



Jamie Soja

**THERE ARE SECOND ACTS:** Mary Ellen Simpson, Mary Gannon, Diane Vitalich and Denise Kaufman gather in the studio to record **ACE OF CUPS'** long-awaited debut album.

Q'S WITH:

## Ace Of Cups' Denise Kaufman On The Return Of San Francisco's First-All Female Rock Band

By Sarah Pittman

"I really like it because it makes me feel so good," the members of Ace of Cups harmonize on their new single. And they should considering the song is from their self-titled debut album (Nov. 9, High Moon Records) out more than 50 years after they formed San Francisco's first all-female rock band and left an indelible mark on the city's music scene.

Guitarist Denise Kaufman, 71, talked to Pollstar about the group's journey, from opening for Jimi Hendrix, The Grateful Dead and The Band to splitting up in 1972 to finally hitting the studio with producer Dan Shea (Jennifer Lopez, Mariah Carey, Santana).

With a blend of rock, folk, blues, gospel and pop, the album features Kaufman joined by four of the original five Aces – lead guitarist Mary Ellen Simpson, 72, drummer Diane Vitalich, 75, and bassist Mary Gannon, 75 – with all members contributing vocals and songwriting. Guest appearances on the release include longtime friends such as Bob Weir, Taj Mahal, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Pete Sears (Jefferson Airplane/Starship).

Since Ace Of Cups broke up (thanks in part to motherhood, at a time when it was difficult to be both mothers and rock stars), the members continued to play music, while taking on other jobs to pay the bills including Kaufman teaching yoga (with clients including Madonna and Quincy Jones), Gannon teaching music, Simpson working in mental health, and Vitalich becoming a massage therapist. Now the band is ready to keep rocking, with a second album due in spring and a tour in the works.

**Pollstar: How did Ace of Cups first come together?**

**Denise Kaufman:** I met Mary Ellen on the last night of 1966 at the band Blue Cheer's house in Haight-Ashbury. I wandered into a bedroom and she was alone playing guitar. We started jamming and then she invited me to come and meet the rest of the [members] who were starting an all-women band.

I'd played in other bands before but I was the only woman. It never occurred to me to play with other women because I really didn't know women who were drummers or keyboard players or guitar players.

**What were some of the challenges women faced to get into music?**

Diane, our drummer, wanted to play drums from the time she was in grammar school and wasn't allowed to because they told her girls couldn't play drums. If you started out in jazz band or orchestra in school then by the time you got to be 18 and you were interested in being part of a rock band you had some chops behind you. Women who would have been drawn to that didn't have as many opportunities to get to square one.

**How did you come to play with Jimi Hendrix and The Grateful Dead?**

Within the San Francisco scene, there were a lot of opportunities to play. There were



ballrooms and smaller venues and benefits for different organizations. We were known because we played a lot.

Also, we were part of Westpole, our manager Ron Polte's office, which was a gathering place and incubator for new ideas and management and music.

#### **Were there any performances that really stuck with you?**

Opening for Jimi was amazing because it was just Jimi's band and us on the back of a flatbed truck at the Panhandle in Golden Gate Park. He stood in front of us and took pictures of us for a lot of our set. He was really supportive and wonderful to us. He wasn't really that well known in the U.S. yet. There were a lot of people in Golden Gate Park but not as many as there would have been a year later.

And then playing with The Band, that was an incredible show, that was at Winterland [Ballroom] for three nights. That was very memorable. We were huge fans of The Band so when Bill Graham invited us to open for them I was like, "Yes!" (laughs) [Music from *Big Pink*] had come out and it was already a giant hit. This was their first live show as The Band. They were incredible.

#### **You also played with The Grateful Dead.**

We played a lot of shows with the Dead, with Jefferson Airplane, pretty much everybody who was playing in our area – Santana, Country Joe and the Fish, Janis Joplin.

#### **What led to the decision to split up?**

We got looked at by a few record companies but they all passed on us. At the very end we got an offer from Fantasy Records but it wasn't a good offer and by then it was too late. Over time it was really hard to sustain being a band without getting to that threshold.

Of the original five of us, four of us had had babies by 1970. There was sort of no way to continue financially without having some more support.

The other thing was, there was some different directions in the band itself. Our lead guitar player ended up leaving and moving with her husband to Northern California to have a back-to-the-land life, which they did for a while. And then eventually the rest of us just couldn't stay together. It wasn't like we said, "Let's break up." We just faded away slowly.

#### **And then the chance to finally record a studio album was set in motion by the band's appearance at Wavy Gravy's 75th birthday party in 2011.**

High Moon Records' founder George Baer Wallace had reached out because we had the live album that came out in 2003 and he asked if we had any other archival tapes that hadn't been released yet.

Then he saw us play at the Wavy Gravy event and he just got inspired that we should record. The three of us who lived in California started meeting to play every six or eight weeks and we started writing new material.

#### **What was it like working with producer Dan Shea?**

He just got who we were, what we were interested in, what we wanted to do. I was looking for someone who could really collaborate with us musically and I wanted someone I could bounce lyrics off of. Because we didn't have studio experience we wanted someone who could really take us through this process with patience and get our humor and the eclectic nature of our music. And Dan Shea was all of that.

#### **Is Ace Of Cups considering touring?**

We're just working on that now. We've got a rehearsal space in Novato. We're hoping to get together for three or four weeks before the album comes out and do some shows around the album release.

#### **What about a manager or an agent?**

We don't have a manager yet but we're shifting out of recording mode and assembling our team.

#### **While things have changed in the music scene for women over the past decades, what would you like to see going forward?**

Whether it's filmmakers or painters or poets, women need to be able to have a place at the table and to be able to be heard.

When we were starting out, just being an all-women band was already a revolutionary thing, and I think now the real revolutionary thing is that we are the age that we are. There's this societal sense that women at whatever age they are, probably depending on the profession, are supposed to just go away at a certain time. Whereas with men, that's not the case. We'd like to knock that on its butt. (laughs) And just encourage people by example to step out and do those things that they're called to do. Not to ever feel that it's too late. We all need to have our visions expanded and our stereotypes broken up. ✨



The members of **ACE OF CUPS** (including original piano/organ player Marla Hunt) pose for a photoshoot on Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, Calif., circa 1967.

Casey Somabend