

Riveting Riffs Magazine

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Interview by Joe Montague

Joyce Cooling has long been considered to be one of the funkiest, smoothest and most creative guitarists and songwriters on the music scene and the Bay Area resident, along with Jay Wagner, the other half of the dynamic songwriting team, have struck gold again with the fabulous Global Cooling album. Global Cooling opens with an up-tempo “Grass Roots,” showcasing Cooling’s delicious guitar playing, as she bends a few notes, and featuring Buddy Rivera’s undeniable funky bass, Bill Ortiz’s sweet trumpet and Roberto Quintana on percussion.

Over the years, Joyce Cooling has become a friend to this magazine and we continue to be attracted to the Cooling / Wagner arrangements, because of the imagination the duo demonstrate in the creation of songs such as “Cobra,” which fuses jazz with Indian percussion.

“I have always, always, always loved Indian music, the classical music, as well as the pop. I don’t know much about it. I am not a musicologist by any means, but I love those scales, those ragas (melodic moods used in Indian classical music). There was one in particular that I always loved and every time that I heard it, I would always run over to my guitar and try to play with it, improvise with it. That is the scale (the raga) that you hear in “Cobra.” I wanted to keep who we are; it is still a contemporary jazz CD, but I have always loved sounds from around the world, so in “Cobra,” we threw in a little sitar and tablas, and of course that exotic scale that I love. Jay came up with this really cool rhythm track. We wrote a melody and I am still (trying to find) the words, because it is contemporary jazz, with the little slight sound of India in there. Is it slam, dunk traditional Indian music? No, not at all. It has that whole vibe to it.”

Cooling once described a previous album, Revolving Door as being earthy, with salt and minerals, and she describes the current album Global Cooling as, “It is not world music by any stretch, but you can put it on and you can take a trek around the globe. For example, we talked about the song “Cobra.” The song “Red Rose,” is not a real, authentic Tango, but there are elements (in it), with some of the scales that we used and some of the percussion. Some things are borrowed from the groove of Tango, to make it feel like Tango. “Grass Roots,” is by no means a down the pike reggae tune, but we borrowed little vibes out of reggae, little slices of things. You are in the Caribbean with that. “Dolores In Pink,” is totally borrowed from Brazil. Celso Alberti who is from Brazil is all over that one. So now you are in South America, and then at the very end of the CD, we have a little Carnival thing that is totally out of Rio. Is it a traditional Carnival piece? No. There is a backbeat in it. We borrowed from all over the place, so Global Cooling is kind of a little trek.

Because she is a guitar virtuoso, it may surprise some of Cooling’s fans to learn that their heroine was first attracted to the use of percussion in music, many years ago. “It was a conscious decision to have (more percussion) on the (album) because I have always loved percussion. At one stage, early, early in my career, I thought that I wanted to be a percussionist. I got into the whole West African music from Ghana. I wasn’t a professional musician yet. I was meeting a friend for lunch, who was a student from the U of C Berkley and we met on campus. There was a classroom window that was open and the most amazing grooves were coming out of it. Do you remember the old

cartoons where someone puts a pie on a shelf to cool, and the aroma from the pie is wafting out and the cartoon character gets a whiff of this coming out of the window? The cartoon character starts to float towards the aroma and the scent turns into a beckoning finger, as the cartoon character follows it through the air. That is kind of how it was. It was mesmerizing and I fell into a trance almost. I stood outside the classroom and would just listen. I found out that the class met twice each week, so I would come back twice each week. I wouldn't miss it for love or money and I rearranged my work schedule. Then I got bolder and I crept into the back of the room and I was working out the rhythms on the side of my chair. Everyday I would get a little bolder and I would creep closer to the front of the class. Then the teacher said, 'I know that you aren't a student, but I can see that you love the music, come on,' and he handed me an axatse, which is a gourd covered with a net of beads."

Our conversation then takes a side trip, as Cooling educates me, concerning different types of percussion instruments. "There is a pecking order, you start with the axatse and then you graduate to the bell, then there is a little drum called the kidi. You can't graduate to the kidi drum until you have really gotten how the axatse and the bell fit in with the rhythms. It's not just playing the groove, it is a repetitive pattern. The axatse and the bell do not vary, they are static and someone may say, oh how boring, but it is not boring, trust me, because when you start tuning in to what the lead drummer is playing and what some of the other parts are playing, you will be thrown. It will throw you right off of your part. The first step is you almost block everything out and just keep your part, then you can slowly let in the bell part and the kidi part. You can play one with one hand and one with the other, to see how they integrate. You are ready when you can play the bell and let in the whole lead drum part, which is part improv and part like a classical piece that is very sophisticated and polyrhythmic. That stuff will throw you off and you have to let it in slowly. Then once you have mastered that and you let in the most sophisticated part in the pecking order, you are ready to move to the next instrument, and you start the process all over again. I was just floored with it and I am nuts about it," she says.

