



# ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

nine local women talk songs and success

by Leslie Benson, photos by Julie Curry and Kris Arnold

Whether they are strumming guitar chords, wielding violin strings or exploring the human condition through oral storytelling, Central Indiana nurtures a fertile field of women in jazz, blues, country, folk and down and dirty rock. Recently, NUVO spoke to nine local female musicians who have found individual and alternative routes to success about what matters to them most and how they've managed to make music a full-time profession.



I think **Joan Jett** will still be kicking ass long after **Britney Spears** has a lobotomy.

Grunge-era distorted guitars and Shirley Manson-esque vocals erupt from Indianapolis native Jane Jensen — a gritty singer-songwriter unlike the ballad chokers heavy on store shelves these days. She's vintage '90s, when alt-rock reigned, and female musicians began breaking molds.

Her songs move. They have attitude. But the lovable Jensen's songs seduce as much as charm. Sometimes they stir trouble.

"My first musical obsession was Mick Jagger and Rolling Stones," Jensen says. "I'm still obsessed."

After moving to Chicago in the early 1990s, Jensen attended the Columbia College for music and theater, where dark industrial act Ministry had a studio. Jensen recorded her first CD at Chicago Trax and ended up babysitting Al Jourgensen's daughter.

From an alt-rock edge, Jensen began introducing industrial elements, like programmable instruments into her music, though the songwriter could still hammer out licks on her guitar. "When I moved to New York and started recording *Comic Book Whore*, all of the Chicago influences really came out in my music," she says. "The music I am doing today is all acoustic based ... it's pretty organic."

A self-proclaimed comic book "nerd," Jensen's Chicago days also found her reading graphic classics. "Pretty soon I was a total fanboy for Neil Gaiman and Jamie Hewlett," she

says. "I still have stacks in my closet that I will always keep, but I'm not a 'user' anymore. I loved Tank Girl, Death and Delirium — they were my favorite characters."

A fearless "Tank Girl" in her own right, Jensen has tackled the music world head-on. She's played CBGB with Green Day and Red Rocks with Bad Religion. A few more achievements of note: Jensen's *Burner* CD previously won the best alternative album award from Just Plain Folks, a national organization based in Indianapolis, and she signed for a stint with Interscope before becoming 100 percent independent. "When I was with Interscope, I was signed by a woman, Anna Statman," Jensen says. "Still, [the music scene] is mostly populated by men, and it can feel like a boys club."

But Jensen's in her own "club" — songwriters with stories to tell and the chops to back them up. "Of the newer popular female artists, I really like KT Tunstall and Amy Winehouse," Jensen says. "I don't respect label/producer-driven pop music written by a writing team for a female vocalist... I think Joan Jett will still be kicking ass long after Britney Spears has a lobotomy."

The straightforward Jensen recently returned to live in Indianapolis. She just finished recording her third solo CD, *Rockabye*, at Pop Machine Recording Studios with Eric Klee and Marc Johnson. Look for a CD release party at the Melody Inn in early September.



For Indianapolis singer-songwriter Ann McWilliams, a beat-up cowboy hat and a 14-year-old Santa Fe guitar are the most comfortable things to put on at the end of the day. On the long journey from a past full of bar gigs with former band Miles to Go to the all-ages festival shows now, McWilliams finally knows what works for her.

"I've brought a bluegrass essence into my music over the past year and a half. It's fitting," she says. "I realized, I can get really old and still do country!"

Switching from the original music purveyor school of thought to a more open set

list, the guitarist has allowed her Midwest upbringing to seep into her music, playing originals like "Love X 7," about her old guitar, to covers of Neil Young, Lucinda Williams and the Pretenders.

"You have to adapt to your environment," McWilliams says, "and I do a combination of both [covers and originals]. It's a good thing."

The former French horn player and pianist found music as her means of self-expression throughout school. It triggered her decision to join the DePauw University orchestra in Greencastle, Ind., and to sing in the band Plaid Descent during the mid '90s. Eventually, McWilliams would even perform at President Bush's inauguration.

But that was after overcoming bouts of stage fright.

