

Multitalented Zac Brown Band collaborator Caroline Jones working on new album, debuting new songs

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Fireworks are bright and brash, exploding in a moment of grandeur, and resulting in “oohs” and “aahs” from entertained audiences.

But that’s all they are, really: a flame that bursts onto the scene and flickers out just as quickly.

At a time when so many musicians are desperate to become the reality TV version of fireworks, Caroline Jones is building a foundation for success that will far outlast her peers’ 15 minutes of fame.

While still in single digits, she began to write and use creative expression. Jones partnered with vocal coach Andy Anselmo, who trained Tony Bennett and Liza Minelli; took up multiple instruments; trekked to the home of country music, where she studied its pioneers in-depth; latched on with Zac Brown, who took her under his wings; and learned to craft cinema-quality music videos.

Now, with a refined look and

sound, Jones has been heralded as the next big thing in country music. The dynamic singer and prolific string-picker has been releasing songs from her forthcoming sophomore album. Recent singles “Come In (But Don’t Make Yourself Comfortable)” and “Getting to Me” have already racked up 1.6 million YouTube views.

As if that wasn’t enough to fill a resume, Jones also hosts the SiriusXM show “Art & Soul,” in which she interviews and performs with other singer-songwriters; and she spearheads “T.H.I.S.” (The Heart is Smart Initiative), which is “a music curriculum and nationwide school tour that uplifts, inspires, and provides students a medium of expression through music.”

Jones is appearing with the Zac Brown Band on “The Comeback Tour,” which heads to Darien Lake on Saturday. The singer recently chatted with NFP, shedding light on her creative process and unexpected love of country music. An edited Q&A follows.

Q: *This is obviously a great opportunity for you. How did you initially get hooked up with Zac Brown Band, and what keeps you coming back to play with them time after time?*

Caroline Jones: The question really is what keeps them asking me to come back time after time! (Laughs)

I initially got connected to Zac through friends of friends, and he just went out of his way to be supportive of me and my music at a time when I really didn’t have much going on at all. He invited me out on one run of his 2017 “Welcome Home Tour,” and one of those dates was actually in Buffalo. And I was supposed to be out

for three dates, and then I ended up doing the whole rest of the tour – which at the time, as you can imagine for me, was just a total dream come true.

And I’ve just been touring on and off with them ever since. And then this year, I wasn’t supposed to be touring with them or opening for them. Zac asked me to come out as a special guest in the band and actually play as part of the band and be an honorary member for a tour; and play guitar and B3 (electric organ) and a couple other instruments and sing their harmonies with them.

It’s just, as you said, it’s not what I spend the bulk of my solo career doing, obviously; I’ve never been a side woman before. But it’s been an incredible experience so far, and it was something that I just couldn’t pass up – to have the opportunity to be in one of my favorite bands.

Q: *I happened to watch the video for “Getting to Me,” and I just was immediately taken aback by your talents. Tell me a little bit about your musical background – where you started, what got you into it, and what you love about making music.*

Caroline Jones: Thank you so much. I started out writing poems and stories at a really young age. I loved words and stories. And when I was 9 years old, I got really into music and asked my parents for singing lessons. And as soon as I began singing, I realized I could put all those stories and my poetry to music, and write songs. I was hooked at a very young age, and never wanted to do anything else.

And as I mentioned, I didn’t grow up listening to country music. I have a pretty diverse musical back-



Caroline Jones returns to Darien Lake this weekend. (Image by Tyler Lord)

ground. I grew up listening to a lot of classic rock and R&B from my dad, but I was trained classically in opera and jazz by Andy Anselmo, who, as I mentioned is from Buffalo – who I’ll get to see this weekend when I’m up in your home.

And I listened to a lot of the divas of the ‘90s as well. My mom loves like Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston, Celine Dion and Barbra Streisand. So, I basically grew up listening to a little bit of everything but country music. And then discovered country around 17-18.

I went to Nashville for the first time – went to a show at The Bluebird Cafe, which is a legendary singer/songwriter venue down in Nashville. And I just, it was kind of a lightning bolt, lifechanging moment for me. I felt like I found the missing piece of kind of my musical and artistic identity. I hadn’t realized prior to that that there was a whole genre of music, and community of people, in Nashville, Tennessee, who really prized musicianship and authenticity and storytelling and all the things that I was really drawn to and hadn’t even realized that I was. I was really into Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan and Patty Griffin and kind of the storytellers. And I just didn’t realize that is country music’s M.O.

And so, then I kind of delved back in my late teens, early-20s and started at the Carter Family and Hank Williams and just went forward from there, and listened to the whole lineage of country music and fell in love. So, that bled its way into my kind of pop singer/songwriter music. And then you have the Venn diagram that is currently Caroline Jones.

But thank you for saying that about “Getting to Me.” I’m really proud of that song, and we’re leaking out songs slowly one at a time every month until the album comes out later this fall.

Q: *Tell me about “Getting to Me.” This is about your fiancé, but was that the intention when you set out to write it or did it morph into that?*

Caroline Jones: It was definitely the intention, setting out to write it. It was the first song that I ever wrote about him. And it’s hard to overstate the magnitude at that time of finding – as cheesy

as it sounds – the one, and how sacred that experience was for me. When I listen to this song, I can go back and feel that.

I tried to mirror that in the production, too. Like, it starts very sparse and strong, but very simple, and then it gets pretty rock ‘n’ roll and pretty epic. And I love that dichotomy in production. I think I’ve been wanting to do that in a song for a long time. By “for a long time,” I mean like I wanted to create a song that has a huge production discrepancy between the verse and the chorus. I love songs like that, that just the chorus explodes and it’s like a wall of sound, but the verse is very minimalistic and very clean and very pure. And it does that with my vocal, as well; like it’s a full octave below the chorus. I love

that kind of stuff.

Q: *It’s funny that you say “minimalistic” and “clean,” because, looking at some of your songs, I feel like that’s definitely something you do a lot of. I listen to your songs and then I go back and listen to some other people’s songs, and I’m like, “Jeez, they really didn’t need the bells and whistles. They’re really not necessary. Look at someone like Caroline Jones – she doesn’t need all that stuff.” It’s just a really clean, straightforward, good vocal, good song.*

Is that something that’s important to you, just focusing on the talent and not so much worrying about all the other bells and whistles that could possibly go into a song?

Caroline Jones: Thanks. Honestly, I’m still in my journey with all that, because I love production, and at a young age I really wanted to be involved in production and wanted to be a musician. I remember going to the studios in Nashville and seeing the studio musicians, and just being so blown away by their talent and all the sounds – not only like the facility on their instruments, but also the sounds that they can make. And modern production is such an endless rabbit hole of, like, fun and just sonic landscape and experimentation and creativity, because of the digital age.

So, I feel like, at some points in my life, I’ve been really like analog and pure and wanted to do things live and acoustic; and then at some points I’ve been super into production, and how to layer sounds, and just fascinated by how records sound so big and so thick and so well produced. And so, I’d say that I definitely am a pendulum swinging back and forth, as far as production. Because then I’m on tour with Zac Brown Band – like, they don’t play tracks; they hardly play to click. Everything is super live, and raw, and analog, and real, and I love that, too. So, I’d say it’s all fun, is the simplest answer I can give to your question. And it’s something that I think a lot of musicians are navigating now, like, “How and when do I bring in bells and whistles; and when is the story told better simply?”

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