

Bett Butler

a detailed biography

Recuerdos...



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Bett Butler still remembers the morning they delivered the dusty old upright piano, badly in need of tuning. Three years old at the time, she immediately attempted to imitate what she heard around her: the crazy mix of musical treasures her father scoured from second-hand stores, platters serving up Billie Holiday and Beethoven, Ernesto Lecuona and Louis Armstrong, Willie Nelson, Ray Charles, the Platters, the Andrews Sisters. The living room became a refuge from the smoggy Houston air that took her breath away, a magical place where imagination soared on sound.

She made her stage debut at age four, on a family vacation, in a swank nightclub in Mexico City. Bett still remembers the room: the noir glow of blue and violet lights, the elegant heads bowed in intimate conversation over icy cocktail glasses, the mammoth grand piano, black and shiny as a limousine. She played “Boogie Woogie,” a piece she’d heard her older sister practice for piano lessons, to a rousing ovation. (She still blesses the tolerant trio of tuxedoed musicians who invited her onstage that night.) But the pleasure came as much from the place as from the applause; it was a place of magic and mystery and sophistication, like in the old movies she loved to watch at the Santa Rosa Theater.

As Bett grew older, that sense of place was also fed by the stories she voraciously read. Her father had started teaching her to read before kindergarten, using reprints of the same readers he had learned from decades ago in a one-room schoolhouse in deep East Texas. The family had a modest but determined library: beefy, faux-leather-bound encyclopedias with quaint drawings, short stories by Guy de Maupassant and O’Henry, the complete works of Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe, Aesop’s fables and the bizarre tales of the Brothers Grimm. Her conservative parents closely monitored the movies she was allowed to see, but she snuck steamy paperbacks like Orwell’s *1984* and Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* off the top shelf when they weren’t looking and devoured their exotic contents in secret. A natural night owl, she would read with a flashlight under the covers long after her parents had gone to bed.

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As a teenager, Bett spent hours prowling the libraries and art museums in downtown Houston, savoring the fragrance of moldy books and drinking in the rich colors of Gauguin and Degas while her mother, a genealogist, did research. Her bedroom and furniture were painted in those colors, sea greens and blues and brilliant oranges, and a print of Renoir’s *Girl with a Watering Can* hung on her wall. Her grandmother, who had dropped out of finishing school to marry a man who worked on Gulf Coast oil rigs, took her to the ballet and theater. She discovered the low end of the FM dial, the college and public radio stations that played Charles Mingus and Stan Getz and Billie Holiday and flamenco and the drummers of Burundi. She was also beginning to make money as a musician, singing at banquets and weddings and writing and performing gospel music for

tent revivals.



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In high school, Bett Butler was a theater geek. Acting enabled her to *live* the stories she read. Things seemed to come easily to her, and she rebelled against the piano lessons she'd taken since she was seven, took up guitar, and argued with her father about politics and war (as if she knew anything about either). An honor student, she was almost suspended for performing an anti-war piece at a PTA meeting. At the dinner table the next evening, when her war veteran father tried to explain why everyone was so upset, she saw him cry for the first time. It was the only time he had ever mentioned his wartime experience.

Bett went to Trinity University in San Antonio on scholarship, planning to major in theater, and instinctively switched to music at the last minute. She suffered an identity crisis and moved into a religious commune for a semester, where she quickly discovered her unsuitability for cloistered life. She moved back into the dorm, chaffing against the stuffy rigor of classical training, and spent most of her time listening to Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith records and the school's jazz radio station. A film student loaned her his musician father's fake book, full of jazz standards, which she devoured. (She still has the fake book.)

After graduating (barely), Bett began working at the downtown Melodrama Theater, playing Scarlett O'Hara in a send-up of *Gone with the Wind*. It was good training; the audience heckled and threw popcorn, and she learned to be thick-skinned and quick with a sarcastic retort. Other roles at other theaters followed: Roxanne in *Cyrano de Bergerac* and the title role in *Lysistrata*. She wrote and produced several musicals and worked as an accompanist, married impulsively, and divorced three years later.

Bett played in local clubs as a soloist, singing tunes by Gershwin and Cole Porter and Irving Berlin. A friend introduced her to a somewhat questionable promoter, who told her to write some country songs, get a band together, and he would let her open for a nationally-known act. She did so. The promoter ran off with the money before paying the band. From that experience, she learned several expensive but valuable lessons:

1. Don't try to be something you're not.
2. Know the people you're dealing with.
3. Always get a written contract.
4. You gotta pay the band.

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Bett was working happy hour as a soloist at a popular club called Arthur's when she noticed the musician who played with the Monday late-night trio. Tall, dark, and well-dressed, he would come in quietly, take his fretless electric bass out of its beautiful leather bag, and warm up, silently playing scales up and down the fretboard. She thought, "That's the kind of musician I want to be when I grow up." A drummer friend told her he was Joël Dille, a first-call studio musician, staff bassist for the Carver Cultural Center and the Southwest Guitar Conservatory, and urged her to call him for the trio gigs she was just beginning to book. "He'd never play with me," she answered. "I'm just starting out."

Four or five very bad bassists later, she called him. They've been playing together ever since.



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Joël—who had played professionally since age twelve, toured with nationally-known groups while still in high school, and produced and engineered several records—was a kind mentor and teacher. Playing jazz trio gigs in Houston, San Antonio, and Austin, their friendship deepened into love, and they married. While living in Houston, he produced and arranged her first single, “He’s a Man, He Never Cries.” Eventually, they moved back to San Antonio and formed Mandala Music Production and independent co-op label Dragon Lady Records. Their first releases were recorded in a makeshift home studio. Vocal parts were recorded in the bathroom, which had excellent acoustics. They hung blankets from the ceiling and propped the mattress against the windows in the bedroom to record drums.