"The first thing that happens when you get nervous on stage is that everything goes south," McWilliams says. "So what I do is I never think about a show beforehand ... I become sort of my alter-ego, and it's just as comfortable now as [the real me]."

McWilliams performs regionally for audiences large and small, while promoting the arts as the marketing director for the Indianapolis City Market, supporting locally-grown goods. "My goal down the road would be to have a musician here every day," she says. "It would be good for the market and the community."

McWilliams is most passionate

about nurturing other independent artists. Her nationally syndicated radio program, *City of Music* (www.cityofmusic.com), aired for nearly six years until 2006 on stations like WKLU-FM 101.9, where it began, and WTTS-FM 92.3. For the independent, world-wise show, she paid \$200 per hour with the help of outside donors and funds from the live shows she put on to help with programming.

"Independent musicians, if they're good enough, should have a platform on radio," McWilliams says.

"The fans want it. That's the bottom line. The gatekeepers say they want to support it, but they have no idea what it takes."

**Independent musicians, if they're good enough, should have a platform on radio.**

## SEE THEM LIVE:

### Ann McWilliams

[www.annmcwilliams.com](http://www.annmcwilliams.com)

"Groovin' in the Garden"

Easley Winery

Tuesday, Sept. 18, 5-7 p.m., free, all-ages

### Carrie Newcomer

[www.carriewcomer.com](http://www.carriewcomer.com)

Concerts on the Canal, with Krista Detor

Presented by the Indiana Historical Society

Thursday, Aug. 2, 6-8 p.m., reserved table seating: \$25 for tables of four people; \$35 for tables of eight people, all-ages

### Cathy Morris

[www.cathymorris.com](http://www.cathymorris.com)

• Canal Lunch Concerts

Wednesday, July 18, 11 a.m., free, all-ages

• Greensburg Concert Series with the Lake Sanatee Trio

Saturday, July 21, 7:30, free, all-ages

• Conrad Hotel

Sundays, 11 a.m.-2 p.m., free, all-ages

• Cathy Morris quartet

Chatterbox

Sundays, 8 p.m., free, 21+

• Indianapolis Arts Garden with the Chanticleer String Quartet

Tuesday, July 31, 12:15 p.m., free, all-ages.

### Cynthia Layne

[www.cynthialayne.com](http://www.cynthialayne.com)

• Morty's Comedy Club

Thursday, July 19, 6 p.m., \$5

• Conrad Hotel

Friday, July 20 and Saturday, July 21, 9 p.m., free

• Riverfront Concert Series

Indianapolis Art Center

Wednesday, July 25, 7 p.m., free, all-ages

• Conrad Hotel

Friday, July 27, 9 p.m., free

• Jazz Kitchen

Saturday, July 28, 8:30 and 10:30 p.m., \$10, 21+

• Ruth's Chris Steakhouse

Sunday, July 29, 7 p.m., free

### Jane Jensen

[www.janejensen.net](http://www.janejensen.net)

[www.myspace.com/janejensen](http://www.myspace.com/janejensen)

• Rockabye CD release party, sponsored by NUVO

Late August or early September, date and location yet TBD

• Acoustic set

Spin Nightclub

Friday, Sept. 7, 10 p.m., 21+

### Jennie DeVoe

[www.jdevoe.com](http://www.jdevoe.com)

• The Rathskeller

Friday, July 20, 7-11 p.m., free, 21+

• Wilson Winery, Modoc, Ind.

Saturday, July 21, 8:30 p.m., \$10-\$15, all-ages

### Mandy Marie

and the Cool Hand Lukes

[www.myspace.com/mandy-marieandthecoolhandlukes](http://www.myspace.com/mandy-marieandthecoolhandlukes)

• With the Twistin' Tarantulas

Radio Radio

Friday, Aug. 24, 9 p.m., 21+

• Hillbilly Happy Hour with Danny Thompson

Melody Inn

Friday, Sept. 7, 7:30 p.m., 21+



**When I get to sing, I like to do hard-grinding blues.**

She peppers jazz on top of everything, whether she's playing in a fine-tailored Motown revue or a gospel show with one of her six bands. "When you hear Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holliday ... you hear a human

instrument," says singer Brenda Williams, "[and] you try to mimic the styling."

