

Debra Cowan Biography

“She is blessed with a beautiful voice and a deep appreciation for the tradition....each song is a new story to be shared and experienced.”

Ron Olesko, host "Traditions", WFDU, Teaneck, NJ

Debra Cowan was once asked what kind of songs she writes. Her reply? “Bad ones. Besides, there are so many good songs out there written by others and they should be sung.” Her captivating warm alto carries each folk song she chooses with such emotion that you’ll forget that they were written by others. She performs a cappella and with guitar in the great tradition of folk singers like Joan Baez and Judy Collins, with a clear vocal that calls forth the ghosts of long past but can also offer a more modern urban landscape. In her newest release *Fond Desire Farewell*, she’s taken contemporary and time-honored public domain songs and put them in a modern setting.

As a young girl she idolized Julie Andrews and in her teens discovered Jethro Tull and Steeleye Span. At the age of 21 she needed escape out of a small Midwestern town so she threw darts at a map and ended up in northern California where she attended college, sang in bars, and eventually found work as a math teacher. She continued her discovery of folk with English singers like Sandy Denny and Scottish singers like Ray Fisher. Debra started performing in California 35 years ago and began touring in 1998, with frequent stops in the US and UK, from folk clubs to festivals like the New Bedford Summerfest and the Dunbar Folk Festival in Scotland. That led her to where she is now, a full-time singer who bridges the old and new with a refreshing stage presence -- she may start with a moving ballad like “Rainbow,” a profile of one woman’s courage, and segue into “Johnny Be Fair,” about a poor lass who can’t marry anyone in town because, well, she’s related to everyone.

Debra’s shared the stage with artists as varied as Tret Fure and John Roberts and has also collaborated with well-known guitarists Brooks Williams and Bill Cooley (Kathy Mattea). In 2011, she recorded nine songs encompassing the singing part of Marilyn from Si Kahn’s musical production, “Silver Spoon”. She’s performed in many prestigious UK venues and for six months in the late 90’s held a residency at Sandy Bell’s Bar, Edinburgh’s premier folk music pub, following in the footsteps of Scottish musicians such as Dick Gaughan and Aly Bain. She was a formal showcase artist at the International Folk Alliance Conference in 2009 and 2005, and a formal showcase artist at three of the five regional Folk Alliance Conferences. She has performed twice on the nationally syndicated live radio show *Folkstage* (2002), hosted by Rich Warren and *River City Folk* (2008) hosted by Tom May. Her earlier recordings *Dad’s Dinner Pail and Other Songs from the Helen Hartness Flanders Collection* and *The Long Grey Line* brought her praise from both the US and abroad. In 2006 her version of “Walloping Window Blind” was featured in *SingOut!* magazine and also that year, her rendition of Richard Thompson’s “Has He Got a Friend For Me” was included in the Free-Reed Records box set *RT-The Life and Times of Richard Thompson*.

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Debra Cowan • dcowan@DebraCowan.com • www.DebraCowan.com • (508) 662-9746
P.O. Box 1335 • Westborough, MA 01581-6335