

Beatle Brushes. To Liverpool With Love: An interview with Suzahn Fiering by Shilo Martin

Suzahn Fiering's Beat Le Jazz is the best of the Beatles infused with a Jazz flair. In a new project, Suzahn has cleverly created original arrangements of some of her favorite Beatles tunes, infusing new life into this brilliant music. Suzahn's masterful guitar work and inviting vocals ease the listener into a jazz sensibility while taking them to a familiar place.

I am very happy to sit down with the super talented Jazz/Blues artist, guitarist, vocalist and composer, Suzahn Fiering. Suzahn is a long time resident of Nashville who grew up in New York. Suzahn enjoys a long and fascinating career in the music industry from touring the world as an artist and educator, to engineer and producer, working the corporate side, and composing music for film, TV., and the stage. But I am here to talk to Suzahn about, The Beatles.

Shilo: You write, play, and sing in a variety of styles ranging from Jazz, to Blues, to Americana, and even Gypsy Jazz. Tell me how jazz in particular impacts your current project, JazzeBeats.

Suzahn: I created JazzeBeats to combine my two great musical loves; Jazz & the Beatles. I know it's been done before but I hope to put my own unique stamp on it with this project. Playing Jazz guitar gives me a large and diverse musical pallet to use over the Beatles repertoire.

Shilo: To say you've had a lot of Beatle encounters, many of them random, is an understatement. The focus of this interview is to unpack how this, Ticket to Ride, happened. When did you first become a Beatles fan?

Suzahn: I was 13 when someone gave me used copies of Rubber Soul and Abbey Road and I became obsessed with the songs and the sound. I spent hours trying to figure out the meaning of the lyrics, and dropped the needle on that vinyl thousands of times to learn the songs on guitar. It was clear, even back then, that music was what I was doing with my life. And I guess, my early Beatles obsession is what started me on the path to a series of random Beatles brushes. I now know there was something karmically attached to my experiences.

Shilo: Beatle brushes, I like that. It sounds like a thing.

Suzahn: I went to high school, in White Plains, New York and was lucky enough to have a music teacher who noticed my passion for the Beatles. She assigned me a research paper on them. I quickly became the Beatles authority in my school, sealing my fate as a life-long fan.

Shilo: Ah, the ever important music teacher having a positive influence on a young mind. There are never enough of those. What happened next?

Suzahn: After moving to New York City to pursue a career as a musician and audio engineer/producer, I was asked by Gloria Steinem (yes, that Gloria Steinem) to play a fundraiser at Yoko Ono's home. It was surreal to find myself in the Dakota, in Yoko's apartment. I found Yoko to be a warm person and committed to women's and human rights. Little did I know, it was foreshadowing in my script.

Shilo: Foreshadowing in the script, how's that?

Suzahn: I ended up teaching Sean Lennon who I met through Leona Naess, Diana Ross's step daughter. That was a random connection but it didn't hurt that I had played a concert in Yoko's home a few years back. I brought Sean into the studio in Manhattan, and taught him songwriting and recording techniques. He was a teenager at this point and was really sweet and exceptionally talented. I had a beat up old car and the radio had been stolen out of it. He thought that was the coolest thing. He was like a sponge, and picked things up really quickly. Hopefully I helped him alleviate some of the pressures of being John Lennon's son. I think those early years were hard because folks expected him to automatically know what to do in the studio despite just starting his musical career.

Shilo: That is amazing. Did it feel like a big deal at the time?

Suzahn: Not really. To be honest, I was so happy to have the work. In New York in those days, being a celebrity wasn't as big a deal as it is now. There was no instant access through social media. New Yorkers left celebrities alone for the most part.

Shilo: Is this around the time you first went to Liverpool?

