

Music Maker

Jeanie Cunningham, '75, has made her mark in the music business.

Jeanie Cunningham can sing and play the guitar like nobody's business. She's lived a life full of musical achievement with enough outrageous stories to fill a book – more than enough to earn her a profile in her alumni magazine.

“JC” was a senior at TASIS in 1974 when she headed off to Zurich for the weekend to see Ike and Tina Turner in concert. Jeanie and a dozen roses finagled their way backstage post-concert, and, after she gushed some words of adoration, was asked by Ms. Turner about her own musical ambitions. JC sang and played guitar for Tina right then and there - and ended up AWOL from campus for an additional 4 days. JC hitched a ride on Ike and Tina's European concert tour as a stowaway in their clothing van, becoming an unofficial stagehand until Ike & Tina left for France. A true TASIS legend. “I've gotten a lot of mileage from that episode” says Jeanie.

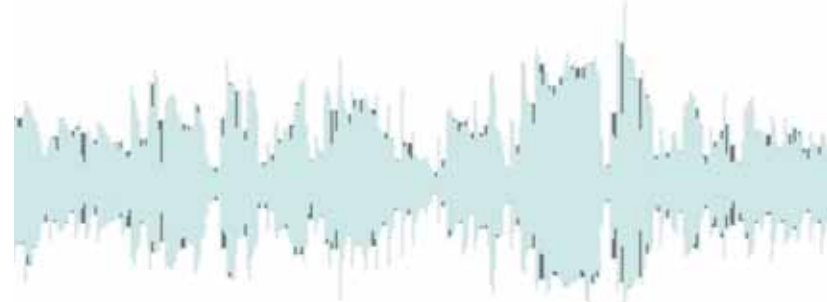
TASIS reconciled that escapade with a suspension and laundry duty. Jeanie recalls: “With each sock I sorted, with each shirt folded, I kept thinking of Tina, and how I couldn't wait to get back to Los Angeles to see her again. It truly started my whole career.”

After graduation Jeanie returned home to California where she began working in the music business in earnest as a singer, and also as a songwriter.

“Right after graduation from TASIS, I joined up with Ike and Tina Turner back in Los Angeles”, recalls Jeanie. “It was there that Ike took me under his wing and showed me how to engineer a 24 track recording studio, how to program drum machines and keyboards, how to mix sounds, and how NOT



- 1) Jeanie with friend David Crosby in the recording studio
- 2) Jeanie on stage and on tour with Lionel Ritchie
- 3) JC with friend and mentor, Tina Turner



to treat a band...(he was pretty hard on his band). Tina taught me how to sing and dance - without sounding like you're bouncing up and down and getting too out of breath (it's INTENSE diaphragm control). But I spent most of my time learning from Ike, who was always a perfect gentleman with me."

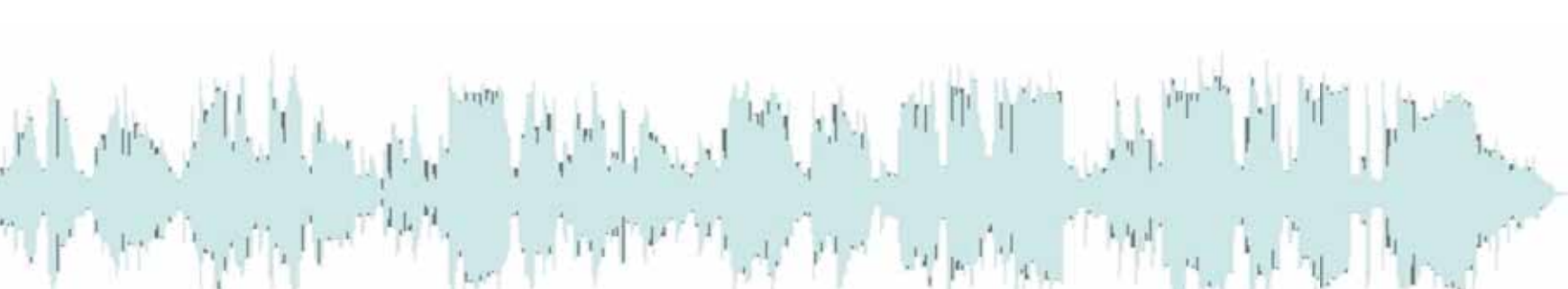
Tina's performance of one of Jeanie's songs, "I Can Take A Little Bit of Pain" on The Tonight Show, earned the newcomer her professional songwriting credentials. As JC tells it: "Between road gigs and record deals, I made my bread and butter by writing "rah-rah" songs for Fortune 500 companies for the past 20 years. I've written for corporations from Microsoft to Toshiba to Radio Shack to Chevron to...you name it, I've probably written for it. You know you can write when you're asked to create ditties for products ranging from toilet seat covers to artificial heart valves. It gets pretty hilarious at times, writing about things you know nothing about."

Take rhythm, rock and blues and add a splash of soul. Somewhere in the mix, you'll find the music of Jae Cie.

