



Theresa Andersson finds herself going to her native Silte, Sweden, in her mind

By **Contributing writer, The Times-Picayune**



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It is the sort of hometown performance New Orleanians have often witnessed in recent years: Sunday afternoon in the park. Small, tent-covered stage. Theresa Andersson orchestrates her one-woman "band," which enables her to sing and play multiple instruments while building song arrangements with an army of foot pedals and digital loops.



But why is everyone in the audience sipping coffee -- where's the beer? Why are people clapping but not dancing? What's with the festive garden floats anchored in a moat outside a 16th-century fortress? And why is everyone wearing jackets and sweaters in late August?

Because this is not New Orleans, but Andersson's other, original home: the island of Gotland, in Sweden.

Twenty years ago, at 18,



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Courtesy of Miranda Penn Turin

Theresa Andersson

Andersson left her homeland to join fellow Swedish musician Anders Osborne on a journey to New Orleans. Since then, she's made a name for herself and settled down in the Crescent City with husband, Arthur Mintz, a drummer and puppeteer.

She lets her Nordic roots show, however, on her most recent album, "Hummingbird, Go!" It has a Swedish producer (Tobias Fröberg), a duet in Swedish (with Norwegian musician Ane Brun), and a hometown collaborator (the album was mixed by Linus Larsson at his studio on Gotland). "The whole way through it has a perfect blend of New Orleans and Sweden," she says.

It also is the first of Andersson's albums to be released in Sweden, which allowed her to tour and promote it in her homeland.

"It's nice to feel so welcome in your home country," she said.

During her spring tour there, she played such unique venues as Vadstena slott, a former royal castle in the province of Östergötland, and Kalkbruksmuseum, an old limestone quarry in Bläse, on Gotland, that's now a museum.

Andersson hails from Silte, population 126, a farming community that is a five-hour drive and ferry ride southeast of Stockholm, Sweden. The Anderssons -- mom, dad, brother and sister -- grew rapeseed, rye, wheat and carrots. Andersson and her brother helped in the fields, picking rocks and pulling weeds. When the rapeseed bloomed in summertime, the fields were drenched in a blinding, undulating yellow.

The family's 1700s farmhouse, where Andersson's grandmother once lived, had thick stone walls and gigantic windowsills. "I always had the sunset on my side of the house, so at sunset I would just sit (in the windowsill) and do my homework and look out on the fields," she says.

As a young child, she would hang around while her mother taught piano lessons to neighborhood kids. Though their styles clashed when the time came for her own piano lessons, Andersson says she loved singing with her mom. Her grandfather made recordings of the future songstress when she was 4 or 5 years old ("they're in the vault," Andersson says).

Silte had one church. An Andersson family tradition was to attend Sunday school

. The typical starting age was 5 or 6, but 4-year-old Theresa couldn't wait because she knew there would be singing. Her first live performance: a Christmas concert. "I got up onstage and sang my little heart out," she says. "I just loved it."

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In Sweden, compulsory education stops after 16. If students continue, three years of high school, or gymnasieskola, are next, with a variety of focused programs and curricula designed for college preparatory or vocational training. After high school comes university, or högskola. Sixteen-year-old Theresa was not ready to leave Gotland, but her only secondary-school option was in linguistics-heavy aesthetics. She found a college in Hemse, about 10 miles away, that specialized in music, but needed special permission to attend because she lacked two years of required math and English courses.

Once accepted, she moved out of the family house in Silte and never moved back. She studied ensemble, music theory, music history, art history, movement, voice, violin, guitar and dance. She applied to a jazz vocal program at another college in Skurup, 350 miles from home, and planned to continue her studies there.

The summer before setting off to Skurup, however, she met Osborne. They started playing music together.

"I was playing violin and screeching on that and singing, " she recalls. "I wore no make-up. I was totally like a nature child. Long blonde hair. He was this bearded crazy dude. He played slide guitar."

There was more than just a musical connection, but Andersson says she didn't think beyond the summer. She planned to spend a month away with the World Youth Choir. When the month got cut short, she came back to Gotland and to Osborne, who had a plan to go to New Orleans. She thought, "Well, I can either go to school or I can hang out with this guy I really like and see what New Orleans is all about, " she said.

For six winter months on the island, she cleaned marble staircases to save money for a plane ticket. "That's when I heard Sade for the first time, " she says. "I used to sing Joni Mitchell songs in the stairwells because it echoed so nicely."