Cooling lends her vocals to a few of the songs on *Global Cooling*, including the fun and forward looking "What Are We Waiting For?" and "Chit Chat," a satirical comment on society, with words like, "Floyd hits the void – watches TV / Til he goes to bed / Jane rides the train – tabloids fill her brain / As she nods her head," and then a verse whose lines were inspired by a conversation that Cooling overheard, "Talk at supper – gossip at work / who's the bride – who's the groom? / Chitter chat chatter – what does it matter / who broke up with whom?"

"I am poking fun at myself and the rest of us, because we have become so voyeuristic. The lyrics are tongue and cheek. Do you think that we have become more voyeuristic as a culture?" Cooling says as she poses the question, and then takes a moment to consider it herself.

She then explains how the song came to be, "It started at a coffeehouse. I love coffeehouses and I like to write songs and lyrics at coffeehouses. I was sitting in this coffeehouse, when I heard these two people having a really animated conversation; 'No Kidding! What! No Way,' that kind of thing. I assumed it was a family member that they knew or a friend that they had in common, but it turns out they were talking about a TV show. I was floored and then I got into this whole thing about how we live so vicariously through other people and the media. Sometimes I wonder if we are neglecting our own

lives. It is a funny thing that we do. Maybe at that moment when we have a choice to live vicariously, we can choose instead to do something interesting and rewarding for ourselves.”

To that end Cooling sings the bridge for the song “Chit Chat,” “It’s so amazing to be free / We can choose what will be / We can write our own life’s movie script / The trip is so much better...than chit chat.”

For several years now, Joyce Cooling and Jay Wagner have been writing their own movie script and enriching their lives and the lives of others by their quiet involvement with the National Alliance on Mental Illness. In the fall of 2009, two of Cooling’s concerts, one in San Antonio Texas and the other in Austin Texas, had a portion of the proceeds from the ticket sales and merchandise sales given to local NAMI chapters. This is not the first time that Cooling has given up a portion of her income in support of NAMI as her Revolving Door album also had a portion of the proceeds donated in support of NAMI.

Creating more awareness for funding and education surrounding mental illnesses is something that hits close to home for Joyce Cooling, as her brother has a mental illness. She talks about her involvement as a spokesperson for NAMI, “It really is about getting the word out, breaking the stigma. Mental illness is not something to be feared. Mental illness affects the brain, just as, and here is the classic example, just as diabetes affects the pancreas. Because it (mental illness) affects behavior, people are scared of it. They don’t know what to make of it. There is a lot of shame attached. People don’t want to admit that a family member, or perhaps they, or a spouse or whomever, is struggling with mental illness.

“Also, in San Francisco, there is a staggering homeless population. The city is lenient towards the homeless. A lot of the people who are homeless on the streets aren’t lazy. They have a mental illness. If my brother didn’t have us, he would be on the streets. That’s where you end up. It’s for my brother, but it’s also for everybody else out there.”

Joyce Cooling has seven albums to her credit, five of which have charted on Billboard. She has enjoyed two #1 radio singles, six in the top ten, and in total had thirteen singles chart. Along with her partner, Jay Wagner, she continues to find new ways to stir the creative juices and like most dynamic songwriting teams whether they are a Hal David and Burt Bacharach or Daryl Hall and John Oates, Cooling and Wagner continue to produce songs that capture the imagination of the listener.

Cooling credits their success to, “a total submersion and lack of egos. It is not about two separate egos at all. We’re not the freakin’ Bobbsey Twins; I like what you like and we’re just exactly the same (she says in a bit of a cutesy, but mocking voice). We aren’t like that at all. We grew up three thousand miles apart, but we had almost identical record collections. It was amazing. We could listen to a whole solo, a long straight ahead jazz solo and we could ask what’s my favorite measure in that solo, what are my favorite two notes in that solo and it was uncanny, because we could pick them out. We are both coming from the same place, but he’s Jay with his twist on it and I’m Joyce with my twist on it. When it comes together, it’s fun. I would rather song write than anything.”

That is a good thing for the rest of us who enjoy listening to Joyce Cooling play her guitar and sing the songs that she and Jay Wagner create.