

on the brink of stardom

# Krista Detor



by **ELISABETH ANDREWS** •••• photography by **JIM KRAUSE**

*"I've worked with everybody—Paul McCartney, Kate Bush, Lyle Lovett—and there are those that have it and those that don't. But it's a strange one with Krista. It's a slow burn. She's one of these artists who have to suffer for their art before they get recognized, and then, when they do, everyone wonders why they didn't notice her sooner." —Pat Tynan, music publicist, London*

When Krista Detor arrived in Europe in 2006, she was greeted by a rush of photographers and reporters from publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Revolver*. Her second album, *Mudshow*—written in a single week—had reached No. 1 on the Euro-Americana chart, and she was booked at all the top venues frequented by the genre's stars and tastemakers. As she interviewed with BBC Radio and similar stations, she found herself fighting back tears, astonished by the care with which the DJs had studied her music.

"They knew my material backwards and forwards. Their interpretations of the songs were brilliant. I couldn't believe the way they were speaking back to me the things that I had said, just looking me in the eye, and saying, 'Here's your soul on the table,'" she remembers. "They put me in a category higher than I had ever seen myself in, saying things like, 'One of the

great songwriters of our time,' and comparing me to Tom Waits and Joni Mitchell."

In truth, Detor had secretly imagined that she belonged with those artists since she first began composing as a teen. But she had struggled so long with stage fright, self-image issues, and the doubts that plague many artists that she was seldom sure how to evaluate her talents. The European reception amazed her and made her wonder, for the moment, if she was actually on the road to stardom.

As it turned out, the path was not unswerving. "The American DJs got wind of the album, but it's a harder row to hoe in America," she says. "The American folk world wanted me to be more categorized, and they weren't sure where to fit my music. Then the European journalists were like, 'If the American reviewers aren't embracing her, why are we?' It all got confused, like a bunch of marbles rolling around."



Five years and several albums later, Detor still tours North America and Europe. Her latest disc, *Chocolate Paper Suites*, not only made countless “Best of 2010” lists on both continents but is also taught alongside Kafka and Yeats in the writing and rhetoric program at Stanford University. Detor makes a good living off shows and album sales and raises substantial funds through benefit concerts for a variety of charities.

The AllMusic website recently described Detor as “an artist of rare ability...with a deep



**ABOVE:** Krista Detor and her brother Rob as toddlers. Courtesy photo

**MIDDLE:** (l-r) Detor, David Weber, bassist Steve Mascari, and drummer Jamey Reid at the CD release party for *Chocolate Paper Suites*.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Teenage Detor performs on the wedding/bar mitzvah circuit. Courtesy photo

poetic gift,” and called *Chocolate Paper Suites* “so good that it deserves to make the artist famous.” It leaves fans and the many reviewers who love her work to wonder: Why is Krista Detor one of the music world’s best-kept secrets?

### A SOLITARY CHILDHOOD

Music is in Detor’s blood, though as a child she didn’t know it. Her parents, only 17 when she was born in 1968, gave her up for adoption, and the originally Midwestern parents who raised her were not musically inclined. Only later would she discover that both her biological grandfathers were singers, her mother and grandmother played in an accordion orchestra, and her father was a prolific poet. Her biological parents first named her after a song, in fact: Dawn, from the song by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. (“Dawn, go away, I’m no good for you.”)

Growing up in Southern California, she baffled her household with her ability to spend hours at the piano. “My brother Rob was a surfer,” she remembers. “He was always outside and I was inside.” Both children were adopted, which was never kept a secret.

“I always did feel separate from most of the world,” she says. “I was different from everyone in inexplicable ways. I was chubby and freckled and had little round glasses. One of the reasons I started writing so young was because I had so much time alone.”

Her parents supported her piano habit, though, even insisting that she continue training when she tried to quit at age nine. “I’m very lucky that I ended up with these hardworking Midwestern people,” she says. “They had the attitude that you make a commitment to something and you finish it.”

By the time she was 15, her musical abilities were so outstanding that an enterprising Los Angeles manager picked her out of a talent show.