She left Sweden in January 1990, when Gotland has average high temperatures of 32 degrees Fahrenheit and about two hours of daily sunshine. Alongside her violin case, packed in a tiny reindeer-leather backpack (popular at the time), were the basics: one pair of pants, two pairs of socks, two pairs of underwear, a bra and a couple of T-shirts. Her family, she says, was supportive.

"They just kind of sent me off, " she says, "but I don't think they thought I was going to stay. Since the country is pretty small and it kind of manages to keep everybody above water, so to speak -- everybody has health care and you can feel like there's a support system there -- it's a little easier to go out and try your wings when you know that you have something to fall back on.

"It's not to say it wasn't scary as hell to come over here."

She knew nothing about New Orleans, except what she imagined after seeing a movie set somewhere else: "Dirty Dancing."

"In Sweden people didn't dance as couples unless they were really old and they did like

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folk dancing. I just thought it was the sexiest thing when couples would dance, " Andersson says. "I kind of thought New Orleans would be like that, I guess."

"Dirty Dancing" it wasn't, but New Orleans quickly became home. She spent several years playing violin and singing in Osborne's roots rock band while dabbling in jazz on the side. The couple eventually broke up, and Andersson focused on building her own career as a singer-songwriter.

Along the way her communication with family in Sweden evolved with technology -- phone, fax, e-mail, Skype. In the beginning, she missed Swedish food specialties like saltlakrits (salty licorice), pepparkakor (gingerbread cookies), glögg (mulled hot wine) and inlagd sill (pickled herring). Her longings faded as packages arrived, World Market opened and she discovered the Norwegian Seaman's Church on Prytania Street.

Andersson grows dill in her garden, which she loves on potatoes and fish. "It's a very Swedish spice, I think."

Just as the British have tea time, Swedes drink coffee. There's even a verb to describe the practice of breaking for coffee -- fika (pronounced "FEE-kah"). I do want my coffee at 3 o'clock in the afternoon."

Other traces of Sweden that Andersson carries are less tangible.

"There's something special about the quietness in Sweden, and the vibe over there is different, " she says. So when Andersson returns to New Orleans after visiting there, she sees things more clearly, at least for a little while.

"You can see what you don't like and you can see what you like. It gives you an opportunity to adjust things and to address things."

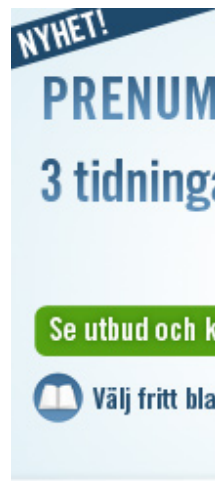
Andersson tries to foster connections between her two hometowns. A couple of years ago, as part of a Louisiana Young Audiences for Arts and Learning program, she explored global musical similarities. She serenaded children with a Swedish variation on the song "Jambalaya, " "Puss och Kram (Kiss and Hug), " that she grew up singing. "It's cool when you can draw those kinds of parallels, " she says.

For the release of her 2008 EP, "I the River, " Andersson and her mother customized 1,500 CD jackets with needle felting. The jackets were made from Gotland sheep wool, which came from the spinnery her mother runs.

"The girls at (Academy of) the Sacred Heart school helped me assemble a lot of those in the final process, which was kind of cool, " she says. "A lot of hands touched those."

During one of her Swedish concerts this summer, Theresa performed "Iko Iko, " which her 4-year-old niece later sang back to her. But perhaps the strongest tie between the two countries grows in the flower pot outside Andersson's shotgun house. Like many New Orleans homeowners, she's raising angel's trumpet. Her grandmother kept one in a 10-gallon pot at the farmhouse in Silte.

"My poor grandfather had to move this thing outdoors every day that the weather



allowed, and then indoors. This thing was huge."

More than 20 years and 5,000 miles away from Silte, the plant reminds Andersson of her roots. "I feel the little connection here with my grandmother."

DISCOGRAPHY

1996: "Vibes" (Rabadash Records)

2000: "Theresa Andersson" (Self-released)

2002: "No Regrets" (PoVolt Records)

2004: "Shine" (Basin Street Records)

2006: "Theresa Andersson" EP (Basin Street Records)

2008: "I the River" EP (Basin Street Records)

2008: "Hummingbird, Go!" (Basin Street Records)

2010: "Theresa Andersson: Live at Le Petit" DVD (Self-released)

Written by Marissa Frayer, a contributing writer for The Times-Picayune.

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