

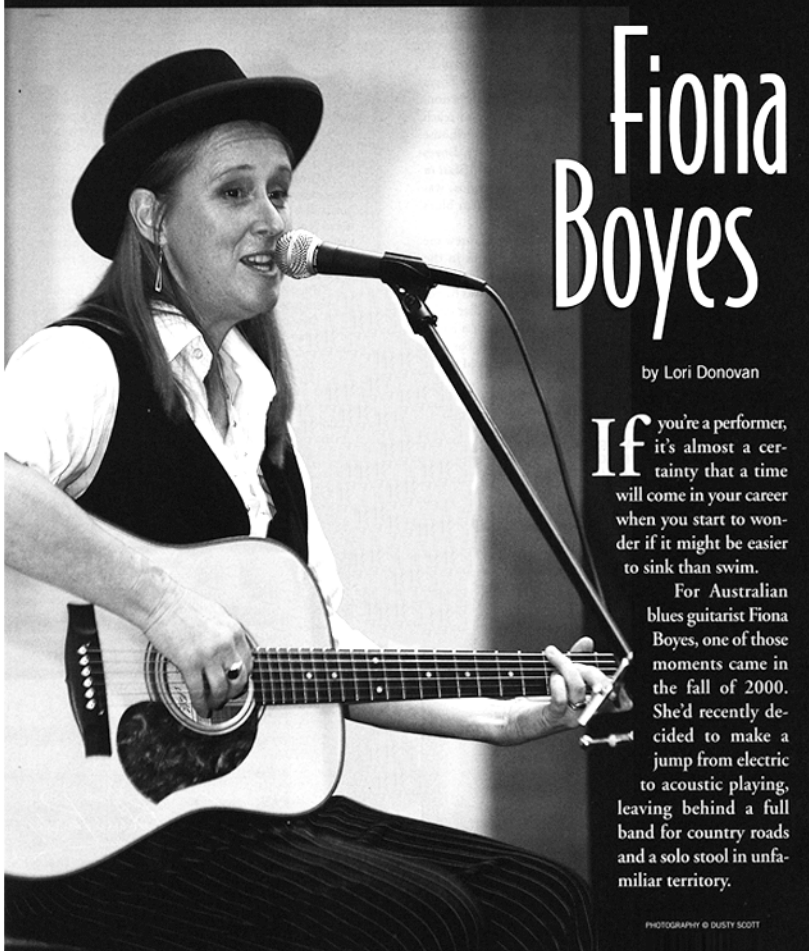


BLUES REVUE

FIONA BOYES

Aussie Wonder

A Down-Under Wonder Crosses Over



Fiona Boyes

by Lori Donovan

If you're a performer, it's almost a certainty that a time will come in your career when you start to wonder if it might be easier to sink than swim.

For Australian blues guitarist Fiona Boyes, one of those moments came in the fall of 2000. She'd recently decided to make a jump from electric to acoustic playing, leaving behind a full band for country roads and a solo stool in unfamiliar territory.

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After serving as a driving force behind the successful New Orleans-style band the Mojors for 14 years, Boyes made the bittersweet decision to go it alone. Members of the Mojors knew their musical interests were beginning to wander. While her bandmates turned an ear to Latin influences, Boyes had no room in her heart for anything but blues.

She'd long admired country blues and the fingerpicking of legends such as Mississippi John Hurt, but Boyes never imagined her own talent evolving in that direction. Going solo, however, provided an opportunity to reach beyond her comfort zone. A longtime fan of barrelhouse rhythms and melodies of the early 20th century, Boyes decided to unplug for the first time in her career. *Blues in My Heart*, her debut recording without the Mojors, was released in 2000, and reviews from the Australian blues community were favorable.

Taking it on the road was another story. "It threw me in the deep end," Boyes recalls. Her bandmates in the Mojors had been working mothers, so the group rarely left the familiar clubs of Melbourne, where the outfit was based. Now, Boyes was on her own, driving to unfamiliar cities and rural communities without the safety net of a band. Rowdy bar patrons expecting a bone-jarring rock band — not thumping blues from a lone blonde — looked at her with doubt.

"It was daunting," Boyes admits. "But I knew if I could make it rhythmic and channel that early juke-joint feel, I could win them over."