“He wanted to make me famous,” she says. “He had me in whatever performance situations he could get me in. He would call a guitar player, a bass player—studio musicians looking for work—and we’d play weddings, bar mitzvahs, cocktail parties, things like that.”

Detor loved performing—pretending to be older, drinking Champagne, and anticipating her big break—but even then, she saw herself more as a songwriter than a pop star. Her lyrics, at 15, were of dubious merit (“I run for cover/in the wild of your eyes/no other lover/can take me where you’re going baby”) but were, she says, “an early indication” of her potential. Her manager disagreed, considering her voice and piano skills her more marketable assets. “It didn’t stop me from writing,” she says, “but it definitely slowed me down.”

Meanwhile, Detor was playing with her high school rock band and hanging out with the drama

crowd, performing in musicals. Certain of her impending stardom, she adopted a too-cool-for-school attitude, earning mostly C’s on her report cards and missing so many geometry classes that she failed the subject.

“I was a bit of a wild child,” she says. “I was voted ‘Least Likely to Be a Nun’ at the *Sound of Music* cast party—because I was least likely to be a nun. I was the one who brought the whiskey.”

As she continued to develop her musical tastes, however, Detor became less interested in her manager’s plans for her. “He had Geffen [Records] looking at me, but even then I wanted to be Elvis Costello. I wanted to be Peter Gabriel. I wanted to be one of the people making those statements, not the girls who were shaking their asses and selling records for labels.”

At the end of her junior year in high school, she suddenly realized she was “going nowhere.” So she quit both performing and partying, turned all her attention to her schoolwork, and made the dean’s list with a 4.0 average her senior year. By the time she graduated high school, she had been admitted to California State University, where she planned to study classical history.

She was still writing songs, but her newfound sobriety brought its own problem: stage fright. “When I was in high school, it was always a shot of whiskey before I went onstage. Always. Or two,” Detor says. Then, when she quit, performing was like “drinking battery acid. I was like, ‘I’m not doing it.’ So I said, ‘I don’t even want to be a musician anyway. I want to be a professor.’ I had myself convinced for a good long time.”

### A WEIGHTY ISSUE

There was another factor, one she’s only just begun to consider. For much of her life, Detor struggled with her weight, at times carrying almost 100 pounds more than she does today. “It’s wrong of me that I have not really made that part of the story,” she says, surprised by her own realization. “I had forgotten how important that fact is. I was really self-conscious. I think there was something in the back of my mind that said, ‘You are too fat to be on that stage.’”

At college, she tried to focus on her studies, but music tugged at her “like a ball and chain around my ankle,” she says. She wrote songs constantly and two or three times a year would perform at open-mic nights.

“I felt compelled to do it, but it felt like crap,” she says.

Two years into college, Detor realized that she lacked the passion of her fellow classical-history students. “They lived and breathed history in a way I did music,” she says. After a





“There was really an identity crisis when I met my biological parents.”

stint in a Hollywood office job, she decided that pursuing a degree in music would allow her to become a teacher and stay in the field she loved, without exposing herself to the terror of performing.

It was during those final years of college that her good friend from high school, George, suddenly became a love interest. “He had always orbited me like the moon, leaving flowers on my doorstep, but I thought he was a little bit dorky. But then one day, after he joined the Army, I looked up at him and it hit me like a sledgehammer. I had fallen in love with him,” she says.

When they married in 1991, George was stationed in South Korea, so Detor moved to the base and became its resident musical director. “It was adorable. I conducted the little Army band,” she says.

The couple’s next stop was less enjoyable. When George’s service ended, they moved to Monroe, Louisiana, where his parents lived, and George, a bass player, found his way into the “artsy underground” and the lifestyle that went with it. Detor provided the vocals for his alt-rock band, but was still so uncomfortable onstage that she resorted to her former reliance on alcohol. “I would just be all Janis Joplin, you know?” she says.

Detor recognized that the scene wasn’t healthy for either of them, and that George’s real talent was as a chef. She convinced him to attend Le Cordon Bleu in California, after which they moved to Portland and a relatively stable period in their lives. At 26, Detor was a property manager at a real estate company, George was a chef’s apprentice, and they had a daughter, Aurora, born in 1995.

