

# Janell Rock 1955–2008



Growing up on a farm in Hope, Kan., Janell Rock was a small-town girl with big-city dreams of making music and being an entertainer. Her sultry voice and talent as a songwriter brought her some success as a musician, but her charm, warmth and sense of humor also helped make the jazz pianist popular among San Diego and Seattle audiences. Ms. Rock's 2003 debut CD, "Quiet Thrill," was nominated for several independent international music awards, and one of her songs won an award for best cabaret song.

Ms. Rock died July 8 at her San Diego home after a long struggle with breast cancer. She was 53. "Mom made us all take piano lessons, but she really took to it," said Ms. Rock's sister, Joleen Webb of Wichita, Kan. "She started playing the piano at about 8 years old and she was always on it. I used that as an excuse not to practice."

Ms. Rock's small hometown high school, which had fewer than 100 students, didn't offer much of a music program, so her mother enrolled her at a school in the next town, about 30 minutes away. Ms. Rock started writing songs in high school and went on to study music at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kan. "She studied classical music but decided that wasn't her thing," Webb said.

A jazz musician, Ms. Rock once considered changing her name because she worried that people would think she played rock 'n' roll. She moved to Kansas City, where she started her professional career in the area's alternative nightclubs. She came to San Diego in 1986, where she became a featured pianist at Croce's downtown and made friends with many local musicians, including Sue Palmer. "She was a fun, gorgeous, beautiful person and talented artist," Palmer said. "She was an award-winning songwriter." Besides writing most of the songs for her CD, Ms. Rock also wrote songs recorded by Palmer and Candy Kane.

Ms. Rock lived in Seattle for several years and won the city's eighth annual Lesbian Music Contest in 1992, performing one of her original songs. She moved back to San Diego in 2006. Although she loved to perform, she focused more on her songwriting in the past several years because of her illness. "Songwriting was something she could do from home," Palmer said. Critics said her debut CD had a "haunting gentleness" and was "a romantic album that you can dance to." It also showed her playful spirit in the brassy "Gertrude & Steins," about a fictitious women's bar. The song was a finalist in the International Acoustic Music Awards competition and won the 2004 award for best cabaret song of the year from Just Plain Folks, an independent international music organization.

"She really wanted to tour and market her CD, but she didn't have the energy because of her illness," Webb said. Janell Denise Rock was born April 17, 1955, in Hope, Kan., to Duane and Velma Rock. She played the clarinet in the Chapman High School band and enjoyed performing on "bandstand nights" in their small community, her sister said. "She loved Kansas, the open spaces ... the wonderful waves of grain," Webb said. "She was attuned to the smaller, beautiful things in life that people forget to appreciate, (but) she was an entertainer, and there aren't many opportunities for that on a farm."

In San Diego, she enjoyed the beach and the sunshine. "She was a total health nut," Palmer said, attributing Ms. Rock's longevity during a 13-year battle with cancer to her nutrition and health habits. "She fought the cancer until there was nothing left." During her career, Ms. Rock traveled to Japan and Sweden to perform, and played piano locally at the Harbor Club, Hilton Hotel and with Palmer at the Belly Up Tavern and other local venues. Palmer said Ms. Rock wrote a lot of material in recent years. Plans are being made to release a new album posthumously, with proceeds going to the Breast Cancer Fund.

"She was processing artistically while she was essentially dying. ... Some of the songs are so edgy and profound," Palmer said. Ms. Rock is survived by her mother, sister and a brother, Marvyn, all of Wichita, Kan. A celebration of Ms. Rock's life will be held Aug. 17. For more information, call (619) 838-3316.

Donations may be made to the Breast Cancer Fund, [www.breastcancerfund.org](http://www.breastcancerfund.org).