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Phyllis Chapell: Holding Strong With International Song After the Loss of SIORA Bandmate Dan Kleiman

The Bala Cynwyd-based vocalist can sing in 12 languages—and she'll blow you away in all of them, including SIORA's latest album, *The Other Side of the River*.

BY RICHARD L. GAW

For 20 years, Phyllis Chapell has developed a musical style that tears down borders and makes the world feel like it's one big neighborhood. Lately, though, it's been rather rough in her own little world.

Casting a pall over all the revelry and excitement surrounding the release of the critically acclaimed Bala Cynwyd-based singer's new CD, a vital piece is now missing from her life. Dan Kleiman, her best friend and bandmate in SIORA, died suddenly of a stroke due to complications from lymphoma last year. "Dan would quietly go about doing his thing and, in the process, inspire people to the bottom of their beings," says Chapell.

So when Chapell celebrates the release of *The Other Side of the River* on Sept. 13 at World Café Live, it will be with both a heavy heart and stoic determination. "When he died, I had to pick it up and move forward," she says.

Perhaps most compelling about Chapell is that she sings in 12 languages—whether it's the sounds of Brazil, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, American folk, jazz and pop, or original tunes. Named one of the top 500 jazz vocalists of all time in Scott Yanow's *The Jazz Singers: The Ultimate Guide*, Chapell has recorded two solo CDs and three with her SIORA jazz ensemble, performing live in the U.S., Latin America, Brazil and Europe. *The Other Side of the River*, her latest effort with SIORA, is a stunning international tapestry.



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If Chapell is SIORA's lilted songbird, then Kleiman was its cornerstone. Throughout his 30-year career, he was equally at home in school assemblies and local church choirs as he was performing with jazz greats Ernie Watts and Benny Golson, legendary harmonica player Howard Levy (of the Flecktones) and Clyde Stubblefield (former drummer for James Brown).

Kleiman touched thousands through his writing, producing, musical direction, performing and teaching. He'd take a Parisian Edith Piaf torch song and fuse it with an Afro-Cuban rhythm. He blended sounds. He merged cultures.

Phyllis Chapell spent her childhood in a home filled with Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Broadway show tunes and sounds from all over the world.

"My father introduced me to the classic songs of the American theater, while my mother loved all the music coming from Europe and the Middle East," remembers Chapell.

Growing up in the '60s, she was also influenced by folk music—"songwriters who were applying layers of meaning to what was a tumultuous time." She learned to play piano and guitar.

"I was always gifted with voice, but I never did believe I'd ever become a professional singer," admits Chapell. "I grew up in a home of hardworking people who put in long hours, and I felt compelled to go in the same direction."

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After attending the University of Pennsylvania, Chapell spent the next several years on the West Coast pursuing a variety of careers outside of music. But her personal songbook refused to leave her. On a trip to Brazil, she had a musical epiphany, falling in love with its bossas and sambas, along with the beauty of the Brazilian-Portuguese language.

As the 1980s dawned, Chapell knew no one in the music business. But she did land an evening gig at the Astral Plane in Center City, playing everything from Brazilian music and jazz standards to Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell. In 1991, after a decade of performing on tiny stages throughout the Main Line and Philadelphia, she accepted a steady full-time slot at the Adams Mark Hotel on City Line Avenue. It was there that she met Kleiman, then a pianist with John Alberti's band.

The two formed a duo and then the ensemble SIORA, adding drums/percussion, bass and horns. They played jazz festivals, colleges, community art centers and shows in faraway Ecuador. Their first CD, *Infinite Lover*, was issued in 1994, followed by *SIORA* in 1996. Eight years later, they released *Vis-à-Vis*, followed by *Vision of the Dry Bones* in 2009.

Venturing out on her own, Chapell recorded 1999's *World Songs* and 2008's *Voice in Flight*, throwing the spotlight squarely on a voice the *Philadelphia Inquirer* described as "tasteful, eclectic and real" and *Songwriter's Monthly* dubbed "captivating."

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When it comes to coping with the loss of Kleiman, Chapell turns to her various SIORA bandmates. Dave Posmontier has replaced Kleiman on keys, joining Ken Ulansey on saxophone and pennywhistle, and Stan Slotter on trumpet and flute. Drummers and percussionists involved in the group include Paul Jost, Jimmy Coleman, Francois Zayas, Jim Hamilton, Joseph and Billy Tayoun, along with bassists Rob Swanson, Chico Huff, Kevin MacConnell and Steve Beskrone.

Chapell also collaborates with keyboardist Heath Allen, who recruited Chapell for the French ensemble Philly Musette, which played the Philadelphia International Flower Show in March.

And while SIORA has continued with its heavy touring schedule, the absence of Kleiman still weighs heavily on Chapell, who has assumed the roles of band leader, booking agent and publicist.

“Dan will never go away, but I’m trying to find my own voice,” she says. “I’m saying yes to every opportunity that’s offered to me. And there’s so much to learn. Slowly, I’m becoming my own instrument.”

The release party for The Other Side of the River is scheduled for 9 p.m. on Sept. 13, upstairs at World Café Live, 3025 Walnut St., Philadelphia. Tickets are \$13. To learn more, visit siorajazz.com.