“There we were, working toward our middle-class American dream,” she says, “when my biological parents called.”

#### THE CALL THAT CHANGED HER LIFE

From across the country in Florida, Detor’s biological parents, who had stayed together and had two more children, tracked her down in 1996. Meeting her family was unsettling on many levels, but the greatest shock of all was the revelation that Detor was not as unique as she had supposed. Not only did they all look like her, but they also shared the same political beliefs, cultural tastes, and even spoken tonal inflections.

“There was really an identity crisis when I met my biological parents,” she says. “Before, I maybe was a rebel and I maybe was odd; I didn’t fit in with my family, but I was unique and I was special. Then there they were and they’re like, ‘Hi!’ and I’m like, ‘I’m a finger on a glove! I don’t know who I am now!’”

Self-scrutiny aside, Detor wanted to make up for lost time in getting to know her biological relatives. So she moved her small family to Florida to open a restaurant with her parents, which would also give George the opportunity to become a full-fledged chef. On the day before they were set to open, though, he panicked, backed out, and left town.

#### COMING TO BLOOMINGTON

Years later, when Detor performed the one-woman show in Bloomington that would finally cure her stage fright, she looked back and realized, “So many things that I’d done since George left were in reaction to George having left.” (Detor’s song “Paco the Pool Boy” gives some indication of how she distracted herself during that period.) In 2000, Detor moved to Bloomington to be with her adoptive mother, Judie, who grew up here.

Detor had discovered, during the time she ran the restaurant in Florida following George’s departure, that the traits she shared with her father did not extend to their approach to running a business—a disconnect that became a major factor in her decision to leave. Their physical similarity, however, sparked a

TOP:  
Weber and Detor with their daughters  
(l-r) Lena, Aurora, and Isla.

BOTTOM:  
Detor and Weber performing at the  
Buskirk-Chumley Theater in 2010.

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Detor at home with her dog Luna.



breakthrough in Detor’s weight management that freed her of her long-running self-flagellation.

“Seeing my family made me realize, ‘This isn’t necessarily a personal failing of mine,’” she says. She recognized that there was a genetic inclination for her body type and that the excess weight could eventually cause her serious health problems. “That made me able to step away from wanting to be a size zero and look at my weight as a long-term investment.”

When she came to Bloomington, Detor had already committed to an exercise program and to keeping sugar out of her diet. She was losing weight, but more importantly, she says, she was modeling a healthy lifestyle for her daughter.

#### HER WOLFPACK DAYS

Despite a growing confidence that came from what Detor describes as “having a sense of control of my physicality,” she was in no hurry to get back onstage. Instead, she took a catering position at the Indiana Memorial Union. There she met Wolfpack, a band made up of maintenance workers who invited her to sing with them.

“What they were doing was hysterically funny, but musically it was heavy metal, not my style,” she says. “I didn’t want that to be my Bloomington musical introduction, so I wore a wig and took a false name. I was ‘Timberwolf.’”

Detor soon took a job at The Uptown Café, where she met Richard Perez, a fellow Uptown employee and artistic director of the Bloomington Playwrights Project (BPP). Having heard the Wolfpack CD and gotten to know Detor as a co-worker, Perez thought she’d make an excellent addition to the BPP’s Cabaret Nouveau Series.

“He said to me, ‘Girl, you’re funny. You should do a cabaret,’” she says. “I was like, ‘No, no, no, I have terrible stage fright. It’s awful.’ But he pestered me for a month.”

Detor eventually gave in and prepared an autobiographical narrative interspersed with her songs. Having committed to perform, she decided to see a counselor who specialized in stage fright.

With the show three weeks away, there was no time for “any actual real therapy,” Detor says, but in their few meetings she found that “the process of telling her my story, of actually speaking it to her, somehow was cathartic.”

By the time she walked onstage, Detor says, her perspective had shifted. “I had to memorize a script and improvise around the script, and that effort made having to sing my own stuff feel completely secondary and autopilot.



