

Denice Franke – Background

Highlights of Denice Franke’s story, so far – featuring her own musings and recollections.

Denice Franke’s career is rooted firmly in her gift for singing, and an intuition for penning songs that get under the skin. She accompanies herself on the guitar with grace, and skill, and a repertoire of rhythms that rock listeners gently in place as they take in the ‘movie’ each song projects. Life as a touring artist began for Denice in 1978. Franke (pronounced “Frankie” – the name she answers to as readily as her first) will tell you straight out she’s grateful for the distances traveled, and for the water under the bridge. It’s what informs her music these days. What makes her dive more deeply into her own stories, and those of the characters who find their way to her songs.



“It took me a while to get to this place of digging deeper,” Franke muses, in the midst of naming off her core musical influences. *“Of course, it helped being around Eric (Taylor). Talking about songs. Listening to his songs, and to people like David Olney. Tom Waits is another. And of course, Joni Mitchell.”* As natural as breathing, Franke exhales a favorite Mitchell line from “That Song About The Midway” where Joni sings, *“I met you on a midway at a fair last year. You stood out like a ruby in a black man’s ear.”* Both women – Franke and Mitchell – have an ear for good lines.



Franke follows with a favorite Eric Taylor line, taking her time with satisfaction, *“The good times scratched a laugh from the lungs of a young man in a Deadwood saloon South Dakota afternoon.”* The classic “Deadwood” is one of several Taylor songs covered by Nanci Griffith, perhaps the brightest star for whom Franke is known as ‘best supporting vocalist.’ Franke makes her point, *“When I hear others’ songs, those are the lines – where something is telling, but it’s not told. You know from the images what they’re saying. They’re painting the picture. That’s the kind of writer I want to be.”*

That’s exactly the kind of songwriter Denice Franke is, thank you very much.

The fact that this songbird made her entrance into the world at a hospital bearing the name “Nightingale” is just too quirky not to mention. Born April 18, 1959, in Dallas, Texas, it was during her growing-up years in a neighborhood near White Rock Lake that Denice Franke found her voice. As a member of the congregation at Christ Lutheran on Lovers Lane in Dallas’ Highland Park, she fell in love with singing hymns and harmonies. Though her father did sing in the church choir, *“How we wound up there I don’t know,”* she wonders out loud, recalling her own neighborhood filled with lower middle-class, blue-collar families. *“I remember these huge elegant lawns with massive houses. It was quite a contrast pulling up next to the Cadillacs in our Chrysler Plymouth on Sunday mornings.”*

Denice takes pleasure in the recollection of visiting her grandparents in Rosebud, Texas, and hearing the booming voice of her German grandfather, John Franke, as she sang next to him at the Salem Lutheran Church. *“In this congregation of several hundred people, it felt like you could hear my grandfather over everyone,”* Franke laughs. *“I thought it was really cool to sing next to this guy with this huge voice.”*

Rather than not sing because the hymn tunes weren't in her range, young Denice made up new harmonies so she could sing along. A gift she's honed through the years, and a big part of how she's made a name for herself in an ever-growing 'congregation' – singing alongside and opening for noted artists and friends including Eric Andersen, John Gorka, Nanci Griffith, Robert Earl Keen, Jr., Hal Ketchum, Chris Smither, and Eric Taylor.

DF & Eric Anderson



DF & John Gorka

DF & Chris Smither



DF & Eric Taylor

A turning point came with the gift of a baritone ukulele from her parents when Denice was 14.

Along with her school choir experiences, Franke recalls an 8th grade teacher's assistant who played the guitar and hosted informal classes, leading the group in singing contemporary songs of the day. It's where Denice first heard Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game."

She remembers heading for a record store looking for that song. *"I became infatuated with everything she did,"* Franke says, attributing Mitchell's songs, along with the hymns of the church, as being the influences that sparked the beginning of her musical journey. The four-stringed gift got replaced with a Sigma guitar when Denice turned 16.

Once she got the hang of the guitar, Denice began writing and performing when she was a high school junior.

She entered the school talent show, and readily admits, *"I got all this attention from that, and I loved it. I was always the shy geeky kid. Tall and big.*

Towering above the guys until later in high school. Sports had been my life as a kid. My Dad had season tickets to the Cotton Bowl back in the Tom Landry/Don Meredith era. I wanted to be a football player, but they didn't have women's football back then.

