

DIVERSIONS

Diva in Disguise



Lori Allison

Butch Ireland/Daily Nebraskan

Fame not on Guns' lead singer's mind

By Scott Harrah
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Lori Allison, the New Brass Guns' lead vocalist and resident diva, sits in a tree on Centennial Mall and slides on a pair of black sunglasses. She giggles as she deftly picks a leaf from a branch and sticks it between her teeth.

She sits back nonchalantly, throws her head forward and starts spinning the leaf's stem around in her mouth.

"I've been twirling leaves in my mouth since 1981," she says, chuckling as she jumps down from the tree.

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— Allison

A guy walks by and says hello to her, asks her about the gig she's playing this evening, then ambles away.

Another guy passes by, recognizes her, mutters an emphatic "Hi, Lori" and moves on.

She contemplates her relatively new fame, then shrugs it off and sits down on one of the worn wooden benches that face the State Capitol.

"I don't know if I'm that crazy about fame, but I like the song . . . the one David Bowie did," she says.

She utters something about fame not being that important as she stretches out on the bench and breathes in the balmy Indian-summer air.

A bag lady carrying a sack full of old clothes, tin cans and dumpster paraphernalia totters by on outmoded

cork wedgies from the early 1970s.

"My family has told me I'll eventually wind up being a bag lady," she says with another giggle, tossing back her blond hair as the white porcelain skin on her cheeks turns a soft pink.

But the music world has better plans for her. Allison, with her infamous arsenal of thrift-store outfits, may sometimes dress like an aristocratic bag lady, but those who have heard the tortured, whimsical instrument that is her voice know she's headed in another direction.

Off stage, Allison is hardly the emotionally detached, delicate siren whose eerie lyrical metaphors and soaring octaves have seduced many audiences.

In person, away from the guitars and cigarette smoke that surround her on stage, she resembles the girl who first fell in love with music when she listened to a Judy Garland tape in her grandparents' car on the way to Colorado.

Allison's voice may not resemble Garland's, but it's certainly reminiscent of the legend's tragic, moody vocal acumen. All of Allison's idols — experimental British chanteuse Kate Bush, Debbie Harry, Suzanne Vega and David Bowie — seem to have influenced the caustic, curiously beautiful spirit her voice projects.

"I like the emotion — concerning vocalists," she says. "I like it when a song makes me feel."

Much of her emotional stance can be attributed to the songs she writes, all dark ballads in the Sylvia Plath-Anne Sexton vein of victims having their world antagonized by demons of reality. Allison's lyrics vacillate be-



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tween uncontrolled love hallucinations and fierce ambivalence aimed at the characters she creates.

Her material comes from personal experience.

She says that although many of the situations in her songs are fabricated, she's able to inject her own emotional data into them.

"Even if it (a song) is made up, I still know what it's about and I know what I want it to feel like," she says.

When she was a child, Allison yearned to be a big band singer. Sometimes, she explains, she'd invite friends over after school and they'd all pretend to be glamorous rock stars. Although she sang in elementary- and high-school chorus, the thought of one day singing professionally seemed too far-fetched and impossible.

"I don't think I ever thought it would be real," she says of her life today. "I never realized that it's not

even that hard to be in a band — to get to be in one, that is."

When she entered college, she started singing with the Go-Bats, an obscure, amateurish band that played irregularly.

"The Go-Bats was just kind of a fun, silly thing," she says. "My voice has definitely changed for the better since those days. The goals of the New Brass Guns seem to be more serious, I guess. In the Go-Bats we didn't really have goals."

In less than a year, Allison and the band have evolved into one of the most inventive, successful local acts in years. A locally produced New Brass Guns tape was one of the top sellers in Lincoln a few months ago, and their shows usually fill bars.

The resonant guitar work of Marty Amsler and Doug Hubner and Brian Barber's drums create a textured backdrop for Allison's songs. But ask anyone who's familiar with the Guns and they'll agree that it is Allison, with her voice evoking a warehouse of images and chilled spines while somehow remaining deadpan, who makes the music transcend mere bar-band jamming.

She agrees. The spotlight is hers because she makes it hers.

"They just stand there," she says of the rest of the band. "But Brian's kind of goofy sometimes — lighting his drums on fire."

One problem she says she encounters is unfair labels placed on the band because of her gender.

"I don't think about the New Brass Guns as male-female, but other people seem to because that's why people compare us to 10,000 Maniacs

so much — and I've never even heard them," she says.

She's studying to be a high-school German teacher, but says she'll continue to sing with the Guns if they keep moving up.

But she won't be devastated if the band never gets a major recording contract and goes mainstream.

"It's not like we're waiting for that to happen," she says.

In the meantime, besides school and singing, Allison will continue to indulge herself with her favorite things: thrift-store clothes and her Pink Panther record player.

On stage, she likes to dress down, wearing simple things like Girl Scout uniforms, cat-eye glasses and dowdy dresses last seen on Sunday-school teachers in 1962.

Her fashion philosophy — an obligatory element of any diva's lifestyle — has changed since the Go-Bats broke up.

"When I was in the Go-Bats, it felt like I could wear more fancy things," she says. "With the New Brass Guns, it doesn't feel right to wear real nice, fancy stuff — unless it's a special thing, like when we opened for the Fleshtones."

When she has spare time and wants to take a mental hiatus from the band, she says, she heads for the nearest cemetery to get away from people.

"I like cemeteries because they're so peaceful and a good place to relax, she says.

But a misanthrope she's not. People are also part of her favorite things.

"They're the best thing I've ever encountered," she says, sliding on the black sunglasses once more.