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Laney Jones and the Spirits.

Keeping up with ...

Laney Jones and the Spirits at The Kate Sunday

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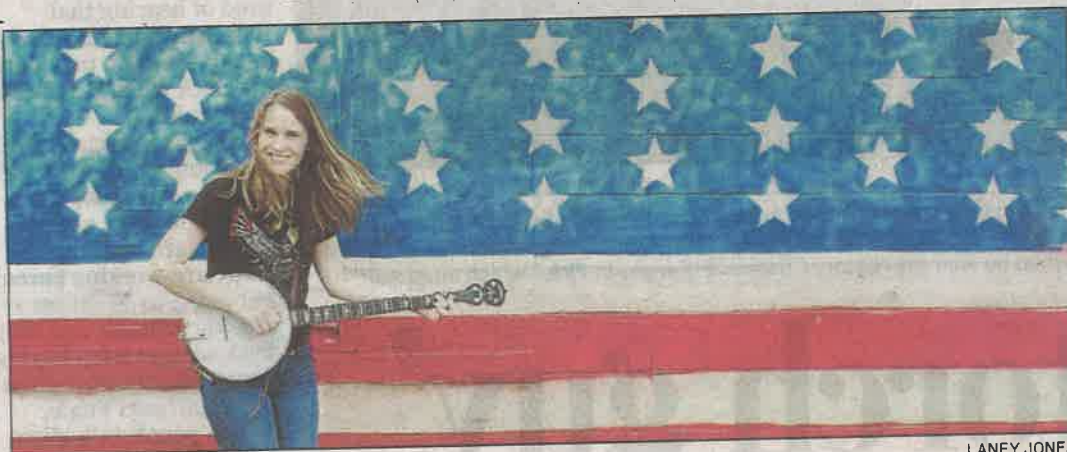
OLD SAYBROOK » When Laney Jones learned in 2013 that she would be playing two songs in a vocal masters session for Alison Krauss, the most awarded singer in Grammy history, she was so nervous she didn't sleep or eat for two days beforehand. Arguably, that's only natural. Especially considering that the 23-year-old, who will appear at The Kate with the Spirits on Aug. 23, would be performing not just for the famed country-bluegrass musician but also for celebrated soprano Renee Fleming, curator of the Masters Session of American Voices.

Not to mention in front of an audience at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center. And representing the prestigious Berkeley School of Music, no less. Oh, and the masters session would be broadcast in the PBS series Great Performances.

Of course the Mount Dora, Fla. native with a voice, according to the L.A. Record, "like honey and whiskey," was already attending Berkeley on scholarship for songwriting and bluegrass studies. And earlier that year she won the coveted Grey Fox-Bill Vernon Memorial Scholarship for emerging artists involved in bluegrass.

Still, what's perhaps most impressive about the blues-bluegrass singer-songwriter is that, just four years ago, when a friend suggested she transfer to Berkeley, she was confounded. "What is that?" she recalled asking in a telephone interview from Lancaster, Penn. where she and her band were on tour.

At the time, she was on her way to getting a degree in International Business at Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla.



LANEY JONES

Everybody's darling: Laney Jones is not only a critically acclaimed singer-songwriter, but a multi-instrumentalist with chops.

She'd grown up with "non-musician parents" who didn't take her to concerts and she'd dabbled in musical theater but "not all that seriously," as she put it.

A few months into college, though, she "got really bored," she said. "I didn't love the major and I didn't know what I wanted to do so, from there, I started teaching myself guitar." One night she wrote a song. "And something clicked."

From guitar, she toyed around on the ukulele and then borrowed a friend's banjo for a night. She felt an instant connection and traded in the mandolin she got for her birthday for a banjo.

That was when it started: the scholarship to Berkeley; the masters session with Alison Krauss at the Kennedy Center; and the feature on the PBS' Great Performances.

"That was my first big break," she said of the latter. Evidently so.

In March 2014, she was selected from more than 2,000 submissions as one of six winners in Belk department stores' Southern Music Showcase, earning her pre-show and side-stage spots support-

ing Lady Antebellum, Tim McGraw, and Keith Urban, among others.

That wasn't it. In July, she took home the grand prize at the renowned 40th Eddie's Attic Songwriter Shootout, thanks to crowd-pleasing performances of selections from her critically adored 2013 album "Golden Road," and in September the Grand Prize in the John Lennon Songwriting Contest.

And four months after that, having been named a finalist in the NewSong Contest, produced in partnership with NPR's Mountain Stage, she took the stage of Lincoln Center to perform for the grand prize.

Asked how it was that in so short a time as a musician she had played at both the Kennedy and Lincoln Centers, the multi-instrumentalist, whose live performance highlights her chops on banjo, ukulele, tenor guitar and harmonica, insisted she just got lucky, as she had with the other honors.

"Then again," she said, "if it's named after a president, you know it's a big deal."

Critics agree. Referring to

her distinctive mix of blues and bluegrass, the influential music blog Ryan's Smashing Life observed that "the notes of her music are a dedication to merging two worlds in music and a little magic that makes me think she will make something of herself. Her banjo play is outstanding. Her voice is angelic."

As does Alison Krauss. "This is beautiful," she said on PBS's Great Performances of Jones's songs. "She's onto something original, as an artist she's onto something new... You got it going on and I can't wait to see what you're gonna do next."

As for Laney Jones, the nerves evaporated once she got on the Kennedy Center stage.

"I just felt this calm come over me," she said. "Like it was where I was supposed to be."

Laney Jones and the Spirits will perform at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center at 7 p.m. on Aug. 23, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. For tickets and information, visit thekate.org or call 877-503-1286.