

## THINGS TO DO

**Oakland County musician Sheila Landis marks 50th anniversary with pending memoir**

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(Photo courtesy of Andre B. Thomas)



By ERIC HARABADIAN |  
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**ON THE SCENE****Local Musician Marks 50th Anniversary with Pending Memoir**

Sheila Landis is a seven-time winner of Detroit Music Awards' 'Outstanding Jazz Vocalist'

By Eric Harabadian *For MediaNews Group*

With dedication and purpose to their craft, Rochester Hills-based musicians Sheila Landis and Rick Matle have been fixtures on the Detroit and international jazz and innovative music scene for decades.

Landis, a singer-songwriter, is celebrating 50 years as a performer, composer, record label owner, percussionist and poet. Soon you can add “author” to the list, too. She is writing a memoir, accounting for her many exploits and adventures playing various venues in the Detroit area and beyond.

Landis, a seven-time winner of the "Outstanding Jazz Vocalist Award" by the Detroit Music Awards, began her professional singing career in 1974 in an easy listening pop combo called Joe Rosanova and The Vineyards. Performing at the Top of the Pontchartrain Hotel in downtown Detroit, she cut her musical teeth on songs by Roberta Flack, Diana Ross and Billie Holiday. She soon realized, however, that her calling was launching her own record label and a solo career.

The vivacious artist had a surplus of original jazz-oriented material and had been saving her money doing gigs like The Vineyards to invest in her start-up record label. She started SheLan Records in 1981. “It was the only route I could see from my standpoint,” she said. “Actually, bebop vocalist Betty Carter was my inspiration. I had seen her a few times at Baker’s Keyboard Lounge. She was impeccably dressed, had complete control of the bandstand and would kick off tempos with her foot. And she had her own label called BetCar Records. So I started my label SheLan Records and we’ve done over 20 releases to date. And I have complete control. If someone wants to buy or license my music around the world we can send it off and do that.”

Some key selections of her catalog have been sampled by labels in Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom. And she also has licensing agreements with some overseas labels that have re-released several of her early albums, with updated packaging and bonus tracks.

"I was advised against starting my own label back then from some of the other musicians out there at the time," recalls Landis. "But I said 'why not?!' And it proved to be quite a catalyst. I've got five 3-ring binders of reviews. It really gives you a name. All you have to do is just take that first step."

Guitarist, composer, significant other and musical confidant Matle is an Oakland University music performance graduate who has worked with Landis for over 30 years. He's a prodigious recording engineer/producer as well who, in addition to Landis, has collaborated with many Detroit area jazz, blues and rock musicians. His latest album release is a project with eclectic singer-songwriter Andy Gunsberg called "Balancing Act" on Steel Rail Records.

"I've been recording my own music and releasing things since the early '90s," Matle said. "But there's a lot I haven't released because I'm probably too critical of my own work."

Landis and Matle work with various rhythm sections from time to time but said they're most comfortable working as a duo. And, as one might imagine, as in any relationship, there is a lot of give and take.

"When preparing new musical arrangements of songs for performances, I often add my own re-harmonizations and rhythmic ideas, singing along in my studio with my Fender Rhodes electric piano," Landis said. "Rick adds his extensive musical knowledge to the mix and together we come up with our own creative musical interpretations. However, often our most exciting ideas spring forth spontaneously in the heat of live performance."

Both Landis and Matle are big fans of, and inspired by, other jazz-oriented guitar/voice duos like the classic Ella Fitzgerald and Joe Pass partnership and more contemporary fare like Tuck and Patti.

"We maintain an intuitive sense where all it takes is giving each other a glance when we're changing a tempo or key in mid-flight," Landis said.

Individually and collectively, Landis and Matle have done a myriad of shows and events. Their resume includes everything from fashion shows and art fairs to libraries, music festivals and even grocery stores. It's all about the hustle and the duo knows full well of what they speak. "It's almost like there are too many talented musicians out there, all vying for the same little clusters of gigs," Landis said. "That's why we've diversified into occasionally performing at senior living communities where we know we'll be specially appreciated."

One of their longest-running gigs to date has been Johnny's Speakeasy, 215 S. Main St., Royal Oak. At 6:30 pm Sundays they perform with Matle's 7-string guitar alternately plucking bass notes, chords and leading tones as Landis emotes soulfully, frequently adding various spicy Latin rhythm "live loops" from her selection of hand-percussion instruments to boost the grooves. And the music can run the gamut from their original compositions to the Great American Songbook, classic rock, Tin Pan Alley favorites, Latin sambas and everything in between.

"We've done a lot of unusual gigs that most people probably wouldn't touch because they wouldn't know what to do," Landis said of the free-form poetry shows and spontaneous performances they've hosted. "I think the key to longevity is varying your repertoire enough to appeal to a multiplicity of musical tastes and also bringing in extra instruments like little percussive things or playing the kazoo. Don't forget that your most requested song is always going to be 'Happy Birthday'."

*For more information, visit [www.sheilalandis.com](http://www.sheilalandis.com).*