

Saved by the Queen Bee

Blues music filled in the empty spaces during a hard winter. *By* AMY ZURZOLA QUINN '94 *Com*

THE EARLY MONTHS OF 1994 EXIST IN MY MEMORY as a kind of Dark Ages. That winter, ice storms shut down nearly everything except the University Park campus. So many wintry systems dumped so many inches onto State College that walking down Beaver Avenue meant negotiating sidewalks reduced to narrow paths cut through walls of snow.

In that frigid time, as my senior year began to tilt toward graduation, the weeks drifted one into the other like the languid chords of a blues song, restless and anticipatory. Ahead lay all the uncertainty that comes with the adult life I wanted so fiercely. It felt like the snowflakes falling from that watery gray sky were coated with a depressant.

It's no exaggeration to say that two things got me through: *The Daily Collegian* and the Queen Bee, **Tonya Browne '85 Com**. Browne was the lead singer of one of the area's most popular bar acts, Queen Bee and the Blue Hornet Band. I was a baby journalist at the *Collegian*, trying to balance the obligations of my newspaper job with my need to go to class and, y'know, graduate. My days were classes, my evenings were the *Collegian*, but several nights each week were with Queen Bee.

I wrote an article about the band, and got to spend a little time with Browne. We sat in the kitchen of her little house in Lemont, drinking herbal tea as she told me about growing up in Brooklyn, coming to Penn State to study medicine or biology, and instead ending up in a band. By then, it was already legendary, how Browne had met guitarist Mark Ross working at the long-gone Brickhouse bar. How he'd heard her singing while she washed glasses, how he'd spun her old-time blues records and convinced her to join the band.

They played together for more than a decade; their last show was in 1999. Two years later, Browne died,

unexpectedly, at age 36, from a complication of diabetes. She was naturally shy, hardly the ballsy diva she portrayed onstage; she described standing behind a microphone as akin to wearing armor. Back then, I was only beginning to realize how my reporter's notebook was my protective shield.

Inevitably, that brutal winter ended, and so did my time at Penn State. I couldn't make it back to State College for the band's last show, but by then, my adult life had grown into the empty spaces I'd once filled with beer and the blues. Lucky Queen Bee fans had our out-of-print CDs to hang on to, but these were the days before everybody in the bar was holding up a cell-phone camera. You kind of had to be there.

Occasionally I'd plug their name into YouTube, hoping a smart and sober person had brought along a camcorder back in the day. For years, nothing. Then —jackpot!—a series of 16 clips from a 1990 festival performance. I lost an entire afternoon last fall watching those videos, forwarding the links to friends who'd weathered that winter along with the Queen

Bee. One remarked how long it'd been since he had felt truly nostalgic; our real-time age makes it tough to forget about something long enough to really miss it.

It wasn't just that ticklish joy of hearing Tonya wail on "Too Tall To Mambo" again. It all came back—that dark winter, my own anxiety, and how her voice had smoothed over the rough edges of those icy months. I wept for Tonya Browne, gone too soon. Then I blushed, remembering those irresponsible, smoky nights, packed onto the dance floor at Cafe 210 or the Rathskeller or the Brewery. All that beer, all those cigarettes, all those headaches.

All that music.

All these years later, all still totally worth it.

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