Franke recalls, *"One of my proud moments as a kid was throwing the football in the street on Sunday afternoon with my younger cousins, my Uncle Johnny, and my Dad – and as I threw a pass my Dad said, 'She can sure throw a pretty spiral.'"*

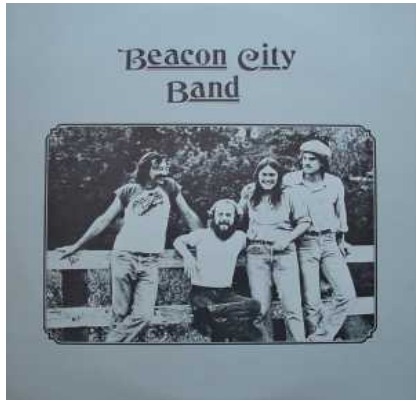


Franke was a good, rough-and-tumble kind of kid who loved being outdoors, and who excelled at sports – and singing.

She was influenced by the music of artists like Jackson Brown and David Lindley, whom she saw perform several times in Dallas. She recalls an unforgettable high school friend she met on her first job flipping burgers. *"We'd go to Wayne's house and spin records,"* says Franke. *"He loved music. We'd listen to Joan Baez and Judy Collins, but he turned me onto a lot of South American music too. And when I graduated, he gave me two mics so I'd have everything I needed to play solo gigs when I went off to college."*

A gift that obviously came in handy.

A 1977 graduate of Dallas' Bryan Adams High School, Franke continued performing as a solo artist while attending then Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. She'd cart her stuff to Grins, a local hamburger joint (still there) where she was a regular on stage, and where she often went



to listen to a group called the Beacon City Boys. One night, in '79, Franke's music caught the attention of BCB guitarist David Wright, who asked her to join his band. She accepted, and 'the boys' changed their name to the Beacon City *Band*.

The 1891 Old State Bank building, an icon of the San Marcos downtown for more than 100 years, inspired the band's name. The bank was "robbed" by actors Steve McQueen and Ali McGraw when the empty building was used as the location of the Beacon City Bank for the film "The Getaway" in 1972. In May 1981, the Beacon City Band recorded an album – two-track live in two days – at Loma Ranch Studios in Fredericksburg, Texas, with John and Laurie Hill at the helm. The album's 11 songs included Nancy Griffith's "West Texas Sun," a cover that would prove synchronistic in the coming days. The group – comprised of Franke, Wright, Roland Denney and Doug Hudson – performed extensively for a year and a half, garnering a strong following.

It was during those Beacon City days, when the band was trying to break onto the Austin music scene, that Nanci Griffith discovered Denice Franke at the Alamo Hotel Lounge. Prior to the night they actually met, Denice would often take the bus from San Marcos to Austin to hear Nanci play the hallowed haunt. "*Martin and Bobby ran the place,*" she says, describing the vibe of the Lounge. "*Eric played there. Nanci, Butch Hancock, Joe Ely, Jimmie Gilmore. They'd play three or four sets, and Martin would pass the tip jar around. That would be the pay. But my way back to San Marcos left at 11 at night, so I always had to haul ass out of there to make the bus.*"

Story goes that the band stopped by the Alamo Lounge one day and left their record. According to Denice nothing happened. But weeks later, they got a call from Martin. Jimmie Gilmore had cancelled, and they wanted Beacon City Band to fill the date.

"*Total chance*" is how Franke describes the page-turner night that opened an important chapter in her life. "*So we got our foot in the door,*" recalls Franke. "*Well, Nanci was good friends with Bobby Nelson who ran the Alamo Lounge with Martin Wiginton. We had four or five Nanci Griffith songs in our repertoire, and we did one during the sound check.*" Drum roll.

"*Unknown to any of us, Nanci would come hear Jimmie at the lounge,*" Franke continues. "*And that's how we met that night. Before we started up, Bobby informed Nanci that I sang 'Alabama Soft Spoken Blues.'* She asked me to do the song. After that, I started singing with Nanci Griffith at the Alamo Lounge."

The Beacon City Band eventually split up, and not long after that, Denice and fellow band mate Doug Hudson formed the popular duo Hudson and Franke.



Nanci Griffith & Denice Franke

The historic Alamo Hotel Lounge fell to the wrecking ball in 1984, but thankfully not before years of playing host to some of Texas' finest performing songwriters. The lineup included Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Nanci Griffith, Robert Earl Keen, Lyle Lovett, Eric Taylor, Townes Van Zandt, Lucinda Williams – and yes, Denice Franke. Out of this dark little bar, many a star did shine.

Hudson and Franke recorded and performed over a period of 12 years, mostly touring across Texas and the Southwest, with one tour to Boston. Early on, the duo remained based in San Marcos. In 82, Hudson and Franke decided it was time to tour Europe. They flew into Luxembourg carrying all their equipment, bought a VW bus, and off they went. Mind you, they departed on this tour with no actual bookings, but loaded with determination they made the gigs happen once they arrived. The tour turned out to be a nine-month musical odyssey.



