



The Heart Is A Mystery

Jess Ribeiro & The Bone Collectors

by Megan Spencer © 2010

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The first time I saw Jess Ribeiro play, I was jammed into a tiny Darwin music club. The licensed-for-fifty venue had swollen to at least a hundred inside that wee room.

Wedged against the bar, friends already knew what I was in for. “Just wait till you hear her”, shouted Liam across the throng. “You won’t *believe* her voice”.

He wasn’t wrong. For the next 35 minutes I sat there enthralled and trembling on my bar stool as Jess sang to us, guitar in hand. Her songs told of rattlesnakes in the desert, mysteries of the heart, self-doubt, love and encounters with all that life threw her way. At the ripe old age of 23 Jess was already an old musical soul. I wept.

For sing *to you* is what Jess does. I was so beguiled by her voice – and music - that I peeled myself off that stool to move closer to this siren delivering a performance akin to divine. I’m pretty sure she thought I was crazy and/or drunk.

I was neither, but I *was* intoxicated. Working for ABC Radio at the time (2008), I cornered Jess before she’d even had time to snap her guitar case shut, signing her up for an interview on the spot.

Everyone talks about the first time they hear Jess sing: when she performed ‘Into My Arms’ live on a triple j broadcast in Darwin, co-host Robby Buck remarked on her “beautiful voice” after a moment of gob-smacked dead air.

Richard Kingsill compared her to Cat Power, and Radio National's Tim Ritchie - after seeing Jess for the first time at Darwin Festival - raved, "A kind of magic that I have witnessed maybe only a couple of times before in my life."

"This young woman sang like someone who had been on the stage forever... she put words together in fantastic ways and then delivered them effortlessly, making each word tell its own tale. You'll just have to trust me that 'special' just doesn't cover it!"



Not bad for a singer who's first musical influence was "The Muppets".

After playing "violin and classical guitar for about five minutes", then being taught to sing by "a Buddhist man" when she was sixteen, Jess found her musical calling when she moved to Brisbane from country NSW. She began managing a bar at live music venue Indie Temple. "The owner's daughter - who was a musician - became a great inspiration to me. She taught me about different aspects of the music industry while I stayed quiet and observant. I had no other aspirations other than to pursue music and learn as much as I could."

Jess played solo the night I first saw her, but she doesn't 'ride alone'. She and multi-instrumentalist Rob Law found each other during the 2007 'wet season', sharing "a tiny commission flat" when Jess moved to Darwin to study teaching. They have been slowly honing their unique, alt-folk/gypsy sound ever since.

"There is lots of intuition involved in our partnership and music," she says their four-year musical union. Rob "is like the 'chilled-out bearded man' version of me, which works out well."

"Jess has really re-inspired me," reflects Rob. "She has helped me reconnect with the deeper elements of music that I think I had forgotten. I like the evocative spaces that some of our songs create." Jess agrees. "The music is esoteric and seems to value silence as well as sound which is peculiar because I always thought I'd be a grungey rock goddess smashing it up like Adalita from Magic Dirt!"

The Bone Collectors came about when old friend drummer Damo Meoli moved to the Top End in 2008. (The band name is derived from "an ancient tale about an immortal being who wanders the earth collecting bones and singing them back into creation.") Together they recorded EP Pilgrimage, travelling the East Coast in 2009 and gigging at festivals such as Fuse in Adelaide and venues like the Wesley Anne in Northcote. Eventually they settled in Melbourne (as much as "wandering" Bone Collectors can 'settle'.)

They added bass player Evan Lordern (The New Loutonians) and embarked upon recording

their first album. Self-funded with lots of support and some favours pulled in, it's been a hard road for the young band, but worth it – almost at an end.

Says Jess, "Individually it's been hard because these songs are my first little babies so I felt really protective of them. As a band we have learned so much about recording and working in the studio. We could have had this recording completed 7 months ago but I didn't [then] have the experience or the confidence to take the lead and go with my instincts."

Adds Rob, "I think initially we would have loved to have gone into a studio and recorded something all in one day, as a way to maintain that live energy, but in reality that wasn't possible... In the end I think the recording has managed to still have lots of energy and transmit the feelings of the songs without sounding sterile... The challenge is being able to play without sounding too cautious and controlled."



Photo by Joel Halmsworth

Their shows are anything but. Even on a cold Melbourne winter's night, a little bit of steamy Darwin creeps in. "Probably the pace of life in Darwin and its open spaces enters the music and allows you to be more expansive in your playing," says Rob. "I think Darwin is a great source of inspiration, and I love playing guitar most on the balcony of an elevated home in the tropics, going into a sweaty delirious and timeless state."

True to their name, The Bone Collectors keep wandering their chosen paths. While Evan and Damo are heading overseas, Rob and Jess are gigging as a duo while putting the finishing touches to their self-titled first album, due for release early in 2011. A tour of the Northern Territory this September is underway – including a gigs at Darwin Festival – plus Melbourne dates in the lead up to the album release. A national tour for 2011 is also in the pipeline.

Which means a whole new audience will get to hear Jess sing for the first time... An enviable position to be in indeed.

Visit Jess Ribeiro & The Bone Collectors [website](#) for tour dates.