For Williams, singing for her father in church at age 6 was just the beginning. She won Mrs. Montana and became second runner-up for Mrs. America in 1984 — and that was before her career really began.

"Everything kind of happened shortly thereafter," she says. That included opening for Ray Charles. "I was well received," she remembers.

Now a grandmother, Williams says her "children have taught [me] so much about life." She's watching her grandchildren grow up, realizing the importance of teaching youngsters musical performance. Williams' time spent performing in the American Cabaret Theatre for 10 years inspired her to instruct young people about good stage presence. "That, to me, is the way my music has affected people — through performance," she says.

The grass-roots musical equivalent to a professional athlete, Williams released her most recent CD, *Brenda Williams ... Live Again*, last year. "Out of 1,000 CDs, I have

150 left," she says, "and I've only been selling them out of the trunk of my car." Next, her mission is to record a gospel album.

"I did a play called *Crowns* about women wearing hats and going to church, and it was all gospel music," Williams says. "I did most of the songs in the show [of which, a few will be re-released, with a twist, on her upcoming album, including 'On the Battlefield for My Lord']. It's gonna have a modern back-up band with saxophone and trumpet. It'll be exciting praise music."

The music Williams records and performs full-time — joyful, easy-listening jazz and standards — is not the same music she listens to in her car. "I have some really old-school rap [in there now]," she says, adding that she's thinking about covering some of the tracks with her band, the Soul Providers.

"When I get to sing, I like to do hard-grinding blues, and I love songs like 'The Thrill is Gone' by B.B. King," she continues. "He makes the guitar talk! I also love Otis Redding's 'Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay.' At the end, I whistle. I call it my talent. (laughs) And sometimes, I'll scat."

Williams hopes her next year kicks off well. "When I'm not performing, I'm gathering material for different shows," she says.

Williams will return this November to the American Cabaret Theatre for a two-week reunion tour. Otherwise, fans can find her at the Jazz Kitchen, which, she says, is one of her favorite intimate jazz venues in Indiana.

I don't have a real **thick shell**, and I **don't want** to get one.



holds 14 more tracks — spiritual tales of the human condition — all about the personalities you'd find

Carrie Newcomer is a singer-songwriter with pop sensibility and Hoosier folk roots, who sneaks playful rock elements and country twang into her songs and speech. A storyteller by nature, she bases the characters in her songs on composites of the people she meets on her journeys.

"I've always been amazed at how generous people are with their stories," Newcomer says. "We've all laughed and cried ... been bewildered and angry. I've never met a person yet who doesn't have a story to tell."

Her tenth record, *Regulars and Refugees*, now a brimming 2-year-old, takes the stories she began telling on *Betty's Diner: The Best of Carrie Newcomer* even further. It

at the elusive restaurant. *Regulars and Refugees* is further spreading the word that it's OK to be yourself and accept others as they are. For Newcomer, it has to do with accepting that she is "an introvert in an extrovert's job."

"I recharge in solitude," she says. "I live way out in the middle of the woods. After tours, it's important to recharge and take long walks with my dog. If I don't, it affects my art. Part of it is processing, too. If I'm not writing, the world gets confusing very fast."

Referring to herself as a silent Quaker, Newcomer values spirituality as well as social justice and has raised funds through her musical endeavors for charitable organizations, including Planned Parenthood, Habitat for Humanity and with the *Regulars and Refugees* album, Second Harvest, a national food bank.

Newcomer's passion reaches farther than supporting charities. She also acknowledges the importance of education and creative expression, thereby teaching writing workshops at colleges, universities and retreat houses across the country, including the Bloomington Women's Writing Center.

"It's a very different experience for women in

music and writing," Newcomer says. "We're under-represented. There's an abundance of us, but we're not always recognized."

"Sometimes it takes quite a bit of tenacity to just put forth your ideas as you have been," Newcomer says. "You have to step forth with a certain kind of strength with what you want to do artistically ... It's about courage. It doesn't have anything to do with being fearless, just loving art and people passionately, even when my knees are shaking ... I don't have a real thick shell, and I don't want to get one."

