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Artist Interview: Diane Hubka

by [Stephen Rekas](#)



As a vocalist and guitarist, Diane Hubka is a rising star on the national and international jazz scene. Diane sings while accompanying herself on 7-string guitar, as well as performing as a vocalist with various groups that feature one or more guitars. Her debut CD, *Haven't We Met* with alto sax legend Lee Konitz was nominated for a 1999 Jazz Award for Best Recording Debut. Her second CD, *Look No Further*, was equally well received with John Hart playing guitar on both albums.

In 2002 Diane Hubka recorded a CD called *You Inspire Me* with seven different guitarists including Gene Bertoncini, Bucky Pizzarelli, Jack Wilkins, John Hart, Paul Bollenback, Frank Vignola and Romero Lubambo with his Brazilian "Trio da Paz". The album features various combinations of one guitar, two guitars, trio, etc. with bass and drums. As Diane says, "You can never have too many guitars!" *You Inspire Me* <http://www.jimnewsom.com/DianeHubka.html>, on VSOJAZ - (Vocal Sound of Jazz Records) reflects both her love of a good lyric and her intimate relationship with the guitar.

This Blue Ridge Mountain-bred artist grew up in Western Maryland in a musical family and learned violin,

trombone and folk guitar from an early age. In college she joined her guitar teacher's group as a singer, and developed her love and knowledge of jazz. Her guitar teacher, Bill Bittner made a permanent impression on her young jazz ears. Diane moved to New York In 1989, after winning a jazz fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for private study with master vocalist Anne Marie Moss. She studied voice, piano and guitar with some of New York's premier jazz artists, including Sheila Jordan, Barry Harris, Harold Danko, Connie Crothers, Gene Bertoncini and Howard Alden.

Diane has performed as a vocalist in New York's top jazz clubs - appearing at The Blue Note, Birdland, The Knitting Factory, and Jazz Gallery. On a visit to her hometown, she was the featured soloist with the Western Maryland Symphony. She sings in Washington DC's Blues Alley, (with guitarists Paul Wingo and Steve Abshire) and the Jazz Spot and Spazio in Los Angeles with guitarists John Pisano, Barry Zweig and Jim Fox.

In the mid-nineties, Diane began performing while accompanying herself on guitar. She appeared in such New York venues as Chez Suzette and Trumpets, and at the Central Pennsylvania Mellon Jazz Festival. In September 2002 she began playing the 7-string archtop guitar. [See *Tales from the Road*] In 2003 she performed at the Philadelphia Guitar Show on behalf of Dale Unger and American Archtops guitars. She is currently awaiting delivery of a custom 7-string guitar by Ed Schaefer and a classical 7-string by Bo Walker. Concord Jazz recording artist Howard Alden, one of the world's foremost 7-string players, says of Diane's abilities, "I think voice plus seven-string guitar are an ideal combination. It's rare to find someone who can handle both single-handedly, but Diane Hubka does just that - beautifully!"

Guitar Sessions: Who or what events inspired you to play the guitar? Was music a part of your household when growing up? What styles interested you when you first began to play?

Diane Hubka: My parents encouraged me to play music from an early age, and I began taking violin lessons at age six or seven, trombone in 4th grade, and finally settled on guitar at age eleven. My teacher taught me folk songs and fingerstyle picking - Peter, Paul and Mary and other folk songs. Throughout school in the 70's, I was influenced by James Taylor, Joni Mitchell and blues/rock bands like the Allman Brothers. I played pop and folk-rock songs for fun, but never thought of pursuing music seriously until I graduated from college (with an accounting degree!) when I began taking guitar lessons again and was exposed to jazz for the first time.

My teacher, Bill Bittner, was a wonderful jazz guitarist; he played a big hollow-bodied Gibson L-7 with a Charlie Christian pickup. He also had a wonderful record collection which he lent me generously - Charlie Christian and The Nat King Cole Trio with guitarist Oscar Moore, as well as Carmen McRae, Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra. When he told me his group needed a singer, I learned some of the great jazz standards, and my career as a jazz vocalist began.

GS: Have you always combined your vocal and guitar interests?

DH: I've always used guitar, and also piano, to study music, learn my songs and be able to write my own lead sheets; I've also used it to develop my ear to become a better vocalist, increase my improvisational skills, and get deeper into the music.

