percentage” of such campaigns succeed, Cole said, “You have to go into it humbly. You have to have some body of support from fans. This is an amazing (option). For artists, you don’t realize the power that you have.”

And that support added up to her achieving 150 percent of her goal in just 38 days, as 911 individuals backed funding for the album, from donations as low as \$5, to one person who pledged \$5,000.

Having “just mastered the last songs on ‘Raven’” on Tuesday, upon looking over each of the songs for the album set to be released in April — which she defined as “simpler (with the cords), more story telling and lots of rich lyrics” — she couldn’t identify any favorites.

“It’s hard, it’s like asking which child do you like best, but it’s been a fascinating journey,” she said. “I’ve pulled some from my catalog and others that have been under wraps for years.”

But one song that will be included on “Raven,” Cole spoke of as being particularly pleased with, about how it came together.

“There was one written for Solomon Burke, which he didn’t use, ‘Eloise,’” she said. “I changed the time feel, I moved the key, and readapted it so I could sing it myself. I’m proud that it found it’s way to life from all its incarnations.”

Among the different songs, despite its intriguing album title of “Raven,” the Bay State native admitted that “I didn’t shape the album with a unifying theme. What works, what feels right, what segues, they all came forward and demanded to be recorded.”

And adding some more Bay State flavor to the Jan. 19 concert at Bull Run will be that 2012 Boston Music Awards nominee Sarah Blacker, who will open the show for Cole.

For fans of Cole wondering why there has been the long wait of three years since her previous album was released, she explained, “It’s not the late ’60s anymore, when they put out albums every 10 months. It takes time to tour, and I live a very rich personal life at home, and that’s my priority.”

That “personal life at home” even meant that after winning a Grammy for “Best New Artist” in 1997, she chose to step back from the limelight, so to spend time raising her daughter.

“I missed singing and I missed performing, but no, I knew that I needed to be with her,” she said.

“I needed to make my life right again, to be free.”

The height of Cole’s national notoriety began a few months prior to her Grammy win, when she was nominated for seven Grammys, recognizing the work from her second album, “This Fire” which was released in October 1996, and ended up selling more than 2 million copies.

And that rise in notoriety ended up being somewhat unnerving to Cole.

“It all came very quickly, a big wave ... a big spike. I suppose if you could play God, I’d prefer that it would have come incrementally,” she said. “Grammys were not the be all and end all ... it wasn’t that important to me honestly, even if they make a great bookend.”

But even when she chose to return to release her third studio album, “Amen” in 1999, she added, “I shook off the attention and retreated (even more) from the spotlight, and lived in hermitude away from the music business for about eight years.”

During that hiatus, Cole explained, “I needed to live my life. I needed to be with my



Courtesy photo

Singer/songwriter Paula Cole on stage at the piano during one of her recent performances.

daughter, and (dealt with) a divorce. That’s a universal pass (for others that one) can’t be the same career woman that they once

were. You have to find your way, and it took time for it to be right.”

Now that she has gotten back to producing albums and performing, she emphasized how different it is being on stage versus in front of a studio microphone.

“Live is completely different, as I don’t try to replicate a studio performance,” she said. “I actually try to breathe through my nerves, as I’m nervous before every show. I try to talk to my audience, love them, and have my heart on my sleeve, because you really see if they got ‘it’ by seeing them live.”

Having worked on albums for nearly 20 years, Cole pointed to a number of musical influences, including John Lennon, Joni Mitchell, Dolly Parton, Bob Marley, Miles Davis, Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush, Annie Lennox and Neil Young, but added, “I think those influences have lessened over the years, and it’s more me finding my connection to myself, coming more to the floor as I get older. As artists, we practice other people’s work when we are younger, and then later on, we become more unique seeking to be ourselves.”

Upon looking at her “catalog” of songs that extend across each of her prior five studio albums, beginning with “Harbinger,” Cole simply said, “I hope to write the best songs in the end. That’s where I want to leave my legacy,

and I am happy that my songs live on.”

Among some of her songs that will most likely “live on,” include “I Don’t Want to Wait” or “Where Have All The Cowboys Gone,” which reached the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100 in 1997. While some artists might openly bemoan having to always perform one or two songs at every concert because of their never waning popularity, Cole said, “I stand by my songs, I play them and I’m proud of them. I am happy to play those songs, I would never go on stage to play songs that I don’t want to. (Musicians) tend to complain a lot, but I’m proud of my work.”

When it came to “I Don’t Want to Wait,” Cole said, “The song was picked up by this TV show, Dawson’s Creek, to where they now associate it with the TV show, and our memory adjusts to where it’s now part of the TV show, and that brings (the song) to the attention of a bunch of new people.”

Even as the song gained in popularity once it was used for the show, Cole said, “‘I Don’t Want to Wait’ was a canary in the coal mine, in how the landscape has changed (for artists in having their music distributed). I got heat for it then, but a ton of artists have done it since, and it makes the song live on.”

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Courtesy photo

Album art as part of “Ithaca,” Paula Cole’s album, released in 2010. Cole on Jan. 19 will perform at Bull Run Restaurant in Shirley as part of an ongoing tour, and will offer a sampling from her upcoming album, “Raven,” to be released in April.