Bett began playing solo blues and jazz during happy hour six days a week at Dick’s Last Resort, a rowdy roadhouse on the world-famous Riverwalk, where flying debris and drunken heckling were the norm. Every night was sink or swim, and she learned crowd control and vocal stamina. She released two albums, which sold well to the tourists who came there from all over the world: *Songs for Dick’s Last Resort*, full of original novelty numbers, and *Short Stories*, a mix of jazz and blues originals which earned a three-star “recommended” rating from *All Music Guide*, noting “Butler’s uncommon compositional and performing ability to work successfully with diverse musical themes and within a variety of frameworks,” and critical acclaim from John Swenson of United Press International, who raved “Bett Butler brought me to that place where music can salve the deepest wound, mend the heart most broken.”

Bett and Joël continued recording, adding other artists to the Dragon Lady roster and eventually moving their studio into a warehouse space into San Antonio’s historic King William arts district. Playing at Dick’s for fourteen years made her fearless, and she left to concentrate on writing and performing with Joël and trumpet player Cecil R. Carter in the Chamber Jazz Trio. She researched San Antonio’s rich jazz history, authored a column “The Jazz Underground” for the short-lived arts magazine *Perla*, wrote about jazz for the alternative weekly *The Current*, and maintained a website and weekly e-mail newsletter *This Week in Jazz*, promoting San Antonio’s rich underground jazz scene. She regularly played regional venues like San Antonio’s Jazz’sAlive and NIOSA, and the Texas Jazz Festival in Corpus Christi.

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Bett took a job as Writers in Communities Director for Gemini Ink, a non-profit literary arts organization, where she worked with world-class writers and poets on a daily basis. She also directed and performed in Gemini Ink’s prestigious readers theater program, where she scored original music for productions complimenting exhibits at the McNay and Witte Museums and the San Antonio Museum of Art. Highlights included her jazz-inflected, sung/spoken reading of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, with Joël on solo bass, and the original song “For Gabriele” (included on her new release *Myths & Fables*), which she wrote for an exhibit of work by Expressionist painter Gabriele Münter. Bett also directed and acted in playwright Sterling Houston’s acclaimed piece *Black & Blue: 400 Years*



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of Struggle and Transcendence in city-wide celebrations of black culture and Austin's Black Arts Movement Festival. Commissioned by the International Festival Institute at Round Top, Bett and Joël collaborated with nationally-known poets Li-Young Lee and Rosemary Catacalos to create original jazz settings of Lee's work for performances at the Southwest School of Art and Craft and the 6th Annual Poetry Festival at Round Top. ("Praise Them," the final tune on *Myths & Fables*, sprang from that collaboration.)

With her latest album *Myths & Fables*, Bett Butler enters a new phase of life and work. It captures, in a unique voice, the magic of the stories she loved and lived. Like category-defying songwriters Joni Mitchell, Cassandra Wilson, and Abbey Lincoln, she refuses confinement to formula. It's all about the story, the song, and the character; and wherever they go, she goes. In this album, she follows an offbeat assortment of stories, songs, and characters: the artist who dreams of flying beyond the stifling domesticity demanded by her lover in "For Gabriele;" small-town residents still reeling from a generations-old suicide in "Secrets;" a saucy broad demanding equal satisfaction in "It Ain't Over 'til It's Over." (And every pet lover will recognize the "Angel in a Dog Suit.")

But her aversion to the predictable doesn't stop there. The dark political fable "Grim Fairy Tale" bounces along as a happy samba. A soaring solo by Finnish fusion guitarist Jartse Tuominen turns the tragic folk song "Secrets" into a rousing rock anthem. And "Nothin' to Be Proud Of," a clarion call to conscience, is delivered with gentle, childlike innocence. Producer/bassist/composer Joël Dilley uses instrumentation, placement, and effects cinematically, creating the perfect aural mise en scène for each story, transporting the listener to the alcohol numbed claustrophobia of "When Love Has Left the Room" or a lonely plaza where distant voices echo in his own composition "Recuerdos." Slide guitarist Gib Wharton brings the same eerie noir quality that he contributed to Cassandra Wilson's *Blue Light 'til Dawn*. Co-producer/trumpet player Cecil R. Carter, former Gatemouth Brown drummer Lloyd Herrman, percussionist tbow Gonzales, saxophonist Richard Oppenheim, and guitarist Polly Harrison round out the list of first-call musicians who tell their own side of each story in this extremely sophisticated collection of *Myths & Fables*.

The album won a performance grant from the Artist Foundation, and Bett's song "When Love Has Left the Room," deemed "a fine example of post-modern lieder" by KPAC fm's *Classical Spotlight*, won First Place—out of 10,000 entries—in the Jazz Category of the much-lauded International Songwriting Competition (ISC). Visual artist Joan Fabian's video of Bett's song "For Gabriele," a tribute to Expressionist artist Gabriele Münter, was licensed by the McNay art museum for use in their education department.

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Ask Bett Butler what's next, and she'll tell you that she's still trying do the same thing she did when they delivered that first piano. "I'm just trying to make sense what I hear around me," she says. "There are no new ideas—only new ways of combining old ones. The only difference between then and now is the amount of data coming in. I'm still just trying to put it all together.