

Stephanie Bettman & Luke Halpin

It's easy to 'Get Close' to Bettman's bluegrass

By Michael Petersen for the "Daily Breeze"

Stephanie Bettman may be several years removed from her last acting role, but the multitalented performer hasn't forgotten what it feels like to create a bond with an audience.

Indeed, she's taken her stage and screen skills and applied them to an increasingly successful, eclectic career as a songwriter, vocalist and fiddler.

"Acting is all about understanding human beings, and really empathizing with what it is to be human, and it's the same thing with songwriting," said the Los Angeles musician. "That's what I'm writing about. I'm writing about the human experience."

Fresh off a national tour, Bettman will bring her music to the 100-seat Grand Annex in San Pedro Saturday night, playing acoustic bluegrass and jazz. She'll be joined by her band and her music partner, Luke Halpin.

Bettman's songs cover the emotional spectrum and audiences seem to be drawn to them. Her live performances have been well-received and her debut CD, "Get Close to Me," was met with critical acclaim.

One music critic, David Steinberg of the Albuquerque Journal, wrote of the album: "Stephanie Bettman's singing voice will remind you of a cross between Emmylou Harris and Joan Baez. In her debut CD, Bettman, who also is a fine fiddler and a composer, produces more than sound-alike vocals. She also creates an eminently listenable mix of music that covers plenty of territories of style, from bluegrass to folk ballads and laments to country."

Though her music career started only about five years ago, Bettman said she has been interested in singing and entertaining for most of her life.

"I've just always loved to sing, and I think my mom noticed that I had a knack for it, so she signed me up for voice lessons," Bettman said. "And I kept studying. I went to college for that - I studied opera at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music (in Ohio)."

Bettman, a native of Albuquerque, got her first taste of songwriting playing cover songs as a member of an acoustic trio in Chicago.

"That's when I started feeling the desire to actually create the music we were playing," Bettman said. "I wrote my very first song there."

For a few years afterward she pursued an acting career and even did a stint as a circus trapeze artist. But it wasn't long before Bettman returned to songwriting.

"I usually have a desire when I'm writing a song to make it have multi levels," she said. "It's not usually just about a simple relationship or just about one simple circumstance. It's usually got multiple levels that apply to life in general and I'm usually trying to put some kind of a positive spin on it, even if it's a pretty dark subject matter."

So far, one of the most rewarding parts of her career as a songwriter, she said, was the release of "Get Close to Me."

In addition to receiving positive reviews, that first CD helped Bettman acquire a backing band. The group she now performs with came together as she recorded the album.

"My current band members are on that CD, because they joined me about halfway through the process," Bettman said. "It takes awhile to find the right people who really connect with the project."

One of these "right people" was Halpin. He played the mandolin for Bettman and went on to become her duet partner.

"Luke Halpin came along and he committed to this project in a way that nobody else did, and he brought not only his talent as an instrumentalist but also as a songwriter, and it has been a great, great collaboration," Bettman said.

In addition to performing live, Bettman is working on her second album, which she said is "much more representative of what we sound like live, which is acoustic."

It was this sound that interested Taran Schindler, outreach coordinator for the Grand Annex.

"When I think Stephanie Bettman, I think high energy, smart lyrics, rich music and an engaging performer," said Schindler.

Bettman also fits nicely with the Grand Annex's Folk-Americana theme.

"She is top-notch and key to this series because of her fiddling ability," Schindler said.