JC (or "Jae Cie" as she is often referred to now – an appellation that resulted from her European tours) has released 7 cds and 2 concert videos. She has been the opening act for David Crosby, whom she considers one of her closest friends. "Traveling with Jan (David's wife) and David was about as much fun as you can have. He's as nutty as I am, so we got along very well."

"One day when I was back in L.A., David called and asked if I could drive over to his house; he had something he needed to talk to me about. I was a little worried, thinking that David was mad at me.

"When I got to his house, he had a very stern expression on his face. I looked to his wife Jan for some kind of explanation, but her face was as serious as his. 'Go into the music room', David instructed. 'On the far right of the guitar line is a guitar case. Bring it to me.' Sure enough, there was a new guitar case in his music room, and I grabbed it and brought it to him. 'Open it'. I opened the case. Inside was the most exquisite guitar I'd ever seen, with a smaller-scaled fret board that would've been perfect for my smaller fingertips. David, looking like the wisest of walruses, said with a twinkle in his eyes, 'It's yours. I had it made for you.' I've used that guitar ever since, and gave my guitar to a young and gifted up-and-coming songwriter. Musicians do that. They share their gear."



Jeanie toured with Lionel Richie on Tina's recommendation, replacing Sheila E. who was scooped up by Prince. "Lionel taught me how TO treat a band--we loved him. There was always food at rehearsals. Rehearsals were always paid. We flew first class. We stayed in first class hotels. It was marvelous. Even though I hadn't reached the financial success that Lionel had reached, I learned from him that if you want to keep a band together, take good care of them. Pay them. Treat them with respect. I kept my band together for 14 years, and we still occasionally will take a gig together at the drop of a hat."

From fear, to flying solo

But, for all her success in the music business, JC feels that one of her greatest achievements has nothing at all to do with music. "I used to be terrified of flying", she says. "In 1994, I decided to conquer my fear by taking flying lessons. Not only did I get my private pilot's license, but I also bought a Piper 180 Cherokee. I fly all over the place and have even flown Darby Hinton ('75) with me!" She has even learned how to fly a helicopter. "From fear, to flying solo, I developed a new sense of self and freedom...one of the most awesome accomplishments in my life to this day!"

Jeanie recalls TASIS teachers

When Jeanie was asked which TASIS teacher affected her most, she replied: "There was not just one...there were THREE teachers who really rocked my world at TASIS: John Logan, John Watson and Cynthia Whisenant."

"The first day of (Logan's) Comparative Religion class, he gathered us outside (it was a glorious day), and we sat in a semi-circle around him. He asked us to describe who or what God is...and by the end of that first class I was hooked. It was the WAY he illustrated the differences in faiths, and yet the similarities in their origins. The interactions, the sharing of ideas and concepts, the openness and candor with which we were allowed to express ourselves...it was absolutely eye opening. My mother had died the year before and I was furious with God and had turned my back on Him. Logan led me back, though he never proselytized or preached. Instead, he let us do our own thinking and draw our own conclusions. I will always be in debt to him for that."

"John Watson was nothing if not enthusiastic about the study of Geology, and his joy in it was

infectious", says JC. "I found myself seeking out 'alluvial fans' and glacial evidence in mountain ranges. (John) brought the history of this planet into sharp focus with such flare and style that it was difficult NOT to learn from him. He was awesome!"

And about Cynthia Whisenant, Jeanie remarks: "Of ALL the teachers in my life, 'Wiz' (as we called her), gave me the most in that she taught me the JOY of writing. Many a night since TASIS days, when I've been laboring through writing a song, I've thought about how her instruction has been the cornerstone of my work as a lyricist. I owe that lady a lot! ('Wiz' was considered very 'cool' and 'hip' in those days, and exuded so much warmth and love to us students that it would've been impossible to fail her class!)"

JC credits the exposure at TASIS to many different cultures with broadening her horizons, which in turn helped her in her career. "Typically, most Americans believe the rest of the world thinks the way Americans do--and by virtue of a lack of exposure we are often blindsided by our own ignorance", she says. "Living in a foreign land, going to school with kids from other countries, and traveling around Europe impressed upon me that the United States, in all its glory, is not the 'be all and end all' country that I grew up thinking it was. TASIS trained me to open up my eyes, my mind and my heart to other cultures and ways of thinking. That proved invaluable to me as an international artist."

So, from TASIS yesterday to *TASIS Today*, Jeanie has had a long, varied and successful career in a highly competitive business.

Through it all, she has remained true to herself and her ideals. Says JC, "One of the comments made on one of the myriad of rejection slips I received from the record companies was that my music was 'too preachy', or 'too moralistic in tone'. These comments came during a time when sex and salaciousness was what was asked for and received in songwriting. Bad behavior was 'in', and I was expected to follow that trend. Even Ike, for all his 'nasty' reputation, had a high ethical code in many directions, and I felt that if a guy like Ike could maintain his integrity on some levels, so should I. So, I resisted being like the rest. I think this was my moral compass stuck in the North position." And when JC sticks to something, she *sticks*, as anyone who knew her in 1975, or now, can attest.



"Jae Cie" in concert