Most recently, Newcomer contributed to *Wilderness Plots* (2007), a collaboration of music and literature — songs based off the historical tales of the rural Midwest by Bloomington author Scott Russell Sanders. Along with singer-songwriters Tim Grimm, Krista Detor, Tom Roznowski and Michael White, Newcomer shapes the landscape of American settlers in the wilderness between the time of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

"I want to write about 'us,'" she says. "I want to put into language something I haven't been able to articulate. There is something powerful in an authentic true voice that comes out of this part of the country."



Hanging around sculptors, dancers and musicians as a kid pushed Columbus, Ind., native Cathy Morris toward a career in the performing arts. "I was gigging with my [bassist] dad at age 14," she says. "I saw what it took to be a producer and a presenter."

Earning a violin performance and arts management degree from Indiana University in Bloomington may have been following in her parents' footsteps, but it was really Morris' father (who passed away in 2005) who introduced her to a "full buffet" of music appreciation, including supporting arts education.

"When I go out into the schools [to perform], it's as important as when I'm performing for Hillary [Clinton]. It doesn't

matter where your politics are; the music will be a catalyst for broadening your perspective," Morris says. "It's about using music for the chance to enhance the world."

And enhance the world, she has. Morris has begun transcribing her music for a self-formed publishing company of books for violinists and viola players — budding musicians like she once was.

She and her keyboardist brother have also launched a series of meditative CDs, *Music for Wellness*, which began with their 2006 project, *Sacred Romance*. They performed music over spoken-word Sufi poetry and interpretive dance. Their next collection, *Music for Wellness: Divine Connections*, will be released this September.

"I think music is a direct connection to the 'other side,'" Morris says. "That's why people react to it. Music is like magic ... It's transcending."

Teaching trust and self-esteem through Young Audiences and other workshops and residencies, Morris understands it's OK to "allow yourself to be imperfect." Through her shared wisdom, she empowers young string musicians, while finding time to frequent the Conrad Hotel and the Chatterbox jazz club for weekly Sunday performances. Currently, the Latin jazz interpreter also performs regularly with the Chanticleer String Quartet.

The Libra constantly reinvents herself, studying music and philosophy to grow creatively. "I'm an audio person, but I'm also a strong visual learner," Morris says.

The Yamaha electric violinist finds her peers, Fiona Apple and Ani DiFranco, inspiring. They are, like Morris, "outside the box."

"If you put yourself inside a box, then you'll be treated like you're in a box," Morris says. "I'm not [just] a 'woman,' I'm an individual."



Similar to how Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm cultivated Germanic folklore in the 1800s — fairy tales tinged with seedy truths — singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Lisa Germano bleeds lyrical shadows behind the veil of dreamy songs.

"I want my own music to be in a fairy tale, a mythical place," she says. "Some of the messages might be kind of sad, but they're easier to take [in such a context]."

Singing like a wispy, cracked ballet dancer in a child's musical jewelry box, Germano brings darkness on fluttering wings over piano melodies. Incessant guitar and splattered flute pieces resound beneath intimate vocals, yet, her violin is the instrument most closely relating to the raw underbelly of her songs. It aches and creaks on "A Seed" (*In the Maybe World*, 2006), urging her subject to just "let the love go." And the most polite "f\*\*\* you" insult you could ever imagine is repeated on "Red Thread" from that same album.

"[My family] wishes I wrote happier

music," Germano says. But since 2003's *Lullaby for Liquid Pig*, which Young God Records will reissue this year as a double CD digi-pack, she swears she is a more positive person. "I'm looking outside instead of in," she says. "I'm writing more about nature."

Her new interests have been peaked by the music her peers are producing. "I really like Joanna Newsom," Germano says. "It's beautiful music with a strange twist, and I like Laura Veirs. I like what she writes about — the galaxy and the universe."

The violinist, fiddler and vocalist, who debuted on John Mellencamp's 1987 album *The Lonesome Jubilee* and worked with him for seven years, began at age 7, writing a 15-minute opera on the piano. She's been able to make a living from her art, throwing out her time waitressing at the Runcible Spoon in Bloomington for performing as a guest on Sheryl Crow's *The Globe Sessions* (1998) and David Bowie's *Heathen* (2002), among other musicians' albums. "He [Bowie] was excited about music, like a little boy," Germano recalls.

