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JULY 2020



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Cover photo by Sam Diephuis



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SUZY WILLIAMS AND GERRY FIALKA

Livin' La Vida Local

BY BETTY BAILEY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM DIEPHUIS



Suzy Williams and Gerry Fialka are the sort of eccentric, creative couple you'd expect to meet in a bohemian community like Venice. She is a cabaret singer and songwriter, with an assortment of technicolor wigs, who's honing her video skills during quarantine. He is a filmmaker and storyteller, who organizes free cultural events — from a Finnegans Wake reading club to a toy camera film festival. They live frugally in a converted garage that Fialka has rented for 40 years but their contributions to the community are generous.

Theirs is a simple lifestyle that allows time and resources for such creative pursuits. But, when L.A.'s "stay at home" order went into place, Fialka's carefully crafted plans came to a screeching halt. "Gerry was bereft," says Williams. "He had all these free events that he had advertised and promoted. It was all cancelled in one day."

But Fialka tends to look at the bright side. "Flip what you don't like," he says. "You can turn a breakdown into a breakthrough."

In this case, it was a breakthrough in technology. "He discovered Zoom," says Williams. "And he's been Zooming ever since."

Their cozy home in Venice is a long way from Fialka's hometown of Flint, Michigan. "Dad worked for GM, raised four kids and sent them to college," he says. "Now, every 20th house there is occupied and the others are dilapidated and unattended," he adds, referring to the water quality issues that have plagued the city. "Everybody knew the water was polluted before *Silent Spring* came out. Rachel Carson is a hero of the world because she made people aware of this."

In nearby Ann Arbor, Fialka majored in Modern Art and Film Theory at the University of Michigan. "I studied contemporary art in all forms," he says. "I gravitated to experimental films." He also studied the work



of Frank Zappa. "He was a musician and composer," Fialka says. "Knowing he was a filmmaker, and other things, I could dig deeper into his influences and (see) how he shaped my behavior."

At school, Fialka, also a guitar player, had a chance to meet Zappa while working with film distributors to show movies on campus. After arranging a campus screening of Zappa's work, he got to meet his idol backstage. "I told him I was going to move to Los Angeles to pursue a career in film," Fialka says. "He told me, 'you may just have a job.'"

Before he had even left the university, Fialka had already discovered his future community. "Somebody showed me an L.A. Weekly when I was in Ann Arbor," he says. "I glanced through and saw the film listing for alternative screenings. I love Venice. It fits my mentality perfectly."

Zappa came through with that job and, after college, Fialka headed to California. "I was a production assistant and running his mail order business," he says — a job that taught him to embrace contradiction. "He (Zappa) would say, 'Nothing is what I want.' That's embracing contradictions — that's the human condition."



Williams, a native Californian, came to Venice by way of Boston and New York. At age 17, she moved from her hometown of Gridley, near Chico, CA, to Boston, where her father was working on a Ph.D. at Brandeis. With a record player and no formal training, she describes her musical education as “pure hard knocks.”

“I put on my Columbia-reissued LP and listened to Bessie Smith all day,” she says. “I studied Bessie and I knew all of her songs.” She pauses. “Well, Ok, I knew some of them,” she admits with a laugh. “I learned all the ones I liked.”

“We touched hands and that was it. We fell absolutely madly in love in that instant.”

She describes her teenage self as very obsessive. “I had a coffee pot for a purse,” she says. “I had a big picture hat and a feather boa. I wore that outfit every day for about 6 years.”

Williams put an ad in the Boston newspaper, “Red hot mama looking for a piano player.” It was answered by “Stormin’ Norman” Zamcheck. “He basically took Suzy from doing six nights a week in bars and clubs to Carnegie Hall,” Gerry says.

She stayed in Boston for six years. “Then, Norman moved to New York and I followed him,” she says. In the city, she met and married songwriter Bill Burnett. They lived in New York for 17 years before moving to Los Angeles, when Burnett accepted a job with Hanna-Barbera. The marriage did not last but the couple remains close — still performing together. “I still play with Bill,” she says, “and with Norman.”

