

August 10, 2012--

Artists are a product of their environment.

If you believe that, you have to believe Jan Terri.

Terri is a 53-year-old pop-country vocalist who has never strayed far from her native Franklin Park where she grew up in a crafty world of factory workers, neon motel signs and the occasional mobster.

She emerged in the early 1990s Mannheim Road scene when she sang country at the Possum Pub in Melrose Park. During this period, Mannheim Road was a colorful boulevard of dreams that included more country at the Sundowners RR Ranch, Nashville North, the Stay Out All Night Disco in Stone Park and a few rock clubs thrown in for good measure.

Terri, born Janice Spagnolia, absorbed it all. She made two DIY albums, 1993's "Baby Blues" and 1994's "High Risk," that incorporated country, disco and pop. The track "My Little Brother" from "High Risk" combined the traditional "Frere Jacques" with surf guitar and Frankie Ford's "Sea Cruise." It was more than an original sound. Terri's pure but slightly bent vocal delivery caught the ear of hipsters and the outsider music community.

Then she vanished.

In 2002 she was reported dead from ovarian cancer.

In truth, Terri retreated to take care of her aging parents, who died in the 2000s. She has no siblings.

The 5-foot dynamo returns to the scene Sunday singing in front of the all-female punk band Summer Addition at Reggie's, 2105 S. State. Her performance will be taped for the documentary "Jan Terri Badder Than Ever" that director Darren Hacker hopes to have ready for SXSW 2013.

Her lovingly dated 1990s music videos celebrate Chicago as a backdrop (even Marshall Field's!) as much as they ignore sexed-up MTV flash. Not surprisingly, the videos are enjoying a major rebirth on YouTube.

Terri's uncanny sense of a pop hook blends with innocence and kitsch that separates her from other well-known outside performers like Chicago's late Wesley Willis and Daniel Johnston. Her music can be listened to over and over.

"I classify myself as CPR," Terri says in her saucy South Jersey-Chicago accent. "Like resuscitation: Country, Pop, Rock. Like Donny and Marie," and Terri sings a snippet of the Osmonds' 1976 hit "A Little Bit Country, A Little Bit Rock 'n' Roll."

"At my show I try to please everybody," she says in the basement lounge of her Harwood Heights high rise. "Except the IRS."

And her "High Risk" record features the rap-zydeco "IRS" where Terri complains how the IRS "drains your pockets and leaves your pockets with a great big hole."

Terri sings and plays drums (think Karen Carpenter) and a little bit of bass.

Her first two records were made with Jerry Soto, who owned Soto Sound Studio at Grand and Halsted in Chicago. Soto worked with acts as diverse as Buddy Guy and the Monkees' Peter Tork. He played guitar and charged up his synthesizer for Terri's bass and drum parts. His ear for '60s pop arrangements cued into Terri's vocals.

Soto died of a heart attack in 2005 at the age of 53.



Terri's "Losing You" video was featured on "Beavis & Butt-Head." When Marilyn Manson was appearing at a Tower Records book signing in Bloomingdale, one of Terri's friends handed off a six-song VHS of her videos to the goth rocker. Manson then hired Terri for a private party in Los Angeles for his girlfriend, actress Rose McGowan, and to open for him (sans band, over tapes) at the Aragon.

"I had no idea who this man Marilyn Manson was," Terri says. "I don't listen to a lot of people's music at times."

Hacker was lead vocalist with FUR, a now-defunct Chicago experimental rock band that backed Terri's occasional live show in the mid-1990s. He's been involved with the Chicago Underground Film Festival since the early 1990s.

"Theoretically, outsider music is that if you're aware of it, by definition you're not it," Hacker explains. "I've had long discussions with musical friends about it. We've landed on both sides of the fence. She has elements of outsider informing her writing and some of the melodies are not trained, so she has an outsider sound at points. But, at no means she is unaware of what she is doing. She is sharp as a musical tack."

Terri graduated from Columbia College in 1983 with a degree in broadcast communications and arts and entertainment management.

Her father moved to Chicago in 1958.

"We were mixed in with what I like to call the 'eyes, nose and throat specialists,'" she says. "Mobsters. My dad did electric work for them and cleaned their swimming pools. I'd go with him sometimes. I was about 5, 6 years old. He did Tony Accardo's pool. Chuckie English [an Outfit jukebox operator]. He did electric work for Sam Giancana."

You have to believe Jan Terri.

Kenneth Piekarski does.

In March the community-run Hollow Earth Radio show invited Terri to close its acclaimed Magma Fest in Seattle. On the Seattle website offtempo.com, Piekarski wrote, "There will be nothing to contest this being the best show I have ever and will ever attend. ...The energy, the joy, how ecstatic everyone was ... it was the most animated I have ever seen an audience."

Fest organizer Garrett Kelly met someone who came from Arkansas to see Terri.

Terri shrugs her shoulders. "I can't put on a major show like Reba's," she says. "In between songs I tell jokes, do imitations." On Sunday, Terri will sing the prophetic "Journey to Mars" from her second album and she will throw dozens of Mars candy bars into the audience. This beautiful artist has lived on her own unadorned planet.

And she, too, is about to be rediscovered.