

Cheryl Fisher

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UM music program brought her to South Florida Seeking degree, singer also gets mate, career

By Matt Schudel

It was going to be two years and out for Cheryl Fisher. She had come south from her native Canada to enroll in the graduate jazz program at the University of Miami's School of Music in 1998 with the goal of earning a master's degree in jazz singing. "I wanted to go home and teach," she says. "This was going to be a very rare degree there."

But while she was methodically building her future, that funny thing called life got in the way. She had planned to go straight back to Calgary, but that was before she met Eric Allison, a longtime South Florida jazz musician, and was married last year. Something of a minor star in Canada, Fisher is trying to gain a musical foothold on American soil.

"I'm hoping to find my niche here," says Fisher, who may be a complete unknown in the United States but is well-regarded in her homeland. She has been profiled on nationwide television and has performed twice at the prestigious Montreal Jazz Festival. She has been hailed as Canada's "new diva of jazz" and as "one of the greatest female singers in the history of Canadian jazz"—all this in the country that gave us Diana Krall.

Fisher has been singing jazz for 20 years, but she has never been merely a "jazz singer." She is a mother, a teacher, a student, a songwriter and a record label owner. For years, while singing in nightclubs in Edmonton and Calgary, she was teaching English and special education by day. She designed a curriculum for children with learning disabilities that was adopted throughout Canada. "I've had so many different ways of touching people," says Fisher. "I think it helps me see a broader spectrum of my audience."

Fisher was born in Edmonton, Alberta, and was one of six children. "Music was a central, integral part of my family life," she recalls. All the children in the family learned to play an instrument (piano, in her case) and to sing. "We were doing three- and four-part harmonies in the car." Fisher married young and had a son, now grown, whom she raised alone after a divorce.

Living in Calgary, she met some musicians and asked for the chance to sing. She had grown up as a fan of Motown, but during Calgary's oil boom of the 1980's she found herself working in lounges that—hard as it is to believe—actually wanted jazz. She learned on the job and found a new vocation. She is unusual among singers because she is more inspired by instrumentalists than by other singers. Her favorites are pianist Bill Evans, guitarists Joe Pass and Pat Metheny and "early Miles Davis."

In 1988, she moved to Europe for two years, where she had nothing less than a revelation. "That was the place I started to believe there was something I could offer," she says. "I will never forget being on the cobblestoned streets of Paris, and we started playing. All of a sudden, this little crowd began to gather. I looked out, and there was a sea of people. There were kids and grandparents, people of all backgrounds, and all these people were listening to me sing. I thought, wow, this is unbelievable."

Returning to Canada, she continued to sing and recorded the first of her three albums on her own label, Catfish Records. Even with her success, Fisher wanted to learn more about the music she was performing. "I had reached my ceiling," she says. "I'd never had a vocal lesson before. You can only go so far on your own."

Because no Canadian university offered a graduate degree in jazz singing, Fisher came south to the University of Miami, which has one of the strongest programs in the country. She got up at 6 every morning and concentrated on her studies, learning music theory and proper vocal techniques. "She's very dedicated," says Rachel Lebon, one of her UM professors. "Our master's program is probably the most challenging one around. There are very few people who are able to complete their degree in just two years."

Fisher is now an adjunct professor of voice at the university. In the fall of 1999, Allison was teaching jazz history at UM—the first time he ever taught—when Fisher lent him a rare documentary on Bix Beiderbecke, a brilliant and doomed cornetist of the 1920's.

"Bix Beiderbecke brought us together," Allison jokes. They were married in September 2000, and this past summer embarked on a three-week Canadian tour, culminating in Fisher's second appearance at the Montreal Jazz Festival.

"It was exhausting but invigorating," says Allison. "The audiences were great, uniformly. I fell in love with the country and the people. No matter where we were, you could tell the people appreciated quality. The hippest audience was in Medicine Hat, in the middle of the Alberta prairie."

"I would love for us to become another Cleo Laine and John Dankworth," says Fisher, speaking of the popular British jazz couple. "Music is a wonderful thing to share."

"I love connecting with the audience," she says, "but I'm not a performer who lives to be onstage. My main focus is to touch people, to move them through music."

Cheryl