Fialka, an avid researcher and archivist, has a fondness for dates. He keeps track of the important ones in a notebook. Next to a letter to Williams from composer Eubie Blake, he lists the day he and Williams first met — November 18, 1995 — and the day they fell in love — October 5, 1996. “I wasn’t out to find a soulmate but I felt a revelation at that moment,” he says. “It hit me hard. The clouds parted.”

“There was a moment,” adds Williams, “one moment in time — before we fell in love and after. It was astounding. I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

They had met years before, at a poetry event at PXL THIS, the toy camera film festival Gerry founded in 1990. Williams was having an argument with a poet friend. “My friend went south on me,” she says. “Gerry picked up on it and comforted me.”

They had phone conversations for about a year before they started dating. One day, they decided to meet at a gallery. “We touched hands and that was it,” says Williams. “We fell through the floor — fell absolutely madly in love in that instant.”

She also fell in love with Fialka’s avant-garde lifestyle. “Gerry just showed me the way,” she says. “He’s a lifestyle artist — his point is to live with as little as possible. He created a way of living that is less of a white-knuckle sweat lifestyle. He loves to live the free life and he loves to give the free life. He gives back to community. And there’s more time for bike riding.”

“It was a new lifestyle for me,” she explains. “He turned me on to the bike culture and the history of L.A. He knows all the little cubby holes. Gerry knows the faces of the D.J.s in Los Angeles because he obsessively reads all kinds of publications. Mine was a much more bourgeois lifestyle. I had a swimming pool in the Hollywood hills. I went from a two-car garage to a garage,” she adds with a laugh.

Their 2001 wedding was as unconventional as the Fialkas themselves. “It was a traditional hippie wedding,” says Williams. “A 2001 marriage oddity.”

Since his family was based in Michigan, and hers in Iowa and upstate New York, they chose a location that would be easy to reach — the Lazy Black Bear Farm in Paoli, Indiana. “It was this rambling old house that had been commandeered by activist hippies,” says Williams. “It was in one of the last old-growth forests of the United States. There was a peacock, a couple of horses and a deer walking around with the wedding party. We were married under a stand of zinnias — it was as rustic and charming a wedding as I’ve ever seen.”

“In line at the store, I ask people, ‘What’s one good thing that’s happened since the pandemic?’”

“Suzy wore my mother’s silk wedding dress from the 20s,” adds Fialka. “The speeches we gave to each other was a great moment. Our families were all together on this farm celebrating closeness. Everybody read a Native American poem or a Walt Whitman poem,”

The Fialkas had met the owners of the farm during one of their cross-country road trips — something they did two summers in a row, en route to a music festival off the coast of Maine. “Funky rustic America is right off the interstate,” says Williams.

In these days of sheltering in place, you’ll most likely find the couple in their own shady yard, creating art, making music and enjoying the silver linings they’ve found in staying home. “There’s this joy, this good side of Covid -19,” Williams says. “My family is really connected through Marco Polo (app). I’m Marco Polo-ing my sister daily. We are so damn close right now because of this phenomenon.”

Fialka pursues community and communication through his web-site Laughtears.com and Williams performs for an online audience. “I am so damn fulfilled, sometimes I’ve got to cry,” she says. “I write and collect songs about Venice and I’ve done three about Covid. I’m putting songs on YouTube and using my smart phone to make little films.”





Her husband insists she's being modest. "Suzy is a great song writer and a great lyricist but she is fussy about having people film her," he says. "This virus has finally caused to her to learn how to be an editor, a lighting tech, a producer and a director. She's a great filmmaker now."

At the heart of their activities is the act of connecting with other members of their community, even at a proper social distance. "In line at the store, I ask people, 'What's one good thing that's happened since the pandemic?'" says Fialka. "Then, I ask, 'What's a neg-

ative thing?' I try to engage people constantly with eye contact so I can learn."

"We're learning-from-the-elders-on-the-back porch kind of folks," he explains. "We're into folk music and storytelling. A.A. Milne said, 'Weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them.' Sometimes, people can seem like weeds but, once you get to know them, they might be flowers."

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