



Candye Kane: The Toughest, Tenderest Superhero

by Sossity Chiricuzio, PQ Monthly

Date, 2016

We have lost another champion of justice and joy to the ravages of cancer. Candye Kane, singer/songwriter and activist, was no stranger to Portland. A frequent performer at local blues events and pubs, she made a point of also booking a show at Starky's whenever she could, and though that was just one of hundreds of shows she played each year, she always gave it her all.

Candye loved dykes and drag queens and fags and every flavor of queer. She loved bikers and hustlers and fat folks and all the people that loved them. She loved hedonism and activism and changing the world. She loved pouring out the good stuff all over an audience until they all loved each other, too. She loved music like some folks love air, and breathed it in and out all day.

I've been watching Candye sing and make magic since the mid-90's when I lived in Tucson, and my partner at the time just knew that I'd love her and took me to her show. Having heard a bit about her, I felt confident I could dress up and be appreciated, even though my body is not what society defines

as a 'good body.' I bought a tiny, flouncy, low cut black dress that hugged every curve and roll, pulled on my dancing boots, and found myself a spot right in front of the stage. I wanted her to see me, and have been grateful ever since that she did.

She had a way of looking right at you, in the middle of a joyful, jostling crowd, and make you feel confident, and special, and seen. I was dancing on a foot of air and euphoria by the end of the night, absolutely captivated by this powerhouse who sang about sex and food and love and danger and the redemption of outlaws seeing each other. She stroked her round belly, clearly visible in her sequined dress, with not one ounce of shame, and offered us the chance to love it too. To love our own bodies, and insecurities, and mistakes. To love ourselves.

“You've got to love what you've got, whether it's a little or a lot, and love everybody else's body too if you get the chance. It's worked for me, baby.”

Every song she wrote or covered was for the misfits. Every show a chance to model loving yourself as you are, and loving other people as they are. Every show, over and over, in her powerful voice, resonant with believing every word she said. There was no shtick. No gimmick. Just truth. Just love. Just a voice that could've done opera but chose the blues. Just a voice that could've had a mainstream contract but chose honesty. Just her love of the music, and the world.

She didn't hide her past, either. Finding no shame in her work in porn, which fed her kids and funded her first album and buoyed her confidence in the beauty of her body, she often told a story about a major record producer who said they'd sign her if she'd only “stop talking about sex work and drugs, dress conservatively, lose weight, and suck his dick.” The hypocrisy of the mainstream music industry is what kept her from being famous, kept her touring over 300 days a year and still scrambling to pay bills, kept her voice and message from reaching so many who could've benefited greatly from it.

She refused to compromise her self, or her music. She made her own way, and lifted up other musicians and performers every chance she got. I live and make art in Portland because she invited me and Heather McAllister (founder of Big Burlesque,) to open for her on a portion of her West Coast

tour in 2003. We shimmed our way along the coast, and while it became clear that touring wasn't my thing, it was also very clear that this city was. She always introduced each member in her band, and made sure they had a turn in the spotlight. She was gracious and generous and present and approachable. She had a smile that would turn your knees and words and heart into mush. She never had enough money, or sleep, or time for herself, but she just kept giving.

She spent a considerable amount of time and resources on "United by Music," a non-profit organization that supports talented people with intellectual disabilities and gives them the chance to perform blues and swing music on stage. An international cooperative dream of creating musical extravaganzas "that would promote blues music and brighten hearts, create cooperation, stimulate creativity, and blur the lines between who has a disability and who does not."

Candy was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2008, and though that usually proves fatal within a matter of months, she fought it off for over 8 years and continued to tour and make music and a home for her family and work for her band. She traveled the world with Laura Chavez, her incredible guitarist and constant companion, living for those moments on stage when the music would lift her up and set her alight and let her continue to inspire self confidence. Visibility. Joy.

One of her last shows was in Portland, in December. I am still clinging to the feel of her hand, worn and trembling after her performance, neither of us wanting to say goodbye or let go. I am carrying her voice inside me, folding her wisdom into my own, and walking with my head as high as it was that first show, when she saw me, smiled at me, and sang away my shame.

Find out more: candykane.com.

Sossity Chiricuzio is a writer and columnist based out of Portland, Oregon. She is a regular contributor for PQ Monthly and focuses on social justice, communication, community, and changing the world. You can follow her adventures online @sossitywrites and find more at sossitywrites.com.