Suzahn: Yeah. After working with Sean and Yoko, I began to think maybe there's something to this, but I had no idea how to pay for it. So when Leona Naess' mother offered to fly me to London to teach Leona and help her set up her home studio, I jumped at the chance. I took the train to Liverpool and had no idea what I was doing. I stayed at the old Adelphi Hotel which looked like the inside of a cruise ship, was in desperate need of renovating, and had an unusual, musty smell. It was not the vibrant city center of the Liverpool we know today. This was Liverpool in the early 90's so the streets were not well lit and there were lots of empty buildings. Despite this, I decided to go for a walk and look for the old boys school where John, George and Paul met. It was pretty scary and I had no idea where I was going (this was way before Google Maps). And of course, it started to drizzle. Just as I began to worry, I found myself on a street called Hope. There was one tiny, dimly lit café in the area, and it had a closed sign on it. I wasn't sure what to do.

There were cars parked vertically in front of a little café, and their license plates were facing me. The first plate had a series of letters and numbers followed by the letters, NOT. The second plate had a series of letters and numbers followed by letters, LOS. The third plate had a series of numbers and the letter T, followed by YET. Naturally, I took that as a sign and summoned up my courage and knocked on the café door.

An older woman dressed in a grey overcoat and a headscarf with a thick Irish accent came to the door and gruffly barked that they were closed. I told her I was looking for the boy's school and she immediately warmed up. She mentioned my funny accent and realized I must have come a long way. She told me the old boys school was just down the road. She said I should get a good look at it because someone had bought it. She hoped they were renovating it and not tearing it down. She said, it was a landmark. "Here's hoping the old place is, not lost yet". I stared at her blankly in disbelief, thanked her and made my way past the dark and mysterious Cathedral to the boys school. It was a huge old stone building that was obviously in really bad shape. I thought, this place is gonna take a lot of love. Years later I realized that old building was, "not lost yet", and I hadn't been either. The whole experience had a mystical quality to it. I later wrote a song about that that first experience called, Voices in Liverpool. It is on my Dreaming Americana album.

Shilo: Yes, I've heard it. It's a great song. It sounds like that first trip to Liverpool made a big impression. So you went back to New York, and the Beatle brushes continued?

Suzahn: Thank you. Well, there was yet another random occurrence. As I started to get recognition for my songs, I was asked to write jingles. When I arrived to the music house to record them, much to my surprise, Julian Lennon was there already working. There were several work stations set up in a big room. We were stationed next to each other. I couldn't believe it. He was working on one jingle spot and I was working on another and we were sharing a drum programmer. It was really fun watching him do his thing. He was boiling over with talent and skill. Then we all ended up hanging out at the Bitter End in Greenwich Village.

Shilo: So at some point you moved to Nashville and there were quite a few random Beatle brushes there too.

Suzahn: The hits just kept coming. I was working at an AIDS charity in Nashville and I happened to strike up a conversation with a woman in the ladies room who told me she was a photographer and videographer. We exchanged numbers, she showed me samples of her very impressive work and she agreed to shoot some promo videos for me. Long after working together and becoming friends, she confessed to me she was Ringo Starr's ex partner of 8 years, a world-renowned Rock and Roll Photographer, and book author. I confessed to her that I was working at LIPA and had worked with Paul. We both got a huge laugh out of it. Here name is of course, Nancy Lee Andrews. I mentioned Nancy to Paul at an event and he spoke very highly of her. He asked me to send her his best, and said that I have a good friend in Nancy. Nancy introduced me to May Pang at an event in Nashville and we have also enjoyed a friendship.

Shortly after that, I was invited to the Nashville Film Festival to see, "Good Old Freda", a brilliant documentary based on the life of long-time Beatles secretary, Freda Kelly. I had no idea Freda was there at the viewing. A friend dragged me over and introduced us. As we chatted we realized we had many Liverpudlians in common. Freda has come to my shows in Liverpool and is one of the funniest and kindest people I know. I am happy to report she is still very close to Ringo and his family.