When I got to the end of the show, not only had I lost my stage fright, I'd also stopped hating George."

After that show in 2002, there was nothing holding Deter back from pursuing her music—not nerves, not self-consciousness, not even resentment. She was 34, and she was at last prepared to share the songs she had been writing for decades.

Luckily, Deter had already met David Weber, owner of Airtime Recording Studio. "While I was doing the Wolfpack CD, he had turned around in his chair, and said, 'Do you have more songs? There are people in this town that need to know you're here.' That was an enormous shot of adrenaline for me," she says. With Weber's help, she put together *A Dream in a Cornfield*, her first fully produced solo album, in 2003.

Deter accepted Weber's offer to perform with her, and the two became a frequent fixture at the Encore Café (now Bloomingfoods Near West Side). She was also selected to perform

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in WFHB's Live from Bloomington show at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. "I was all fibbertygibbeted," she says. "There were all these musicians that I wanted to meet—Carrie Newcomer, Tom Roznowski, Tim Grimm, Michael White. I was so nervous."

The performance of her song "Blue Sky Fallen," off *A Dream in a Cornfield*, garnered "a huge response—I was the new little thing in Bloomington," she says.

#### UNREQUITED LOVE REQUIRED

As Deter's local following began to grow, so did her feelings for Weber. She wrote song after song about unrequited love, though she so valued their professional relationship that she resisted saying anything to him.

"Then one day he goes, 'When are you going to write a song about me?' And I was just thinking, 'Oh, I can't believe how stupid you are,'" she says. "So I thought about what he said, and finally I called him, and blurted, 'I just need you to know that all these big unrequited love songs, they're about you, and I'm a songwriter so it's taken on all these epic proportions. But really, I'll be fine, it's just unrequited love, it's my muse.' And he said, 'What's unrequited?' So I defined it for him, and he said, 'Shut up, I know the definition.' And I was like, 'Oh. Gulp.'"

But that was it—they didn't speak of the subject for months afterward. "It got weird after that, but we didn't say anything because we were so afraid that we would ruin the music thing we had going on," she says. "Then about two months later we talked about it and decided we would wait a year before trying to start a relationship. So we agreed, and then I walked past him to get a drink of water and he just grabbed me and kissed me. And that was that. I couldn't resist. He's a really good kisser."

They were married in their backyard in 2006. Weber had two daughters from his previous marriage, which suited Aurora, as the children were already friends.

#### WITH A SONG IN HER HEAD

Soon, Deter and Weber were writing together, producing an album called *Beautiful Money* that paired Weber's experimental jazz riffs with Deter's lyrics. One morning, though, she woke up with a song in her head about "Buffalo Bill and his rodeo show." It was far more direct and

musically accessible than anything they had been working on, but it had sprung almost fully formed into her consciousness.

"I decided I would write an Americana album and I would write ten songs in one week," she says. The resulting album, *Mudshow*, so impressed Weber that he chose to shelve their co-written *Beautiful Money* in favor of Deter's creation. They gave the album to renowned local musicians Slat Klug and Carrie Newcomer. Deter says Klug's response was, "I think you may have written my favorite song ever," referring to "Abigayle's Song"; and Newcomer's husband, Robert Meitus, an entertainment lawyer and musician, told her, "There are one hundred people I know who need to hear this."

#### ON THE ROAD WITH CARRIE

Newcomer had the most astonishing response of all, Deter says. "She said, 'Come on the road with me.' And she literally gave me the how-to primer, and said, 'Here's how I did it, and here's how you're going to do it.'"

It was during that tour that Belgian music journalist Benny Metton found *Mudshow* on CD Baby, the online music-distribution service. "He wrote to me, and said, 'You have to send this to every chart reporter in Europe. This is a masterpiece and the world needs to hear this.' He gave me all the names and addresses. And then all of a sudden all these journalists are like, 'Who are you? Where did you come from?' I got

emails from two record companies saying, 'We want to talk about signing you.' What they were offering me was a lot. So I went with the Dutch label [Corazong Records]."