Before rubbing shoulders with stars, Germano wasn't fully embraced by the public as a solo artist until her album *Geek, The Girl* (1994), which *Spin* praised as one of the top alternative albums of the decade. Germano has gained a cult following here in the U.S., but it's her European fans that really grasp her music. "I really wish my mom and dad could hear me play in Rome, where everybody's seated, listening, and you can hear a pin drop," she says.

Whether she makes people laugh or cry, Germano ultimately just wants listeners to respond. "I want people to be moved," she says. "I've gotten letters from people who've said, 'Your music saved my life.' I know I didn't actually save their lives, but it's wonderful when you can connect like that."

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Despite interest from major record labels, Muncie, Ind.-raised singer-songwriter Jennie DeVoe has opted to stay independent.

"Small explosions happen, and ultimately, they lead to big explosions," she says.

These big bangs include things like performing with her band all over the U.S. and in Europe, though she pays for everything out-of-pocket. "We're returning to Europe this October to record a new album with my old producer, John Parish [P.J. Harvey]," she says. "He's a musician who understands textures and moods. I think [the new album's] gonna have a real raw, dry sound. I'm using timeless instruments and will rock out a little more."

The elusive, thus unnamed collection will be DeVoe's first album since 1994's *Fireworks & Karate Supplies*, produced by Parish and Indiana's own Paul Mahern of the Zero Boys (Over the Rhine, Mudkids).

DeVoe's also savoring news that she was recently chosen as the Indiana artist representing Meijer's Outside the Mainstream, a program that brings one

artist's music per state, per month into regional Meijer stores.

"They bought 1,000 CDs from me, and they'll put them in stores for the month of August, no strings attached," DeVoe says.

It will expand her reach to other Midwest audiences — perhaps another one of her so-called "big explosions." Some others include licensing "Don't Forget to Breathe" to an independent film, *Mango Tango*, about a Brazilian dancer, which will be shown at the Cannes Film Festival and the Oldenburg International Film Festival, the German equivalent to Sundance, later this year. In addition, she had her music aired on *Dawson's Creek* and *Joan of Arcadia* and continues to make a living from her craft.

"I just put blinders over my eyes ... and followed my own path," says DeVoe, who grew up playing piano and only taught herself the guitar five years ago. "I feel like I'm so happy and lucky right now."

Feeling "the heavens open up" when she first heard Bonnie Raitt and Sheryl Crow sing "without masked emotions," DeVoe embraced folk, blues, soul and rock. "But it's my band that really helps me move people ... and deliver my songs," she adds.

DeVoe's lighthearted attitude has sustained her cult following. "The fans seem pretty savvy [in Indianapolis]," she says. "They've figured out that [just because] it's not on the radio, it doesn't mean it's 'discount' music."

"[I want to] put a positive spin on something that's bleak," DeVoe says. "That's why I like 'Redeeming' [off *Fireworks & Karate Supplies*]. It's my favorite song, lyrically. It's the 'We both scooped each other off the pavement' kind of thing. We all need some forgiveness ... My favorite line in that song is, 'I just want someone to wag their tail when I walk through the door.'"

If it's not on the **radio**, it doesn't mean it's **'discount'** music.



playing my guitar until my folks screamed at me to go to bed."

It was trial by fire that brought Mandy Marie close to her guitar. At age 13, she watched her father play hometown Missouri honky tonk gigs, and he'd challenge her on the spot to play along with the band. She did, and it worked.

Listening to her grandparents' record collection taught her chords, and she's held onto her original amp since. "People like Don Rich with Buck Owens, Luther Perkins with Johnny Cash, Roy Nichols with Merle Haggard ... those guys were literally my heroes," Marie says. "I'd come home from school at 3:30 and not stop

A guitarist foremost, Marie never sang until she joined her current band, the Cool Hand Lukes. "It takes a lot of confidence to stand behind a microphone," she says. "That took me a while to ease into. The transition from just being a lead guitar player to being a lead guitar player and a singer damn near killed me!"