Shilo: You've had such a broad array of Beatle brushes. You also got to know Geoff Nugent from the Undertakers, and the legendary Jackie Lomax who was signed to Apple and produced by George Harrison?

Suzahn: Yes, guilty as charged. Oh Geoff, what a lovely man he was. That was another random Nashville brush. I used to regularly attend an invite only guitar jam in Nashville. We would play, then eat and drink, then play some more and so on. It was usually a small gathering, no more than 10 folks made up of our regular players and a few folks stopping by while on tour. On one occasion there were a few guys I didn't know. But as soon as I heard one of them talk I blurted out, "You are a bloody Scouser!" A Scouser is an affectionate name for someone from Liverpool. He responded, "That's right, what's it to ya?" That was Geoff Nugent from, The Undertakers. And in typical Scouser fashion, Geoff had a big kind heart and a brilliant sense of humor. We became fast friends and the next time I went to Liverpool, he introduced me to his friends and always made me feel welcome. We had some memorable nights jamming and partying, Geoff came to my gigs and I went to his. At one point, Geoff recommended a jam in Liverpool he thought I might like, hosted by his good friend, saxophonist Brian Jones, who I came to find out later, was in, The Undertakers. Brian and I are still friends and I try to make a point of seeing him on every trip.

I was introduced to Jackie Lomax in Liverpool. through my dear, dear friend and music promoter extraordinaire, Geni Lamb of Parr Jazz. It was wonderful to meet Jackie and jam with him. He was a legend. Sadly, he died shortly after that. Geni was heartbroken. It is so hard to watch these wonderful folks, and legends age out. I feel so lucky to have shared even a little part of their stories with them.

Shilo: So how did the Paul McCartney Beatles brushes happen?

Suzahn: It was another random thing. A few years after I moved to Nashville, I took a job as the International Events Manager at Gibson Musical Instruments. One day there was a call from a company called LIPA. Nobody else wanted to field the call so I took it and asked how I could help. It turns out LIPA stands for, The Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts, an accredited university program that specializes in entertainment education. LIPA was founded by none other than Sir Paul McCartney and super star arts educator Mark Featherstone-Witty. McCartney and George Martin had bought the old boys school, and Paul and Mark Featherstone-Witty had turned it into LIPA. I immediately flashed back to the trashed out building I had seen years before and couldn't wait to see what it had become. And of course, I was eager to help.

Paul and Mark were looking for outside funding. Mark asked if I could come to Liverpool but I couldn't get approval from my boss to pay for the trip. Steve Cropper, who wrote, Dock of the Bay and Midnight Hour, was running a travel agency. I told him what was up and he fronted me the money and bought my ticket without even hesitating. I flew to London and made my way up to Liverpool stopping along the way, raising money, securing sponsorships, getting instruments donated, and generating some press.

Shilo: Wow, so it turned out to be more than a brush. And that happened because you wanted to help a random person on the phone.

Suzahn: Yeah, I guess so. I never really thought of it like that, but that is how it happened.

Shilo: So did you stay I touch with them after that?

Suzahn: No, I lost touch with them. I had gone back to engineering and producing at Sound Wave Studio on Music Row in Nashville. We started to record my original Jazz album, "Paris Without His Kiss", in the off hours. My boss, Richard Adler encouraged me to start touring as a jazz artist and suggested I teach some master classes along the way to make some extra cash. So I called the LIPA music department and they hired me to come teach. They had no idea I had helped the school years before. And I didn't think it was a big deal. As fate would have it, I bumped in Mark Featherstone-Witty who gave me a big hug and told me that the work I did really got the ball rolling for further donations and that I played a big part after all. I was shocked! He invited me back to graduation and introduced me to Paul. I became a regular guest instructor at LIPA.

Shilo: So you were going back to Liverpool to play and teach at LIPA, and I understand you taught at other universities there as well. And at some point you also connected to George Martin too, correct?

