

kool katja

KATJA RIECKERMANN WOWS CROWDS AS ROD STEWART'S RIGHT-HAND SAX

WHEN I MEET KATJA RIECKERMANN at a sunny spot in West Hollywood, it's less than 24 hours before she has to be on a plane to Belfast, Ireland. She has a date to keep with Rod Stewart—a three-month long date that will see her jetting across most of Europe as the resident sax player in Stewart's band.

Despite her hectic pre-tour schedule, Katja (Kat-ya), a striking blonde with a lilting German accent, has generously agreed to an interview.

She rattles off a list of tour destinations. "Belfast, Dublin, London, Manchester, Birmingham. We'll be in England for about a month and then Sweden, Denmark, Germany..." She pauses on Germany for a moment, thinking of her family in her hometown of Hamburg.

"They are so proud," she says of her parents. "When we're in Germany, they come to all the shows. They drive everywhere. And it's cool for them to have two kids doing this, out there playing with famous [bands]."

The second "kid" is her older brother Ralph Rieckermann, who was the bass player for the Scorpions for 12 years and is now a film composer in Hollywood. Ralph is part of the reason Katja became interested in music in her teens, despite her well-meaning parents' desire for her to go into a more "practical" field.

"I decided for my 21st birthday, 'I'm just gonna start playing the saxophone.' I'd never played an instrument before that. I'd always wanted to, but my parents didn't allow it... They just wanted me to become something serious, like a lawyer or a secretary."

To make up for years of lost practice time, Katja dedicated herself to studying for hours each day.

"I started practicing like crazy." She laughs at the memory. "Everyone thought I was crazy, too. 'You're, like, too old. Don't waste your time!'"

Her diligence paid off in the long run, but it was something of a Herculean effort to get to where she is now. After some initial success in Germany as a member of a saxophone quintet, as well as playing with other bands at larger venues, she turned her eyes to the U.S. She moved to Los Angeles in December of 1998.

She started off playing gigs with Jeff Goldblum's jazz band—The Mildred Snitzer Orchestra—as well as some other local bands, but by 2001 Katja felt misplaced and

"Can you come for an audition tomorrow?"

Katja went in for an audition that day and, evidently, swept them off their feet. She learned on the spot that they wanted her in the band.

"They told me, 'Well, the good news is you got the gig, bad news is we're not rehearsing anymore.' So I had to learn the whole show without rehearsals."

Katja had three days to learn the entire show—not to mention organize her life—before the band set out on a three-month U.S.

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financially strained. "It was kind of a hard year for me. [And] I was in a relationship that didn't work out very well, so I was kind of unhappy. And then 9/11 happened."

The convergence of problems in her personal life with the global tragedy of 9/11 became almost too much for her. "I was really devastated," she says. "I was actually thinking of moving back to Germany."

What Rieckermann couldn't know at the time was that a chance meeting on September 10, 2001, would turn out to pay off in a big way. "I ran into the musical director for Rod Stewart, actually the night before 9/11. I had met him before and he said, 'Hey, aren't you a saxophone player?'"

Katja didn't think anything of the meeting at first. After all, Rod Stewart's band already had a female sax player. But the musical director asked for Katja's promo CD, just in case the band needed a backup or a replacement. "So I gave him that, and then I forgot about it."

She remembers, "And then about two weeks later I got the call from him, asking,

tour. Armed with nothing but a live tape from previous shows, she practiced for three days straight. To make the difficulty of her task almost comical, she couldn't use her own instruments to rehearse. She had to send her saxophones ahead separately on the trucks. "So I kept my mouthpieces and I had to borrow saxophones from friends."

She passed the test of her first tour with flying colors, though she admits to having to battle nerves. Three and a half years later, Katja is a seasoned tour musician, but she still has the occasional bout of stage fright, particularly when the show is broadcast on TV, like *The Tonight Show* or *Late Show With David Letterman*. "I'm still nervous when we do those," she admits. "And I hate to watch myself on TV, can't stand it."

The quality of the light grows warmer and the traffic grows louder as our meeting draws to a close. Katja says she has to keep an appointment, then head home to pack.

After years of touring with Rod Stewart—not to mention playing with the hugely



“YOU HAVE TO STAY IN SHAPE WHEN YOU’RE ON STAGE,” KATJA SAYS.

equipment

INSTRUMENTS

ALTO: Selmer Mark VI
 TENOR: Selmer Mark VI and Cannonball Tenor
 BARITONE: Selmer Balanced Action

MOUTHPIECES

ALTO: Oleg #7
 TENOR: Guardala #9
 BARITONE: Yanagisawa #9

REEDS

Bari Plastic Reeds
 (Katja is allergic to cane)

REED STRENGTHS

ALTO: Soft
 TENOR: Medium
 BARITONE: Soft

successful country duo, Brooks & Dunn—Katja, who just turned 40, is ready to break out on her own.

Of her future plans, she says, “I’m working on a solo project right now. I’ve been doing that for a long time, but it was always hard for me to find the right team, the right producer. But now I think it could really go somewhere. I also have my own band; we play at the Baked Potato, a club in L.A. It’s a five piece band—groovy, jazz, edgy, funky. I plan to

musical influences

DAVID SANBORN * CANNONBALL ADDERLEY
 JOHN COLTRANE * JOE HENDERSON

HOBBIES

Catch Katja Rieckermann on these DVDs:

• Rod Stewart:
 The Great American Songbook, 2003

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www.katjarieckermann.com

HOBBIES

hiking • biking • swimming • in-line
skating • horseback riding

The Great American
Songbook, 2003

• Rod Stewart: One
Night Only—Live at
Royal Albert Hall, 2004