As far as being a female lead guitarist, Marie says she's encountered many gender stereotypes. "People always think that I'm just a strummer who plays a few chords, and when they see me taking solos and really playing, it takes them by surprise," she says. "When a man does a pedal steel lick on a Telecaster, it isn't that big of a deal, but when I do that same exact lick, all of a sudden, it's amazing! And that's just it, bottom line — because I'm a girl."

But Marie surpasses expectations with complicated guitar solos, performing facets of rockabilly and country.

"I grew up playing hillbilly bop," Marie says. "I'm a huge Billy Joe Shaver fan ... He totally changed my life, and he's still to this day my favorite songwriter

ever. But he was Johnny Cash's favorite songwriter too, so I'm in good company!"

For the woman who grew up on a 400-acre cattle farm in the Ozarks, Marie has embraced this independent spirit since youth. "I worked on the farm for my folks doing everything from bottle feeding calves to bailing hay and, let me tell you, playin' guitar is a hell of a lot easier," she says. Now she's the one calling PRN graphics to order more T-shirts. "You don't really need a label," she adds. "DIY, baby, DIY!"

But meeting and marrying another Indianapolis guitarist, Danny Thompson (Bigger Than Elvis, The Mess Arounds), is what brought Marie to the Circle City and helped her find the real love of her life: a 1951 Telecaster.

"Danny and I were shopping for my engagement ring in Louisville, and we stopped in a Guitar Emporium," Marie says. "I played one chord on it and turned to him and said, 'I could take a lot cheaper ring.' Ha! So I had a Telecaster as a wedding ring for almost two years."

Marie didn't mind the wait. "I love that guitar like I love breathin' air."



In a swank, compact recording studio — Static Shack — off Binford Boulevard and 71st Street in Indianapolis, producer Rob Dixon and Owl Studios director of operations Matthew Altizer direct co-workers to mix a song, tentatively called "Testify," from Cynthia Layne's upcoming CD release, *Beautiful Soul*. Layne steps into the studio with her mother, visiting from their Dayton, Ohio, hometown, where Layne attended Wright State University for a few years.

Layne makes her mom comfortable, introduces everyone and gives this NUVO reporter a tour of the studio where she is recording *Beautiful Soul*, formerly titled *Seize the Day*, slated for a local release in late July/August and a national release in September.

Layne found her footing by networking in clubs, sitting in for jazz musicians and performing in cover bands like Nü Cliché in the late '80s. She moved to Indianapolis earlier, in 1984, after meeting her husband, an Indy native. Playing with the house band at Faces, a nightclub that would later become Talbott Street, Layne met fellow musician Gregg Bacon. From a Motown and pop background, she soon found herself embracing jazz.

"Everyone's been through trials and tribulations," she says. "I like to listen to music with substance."

Similarly, Layne's new album "touches upon the state of the world today, heartbreak and love." It's a risk for her, whose previous albums have been more jazz-influenced, but *Beautiful Soul* will explore more R&B and soul than ever before. With that comes a new live show, new lighting, stage backdrops and songs.

Known to regulars at the Jazz Kitchen, Chatterbox and St. Elmo Steakhouse, Layne has kept a fresh approach and a positive attitude to her music for more than 10 years, drawing in young adults and mature jazz enthusiasts.

"Supporting myself with my music is a blessing," she adds.

Having worked in the finance industry until five years ago, when she became self-employed as a musician, Layne has had to struggle with many different playing hands in her life. "I still do a lot of wedding receptions and do songs like 'Brick House' and 'Brown Eyed Girl,' but we're paid well. And when I'm at the Jazz Kitchen or another club, I can play my own songs," she says.

For the singer who steeped her musical tea in flute training as a young person, performing in marching and jazz bands, Layne still values music education. "I used to do vocal lessons for little girls," she says. "I'm thinking about taking that up again. [Music education] makes kids well-rounded individuals and helps with self-esteem. So I urge parents to expose [their] kids to ragtime and jazz. Let them know music has a history."

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I love that **guitar** like I love **breathin' air.**