Suzahn: Yes. The George Martin thing happened almost by accident. At one event at LIPA, I was told to wait in a specific room for some sponsorship guests to arrive. But when I got there, the room was empty except for Sir George Martin. I couldn't believe it! He immediately struck me as a formidable figure, looming large like a lion in winter. I was really nervous but struck up a conversation. First we chatted about the weather and then about LIPA. He seemed genuinely interested in my experience as an instructor, and my educational viewpoints. He was pleased to hear how special a place I thought LIPA was. He remarked that it sounded like money well spent, and I whole heartedly agreed. And at long last, he looked down and smiled. I was like melted butter.

Shilo: That must have been a special moment meeting the fifth Beatle, as he was often called. So how did you end up on the, "Out There Tour", with McCartney?

Suzahn: After a few years of teaching at LIPA and attending events, Paul and Mark invited me to co-host events on McCartney's American leg of his, "Out There Tour", to raise money for renovating the old arts institute that John attended. This included stops at Bonnaroo, just outside of Nashville, and Nationals Stadium in Washington DC.

Shilo: So you were working directly with Macca? What was that like?

Suzahn: Spending time with Paul in a working environment, and getting to know his incredible team was life-changing. It's a good sign when you've had the same employees for 20 years and they speak highly of you. They trusted me to do my job, expected me to show up with a smile, and give 150%. It was hard, but I loved every second of it. It was an amazing experience. I learned a lot and thankfully, I raised a ton of money. I met my close friend, Rose Ann Frontero Belluso through that tour. She was working with Ringo.

Shilo: And you won an award at LIPA. Was that for your fundraising work?

Suzahn: Yes, and also for teaching songwriting and music business at LIPA. Paul, Mark and LIPA presented me with the, "Honored Friend Award". Man, that was a great day. I gave my speech and Paul was beaming. I was pinching myself because McCartney was looking at me like a proud papa. I was overcome with emotion and gratitude. I couldn't believe it was happening. When he gave me the award he whispered, 'Great job'. Being a musician is hard, but sometimes when I feel defeated, I think about that moment.

Shilo: But that wasn't the only Beatle brush you had that day.

Suzahn: No, Giles Martin, George Martin's son who is a brilliant producer and multi Grammy winner, and works with Paul, was winning an award too. And so was one of my all time favorite actors, BAFTA award-winner Samuel West who also won an award. It was nothing short or remarkable.

Shilo: I can't imagine what the energy in that room must have been like. I would have been happy being a fly on the wall. Earlier you mentioned Ringo. How did you brush with him?

Suzahn: I was hoping it would happen eventually, but I wasn't sure how. Just before COVID stopped the world, Rose Ann Frontero Belluso and I put together a meet and greet for my friend Emmy Lou Harris and her daughter, to meet Ringo backstage at the Ryman Auditorium here in Nashville. I had just returned from Liverpool the day before where I saw Paul, hung out with Freda, jammed with Brian Jones, and played a bunch of great gigs. I had a lot to talk about with Ringo and he was really excited to hear how his friends back home were doing. It was wonderful! It was a treat to finally meet Ringo in the flesh. We had a blast!

Shilo: I can see how looking back, you feel like it was all somehow all karmically connected. What is your takeaway from all of this?

Suzahn: Honestly, looking back it seems hard to believe. But I guess I am the Beatles Brush girl, and I am so grateful. I know it doesn't mean much to people that are not true Beatles fans. And I know a lot of folks want to meet celebrities just because they are celebrities, and often pay a hefty price to do so. I am humbled to have had these experiences and I am beyond grateful for the profound musical effect the Beatles have made on my life as a person and as a musician.

Shilo: Talking to Suzahn, has given this Beatles fan a renewed sense of appreciation for all the working musicians out there, and the things that inspire them. I am hoping I can start my own streak of Beatle Brushes. Maybe Suzahn's luck will brush off on me.

Shilo Martin is a freelance writer and dedicated Beatles fan.