

## ***God Loves it When We Dance***

An interview with Stephanie Urbina Jones

by Bob Gray

Some folks are naturally happy. And by naturally I mean it is part of their nature. Talking to Stephanie leaves the listener with the indelible impression that she is such a person. And when you listen to her music, especially songs such as ***God Loves it When We Dance***, you know it's true before talking to her.

Beginning in high school, writing "pretty bad songs about my dog and a lost boyfriend," she has blossomed into a lovely young woman of considerable talent as both a writer and a vocalist. I can imagine the lost boyfriend grinding his teeth in regret.

Twelve years into it now, and she has an impressive list of accomplishments in terms of both her music and merchandising. Talent plays its part in the music, while education (a degree in advertising and merchandising from UT Austin) provided the advantage in marketing her talent. Of course, being willing to spend ten years in Nashville learning the nuts and bolts of the business didn't hurt either. The experience led her to form several companies of her own (Texicana Entertainment, Casa del Rio Publishing, Spirit of Tejas for merchandising among them) – "vertical integration" I think they call it – so that all of the work representing her is to her specifications.

It also didn't hurt to meet a man seven years ago that she married four years later, Jason West, who believes in her ability to such an extent that he was willing to mortgage their home in order to finance her first CD. For many months they lived with uncertainty, the terror of failing. Her Spirit of Tejas actually springs from this time – when money was scarce and prosperity, even existence was, to a large extent, in the hands of strangers. Texans, yes. Still, strangers – who opened their hearts to her, provided a place to stay when she was on the road, who "opened their doors, their refrigerators, their washing machines to me." By God I love Texas!

Most of the performers I've interviewed have at least one other creative outlet besides the music. Stephanie has managed to combine her love for art and design and knowledge of merchandising into marketing her own line of greeting cards, candles, jewelry, clothing, posters, and lots more. You can access this stuff, her music, and interesting stories behind the songs she's written, in addition to upcoming club dates and other news on her site: [www.stephaniejones.net](http://www.stephaniejones.net).

I asked her if she was happy, already knowing the answer. It fairly bubbles out of her. "Oh, yes! I've never been happier in my entire life. I'm tired a lot, maybe working a little too hard." Then, "When we released the first CD back in September of 2002, I drove over 20,000 miles in six weeks, going from radio station to radio station around Texas to persuade them to play my music." It worked. Happy? Oh, yes.

Favorites and influences: Ella, Willie, Johnny, Carole King, Linda Ronstadt, among others. First gig, 18 years old. Next foreign tour – she's been invited back to Japan for a

New Year repeat, and discussions continue to get her on a tour for the foreign based American troops.

Home is San Antonio and, since her husband works to further her career there, Nashville. And here she wants to express her appreciation to the three entities she thinks have made the most positive difference in her career (besides her husband). The Mexican-American Unity Council, for bringing her back to San Antonio three years ago to sing at a function and providing the funds for her first recording (for which I must add my own appreciation, since one of those songs was *Adios Amigos* – as beautiful a song as has ever been produced). The Kerrville Folk Festival, a high watermark in her performance schedule. And Kathleen Hudson of the Texas Heritage Music Foundation for several things: Yes, encouragement, and for making Stephanie one of the central characters in her book on women in Texas music, and for including her in the work of the Foundation. Stephanie says she looks forward to being involved in the organization's work "because it's all about the history of Texas music. Sharing the values and intentions of those pioneers who opened their hearts and carved out a place in the culture for me and other performers. I'm grateful."

Having been chosen to be the Grand Marshal for the Holiday River Parade in San Antonio this year is also a major thrill. The parade is broadcast into over twenty million homes – perhaps as large a live audience as any Texas performer has ever reached in one evening. Which coincides well with the general release of her Christmas music CD, which until now was available only to her fan base.

Unusual for a Texas performer, she is not from a musical family. "Mom sang in the church choir. But that was about it. When I was five she bought a Yamaha keyboard for me to play with. She knew I loved music and encouraged me."

And she does have a way with words, this woman. In *God Loves it When We Dance*, warming a chair in the "corner of the room" at a dance with "ol' doom and gloom" – a guy who won't venture onto the dance floor, is not just funny. It also speaks to the coward in most men - dating from early adolescence - being afraid to look foolish. But the other side is lots more fun: let go, take the chance on looking silly. Dance. You can't have fun if you do nothing. In Texas, dancing is a way of expressing joy. Except her song says it all so much better. So, "let ol' gloom and doom keep holding up the wall," as she says, "it is no sin to have fun. God loves it when we dance." He must especially love Stephanie. BG