Initially, I performed only as a singer. Working in jazz with few opportunities to rehearse, I would hire the absolute best freelance players; they would come in and read my charts cold. I learned to write simple lead sheets, and just direct the band on the gig. I'm a firm believer in "on-the-job" training, and I know my musicianship grew from these experiences. The downside was, they were such great players that at first, I was too intimidated to think of playing guitar with them!

I also have to say that the lack of female guitarist role models probably affected this process. But eventually my love of guitar won out, and in the mid-nineties I began performing accompanying myself on guitar, in addition to singing with groups.

GS: What instruments do you play besides the guitar? Is there any particular advantage or disadvantage to being a multi-instrumentalist?

DH: I found studying basic keyboard harmony at the piano was invaluable in understanding how to sing and play jazz, as well as to better understand the guitar. It was a lot easier for me to understand the concepts of harmony by looking at the piano (Hmmm, there's one line; this direction the notes go down, and this direction they go up ...THANK YOU!!!) Then when I went back to guitar, it seemed a lot easier to grasp the concept of the diatonic major seven chords, modes, etc.

GS: Do you teach? If so, what areas do you emphasize with your students? What are the key areas a student jazz guitarist should pursue?

DH: I've recently begun conducting workshops on improvisation. I generally do this in a group setting, singing with two guitars and bass. I emphasize the importance of singers studying music and ear training, and that instrumentalists use singing to get to the heart of their music. Just as I've found playing an instrument has helped my singing, instrumentalists find that singing what they play can help them get to the music even faster. They needn't be intimidated by this idea. First of all, most musicians have good ears and probably sing in tune. The goal isn't to become a professional singer, but to use the voice to get closer to the music. The best instrumentalists sing what they play, and they also know the lyrics to the songs, which help with phrasing, etc. When you think about it this way, you understand we're all coming from the same place!

GS: What special considerations do you keep in mind when backing vocals? How has the 7-string guitar changed your concept of solo playing or vocal backup?

DH: When I accompany myself, I try to keep things simple, so I'm free to improvise with my voice. I outline the basic harmony of the chord progressions, and use voice leading when I can to keep it sounding smooth, but nothing too busy. Less is usually more. Since I generally play guitar to accompany myself singing in a solo setting: i.e. no bass, and I play fingerstyle, the seven-string guitar is PERFECT for me!

Technique

GS: What do you do to keep your repertoire sounding fresh?

DH: My style of jazz is pretty straight-ahead, but I like to find unusual "not-so-standard" standards, especially songs that were written by the authors of the Great American Songbook, but not their well-known songs. Like "Look No Further" by Richard Rodgers, "Winter Moon" by Hoagy Carmichael, or unusual songs that friends of mine have written, such as Nuages, with wonderful lyrics by Frank Forte. There are just so many great songs that hardly anybody does, so I enjoy finding and sharing them. My voice is very well suited to Bossa Nova tunes too, which I love, and I'm enjoying learning Portuguese so I can sing some of the lesser known Jobim tunes

Gear

GS: What instruments are you playing now?

DH: Currently I'm playing a laminated 7-string archtop made by Dale Unger of American Archtops. Dale worked for several years with Bob Benedetto. This guitar has a rich sound and looks beautiful, and is very comfortable

to play. He builds in the "minimalist" style, with very little decoration - I had to have dots added to the fretboard, so I could see where I was while learning the 7-string! Before I went to the 7-string I had just purchased a beautiful 6-string made by Ed Schaefer, who is based in Fort Worth, TX. It's a true story that this particular 6-string guitar "inspired me to sing" - which is coincidentally the model's name - Jazz Singer! I sold it to buy my 7-string, but then asked Ed to build me a custom 7-string, which he's in the process of making. [See this month's Featured Luthier column.]

I'm also having a classical nylon-seven-string made by Ed's friend and fellow Fort Worth Luthier, Bo Walker. It will have a cutaway body, and the same neck width as my archtop. This guitar will be perfect for the Brazilian tunes I love to do.

GS: Which brand of amps are you using for your guitar and voice?

DH: I use a Raezer's Edge Twin-8 cabinet with the Clarus 2 [twin channel] amplifier. I use two Twin-8 cabinets for larger rooms, and I'm also getting a NY-8 just because they're so small and sound so incredible. It's the perfect combination for singing and playing. I put the speaker up on a speaker stand, which I would ordinarily do as a singer anyway, but it also makes the guitar sound better. This combo makes both the voice and guitar sound incredible; I always get compliments on my SOUND when I play.

Diane Hubka currently accepts students for private instruction, as well as conducting workshops on jazz improvisation throughout the country. Visit her web site at www.dianehubka.com

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