As she was touring, *Blues in My Heart* began to earn the attention that would eventually alter her future. The Australasian Performing Rights Association gave her awards for Female Blues Artist of the Year and Song of the Year in 2001. Armed with newfound fans, a successful recording, and renewed confidence in her fingerpicking, Boyes issued her second solo album, *Gimme Some ... Sweet Jelly Roll*, in 2003.

“Suddenly, here I was in a little bar on Beale Street, playing where my heroes had played. It was surreal. Would audiences relate to my lyrics or sense of humor? Would they understand my accent?”

Australia had a new musical phenomenon, and its blues community wanted to share her with the world. In January 2003, the Melbourne Blues Appreciation Society paid Boyes' way to Memphis, Tennessee, to compete in the International Blues Challenge.

Though she'd spent her entire adult career emulating American blues artists, this was Boyes' first visit to the United States. “Suddenly, here I was in a little bar on Beale Street,” she says, “playing my tribute song to Memphis Minnie right where she and many of my other heroes had once played. It was surreal. I had no idea what people would think of me. Would audiences relate to my lyrics or sense of humor? Would they understand my accent?”

Summoning the same courage she'd used when she first

ventured out on her solo career, Boyes “learned to speak slowly” and met American audiences head-on. “I decided to play like this was just another gig,” she says.

It wasn't, of course. Her performance in the IBC landed her the coveted top spot of Best Solo/Duo Act, making her the first Australian — and the first woman — to take the prize.

The win introduced Boyes to American audiences. In the year that followed, she found herself on the bill of some of the nation's most popular blues festivals and events, including the W.C. Handy Blues Awards, the Chicago Blues Festival, the New York State Rhythm & Blues Festival, and leading venues across 15 states.

Though she'd found success through fingerpicking, Boyes was determined not to lose the part of her that had been comfortable playing electric guitar. “Although I was touring as an acoustic act, I still had my electric guitar with me,” she says. “And lucky for

me, because I found myself being offered the chance to play alongside folks like Tommy Castro and Pinetop Perkins.” Since her time in America was short, she took advantage of every opportunity to perform.

Just before returning to Australia, Boyes called upon Bob Margolin and Austin, Texas-based sax/harp player Mark “Kaz” Kazanoff to join her for an impromptu show at Atlanta's Blue Note West. Having never played together before and with no setlist, the trio — along with Boyes' band, the Fortune Tellers — brought down the house and recorded the performance.

“I took the album on ADAT tapes on the plane, in a plastic shopping bag, back to Australia,” Boyes says. “Then I went about mixing and mastering it myself, which was a huge learning curve as I'd never done anything like that before.” She sent her rough mixes to Kazanoff, one of Austin's most respected producers, and they worked across

Boyes' Aussie Gear

Fiona Boyes might have American blues in her heart, but when it comes to the tools of her trade, she's a hometown girl. “I'm proud that my main instruments are made in my hometown of Melbourne,” she says of her career-long relationship with Australian manufacturer Maton Guitars.

“With only a few songs and a few chords under my belt, I sneaked off one night to an open mike in a part of town far away from anyone that might know me. I was in a borrowed car, with a borrowed guitar, because I didn't own an instrument.

“The coffee shop was having a series of heats in a competition to win a beautiful handmade Maton acoustic guitar, one I certainly couldn't afford. On my third, utterly nerve-racking public performance, I won the instrument that was to be my first and only acoustic guitar. I played it lovingly for the next 15 years, replacing it with a newer Maton a few years ago.

“The competition was intended as a ‘talent encouragement prize’ to foster new roots players. It was pivotal to me. Over the years, I remind Neville [Kitchen, who owns Maton] that it's his fault I was encouraged to inflict myself on the public.”

continents to perfect *Fiona Boyes & the Fortune Tellers Live in Atlanta*, released in March 2004.

Last year, Memphis label Yellow Dog Records signed Boyes. “When the offer came, Pandora's box was opened,” she recalls. “What do you really want to do? Who do you want to do it with? Where do you want to do it?”

Boyes had options she'd never imagined, but the decision to record with Kazanoff in Austin was an easy one. With Kazanoff both producing and performing, and with Margolin serving as guest guitarist, Boyes' new release, *Lucky 13*, encapsulates her expanding repertoire and diverse range of styles, including original and classic tunes on acoustic and electric guitar.

Boyes spent the summer of 2006 touring the nation and house-hunting. “With the plan to relocate to the U.S. in the near future,” she says, “this is the beginning of establishing myself on a more regular basis in America.” ■