On the European tour that followed, she skyrocketed to the top of the Americana charts. But though she was no longer in her own way, she soon ran into the limiting factor of market forces.

Ten years earlier, Deter might have been part of the neo-folk revival that made Sarah McLachlan and the Indigo Girls famous. But in the age of Clear Channel Radio and Pandora and iTunes, with their carefully categorized genres and sub-genres, there's little record-store browsing to allow customers to discover something new. Deter, who doesn't fit comfortably into any existing genre—some songs are bluesy, others country, folk, rock, or even Celtic—presents a problem for reviewers and marketers.

"Everyone says the same thing: 'Have you ever just thought about going straight folk or straight Americana?'" she says. "And there are times when I think, 'I'm just going to write a country album about trains and my momma in jail and it's going to be good and I'll open up a whole different market.' But if I were to do that, I don't feel like it would be a work of integrity if I were writing

something that contains statements that I myself would never make, sentences I'd never speak."

Instead, Deter followed up *Mudshow* with a 2007 album inspired by her own surroundings. *Cover Their Eyes* contains songs like "Go Ahead and Wait," a study of teenagers' fluctuating moods; "Anemic Moon," based on a poem by her biological father; and "Pretty Horses Run," about her wish to see Bloomington preserved as it is today.

That same year, she collaborated with Newcomer, Grimm, Roznowski, and White to produce an album and stage show based on *Wilderness Plots*, a book of short stories by acclaimed local author Scott Russell Sanders. The show aired on PBS and continues to tour nationally. She also produced a holiday album, *The Silver Wood: Wintersongs*.

In 2009 she was invited to participate in the Darwin Song House, a seven-day songwriting event in Charles Darwin's hometown of Shrewsbury, Wales, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth. The show and subsequent album were covered extensively by the British media.

The year 2010 saw the release of *Chocolate Paper Suites*, an album that

Stanford Professor Rodney Taylor praises as "musically, lyrically, intertextually layered" and the British *Maverick* magazine calls "exquisite"; the album's release prompted the music blog Direct Current to describe Deter as "ever-so-amazing."

Along the way, Deter has shared stages with Suzanne Vega, Aaron Neville, Loudon Wainwright III, Jakob Dylan, and other top-tier performers. But to much of the listening public, she still remains under the radar.

"I'll be honest, I want more recognition than this," she admits. "But I also have this kind of faith that when you least expect it, things do happen, really strange things do happen. Somebody may stumble on something and want to record it and make it huge. Somebody may stumble on me at some point, and say, 'I've got this idea for something.' But if they never do and I never moved into a higher income level or some sort of phenomenal world recognition, that would never make me feel like I had failed. I am dead honest about that."

The driving force for Deter remains the same as it was before she ever let anyone hear her music. When she's composing, she says, she accesses something beyond herself that is pure and right and infinite. Though she's not religious, she refers to this state as "burning in the holy pipeline." That experience of transcendence is both her motivation to continue writing and her deterrent from "writing for the market"—or, in fact, writing anything other than what springs from that source.



#### KRISTA'S HOLIDAY SHOW

Deter's album *The Silver Wood: Wintersongs* contains this and several other songs that could someday become Christmas standards. She will be performing a number of those songs at her 6th annual holiday concert, 7:30 pm, Thursday, December 15, at the Bloomington/Monroe County Convention Center. The show is titled "Once Upon a Time" and is a benefit for the charity Giving Back to Africa. Admission is \$15 for adults and \$10 for students and children.

LEFT: Weber and Deter rehearse at home.



"The thing I always want is that artistic high of when you hit the zone and you're saying something that in no other circumstances could you say, and it all comes out through you; you're the conduit. Basically what I live for are those minutes," she says.

"And from that perspective, whatever I manage to speak in this lifetime that touches somebody, if it is one person or a thousand, is that really so vastly different? People have come up to me and said the most lovely things: 'This song touched me in this way, it got me through the death of my son.' There's no greater compliment someone could give you. I think those are the moments that I feel most successful.

"And really," she adds, "it's all been pretty freaking amazing so far." ✨