“That was the trip we went to England and met Rodney and Molly Drake,” Franke tells with reverence of their pilgrimage to the home of a treasured muse who died too young. She credits Nick Drake with being a powerful musical influence. “That first visit with Drake’s parents was brief,” she says. “We came back later in the tour and stayed over. I slept in Nick’s sister Gabrielle’s bedroom. Doug slept in Nick’s deathbed. Since then, Nick’s parents have both passed. It was one of those moments you never forget.”

Denice returned from Europe “longing to be in a bigger place.” She packed up her things in San Marcos and moved to Austin, where she began attending the University of Texas, and declared her major – German. *“It excited me to speak another language,”* says Franke. *“It’s the language of my family’s heritage, and it’s served me well. I’ve since made 10 or so European tours, and I’ve been able to use German in 13 countries.”* In her signature, wry-humor-jive-talkin’ voice, Franke brags about graduating via *“the 10-year liberal arts plan”* from UT Austin in 1987. For that accomplishment, she rewarded herself with a six-month trip to Asia, visiting friends and playing her music in Malaysia, Taiwan, and Japan – where former Beacon City Band mate David Wright was living with his family.

Denice recalls with pride, “In Taiwan I discovered I could make a lot more money busking on the streets than I could in the pubs, and I didn’t have to play as long. I had busked some in Europe before. But in Taiwan I was surrounded by all these street vendors. When they started frantically packing up their goods to look like knapsacks, I would know it was time to put away my guitar and move on before the police arrived. It was a handy system that served me well.” Denice returned home to Texas from her Asian adventure just in time to play the 1988 Kerrville Folk Festival with Doug Hudson.

Hudson and Franke reached a pinnacle that year as supporting singers for Nanci Griffith’s live hits album and video “One Fair Summer Evening,” recorded at Houston’s Anderson Fair. Following that landmark recording, Hudson and Franke toured for a year as Nanci’s backup singers, and as her opening act. Shortly after that tour, the duo parted ways.

In 1989, winds of change steered Denice in the direction of those South Gulf lowlands. She turned the page to a new chapter, and moved to Houston. She wondered at the time if her desire to create music might have taken its leave. Though Franke did



some hanging out and performing with Eric Taylor in the early

'90s, she decided it was time for a break from the music scene.

As a writer from the Houston Chronicle aptly put it, "...it took a different kind of backup gig to find her voice and personality as a solo artist – backing up the waiters and waitresses as a bartender at Café Express." Denice took a job as a bartender. *"It was one of the best things that ever happened to me,"* she says. *"The experience pulled me out of my shell."*

The person, Denice Franke, emerged from her shell, while the songwriter inside rode out her waves of silence in the music world, as songwriters often do. Wisely, she allowed the season to have its turn, the fields seemingly fallow, while all along seeds of new songs were planted, tended, and nurtured – often unbeknownst even by the artist herself.

As a reviewer from Performing Songwriter magazine put it, "With some heavy coaxing from friend Eric Taylor, Denice returned to the music fold in 1997 with a warm, richly textured acoustic gem of a CD called "You Don't Know Me." Produced by Taylor, the record caught critics' and fans' ears, and subsequently established



Denice as a performing songwriter who showed genuine promise and potential. That promise and potential reached full fruition and exploded in 2001 with the release of the Taylor-produced "Comfort" – a tour de force of tight and variegated ensemble playing, passionate singing, emotionally stirring lyrics, and haunting, catchy melodies."

Fast forward to 2007. Having learned a few things about shells, and waves, and winds of change – Denice Franke up and moves to an island. Texas' own Galveston Island. And that has made all the difference. Franke's 2008 release "Gulf Coast Blue"

(on her indie label Certain Records) was produced, recorded, mixed and mastered by Austin's Mark Hallman at his Congress House Studio, and includes a guest background vocal by Red House recording artist Eliza Gilkyson. The cover art reflects a woman who most definitely has come out of her shell. If ever the CD packaging term "jewel box" was appropriate, it is in this case. Inside, behold – a pearl. Franke's latest takes you on a pulsing drive along a coastal landscape where the weather is fine, and the moments shine. As Franke would say, *"You know, there are just certain records."* Certainly "Gulf Coast Blue" is one of them. And in case you're wondering about what's next – if this story so far is any indication – stay tuned. It's bound to be a page-turner.



Wondering about just who is Denice Franke these days? First off, listen to her latest release. Better yet, go hear her live. Up close and in person. And keep up with Franke in the news and online. This woman is going places. Just know that when she comes home off the road, she's writing more songs, spending time with friends, walking the beach, enjoying one of her favorite pastimes – baseball – and nesting in her cozy Galveston bungalow. Oh, and guess what color she painted the house?

Denice Franke Background Highlights compilation and commentary by Lynn Adler - freelance writer, co-proprietor of noted live music venue Crossroads Coffeehouse & Music Co. in Winnsboro, Texas, and one half of the duo Adler & Hearne.