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Laura Burhenn

By Nicole Spiridakis, Photos by D. Goren

Please don't compare her to the other female singers out there—D.C. singer-songwriter Laura Burhenn has a sound all her own.

"When I play keyboard or piano or Wurlitzer or whatever it is I play, and sing my songs, it's easy for people to look at me and say 'Oh, it's another Tori Amos or another Fiona Apple or Joni Mitchell' or whoever it is they're familiar with," she says. "And I definitely don't want that."

Though she does cite Amos as an early influence, especially on her 1999 initial "really raw" album, Burhenn has moved away from solo piano and voice, choosing instead to play with other musicians on her newest record, "Wanderlust".

Released in May, Burhenn produced the album herself on her independent label, Laboratory Records.

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"It feels really good to listen to it and know ... that I did it," she recalls later. "And that it's this way for a reason."

It's a dreamy, piano-laden collection punctuated with electric guitars, drums, cellos and Wurlitzer organ. The album includes some reworkings of her earlier songs, as well as new material, and a cover of Leonard Cohen's "Chelsea Hotel No. 2."

A pianist since the age of five, Burhenn enrolled as a music performance major at the Catholic University—where she now works—and then composition, before settling on an English degree.

"I just wanted to write songs," she says, remembering being dissatisfied with some of the limitations of the music program.

The Hagerstown, Md., native hooked up with her band last winter prior to recording the album. Burhenn says she met drummer Dan Perriello and guitarist Mark Lewis a few years ago at an outdoor festival, and later sang with them on an album. Now, they've returned the favor. Charlie Loudermilk plays bass.

Burhenn plays on a Yamaha 88-key keyboard at her shows, and uses an electric piano at home, though she'd rather have the real thing.

"I would love to have a plethora of old vintage pianos and organs to take out, but I don't have the money or manpower or the biceps to do that right now," she laughs.

Burhenn foresees a future spent supporting herself exclusively through music, and says she is working toward that reality.

"I can't not do it, I can't not write," she says about her music. "It's the one medium where I feel I can say exactly what I mean. I haven't reached the realization of what I'm capable of, so I keep working toward that."

Catch Burhenn monthly in the District in venues such as the Velvet Lounge, or in November out west in Los Angeles. Every month or so, she'll