



Regina Spektor: It's Only Rock and Roll

By Ken Knox

If you haven't heard of Regina Spektor yet, don't worry, you will. A darling of New York's "anti-folk" movement (which spawned the likes of Michelle Shocked, Kimya Dawson and Beck) who wears thrift-store tutus over jeans onstage and hangs with the Strokes and Kings of Leon when she's not opening for them on tour, the singer/songwriter has been garnering comparisons to such luminaries as Björk and Fiona Apple for her quirky, musically diverse piano compositions and distinctive vocal delivery.

The Russian-born Spektor claims not to have known who Joni Mitchell was until just two years ago. This is the result, she says, of being raised on classical music and literature in her native land, where amenities like radio weren't always available.

Spektor's mother taught music while her father was a violinist and photographer, so she grew up with a steady diet of great composers whose music, she says, filled the house. "It was like air. It was everywhere."

"I used to scream in the crib while my mom was marking papers," she says, "so she'd put on a Bach record. As soon as the needle hit the groove, I would stop and lay there quietly listening. As soon as the needle was lifted,

I would start screaming again. She would run in and flip the record over and continue to grade papers."

Spektor doesn't remember a time when she wasn't near a piano, but she was forced to give up her lessons at age nine when her family left the country to escape religious persecution. "Russia wasn't a good place to be if you were Jewish," she says.

The family immigrated to the Bronx, New York, where Spektor tried to continue her studies by practicing on windowsills and tabletops until she found a new teacher at the Manhattan School of Music. Later, during hikes on a school-sponsored trip to Israel when she was 16, Spektor made up songs and melodies to pass the time. She received so much encouragement from fellow students that she parlayed her knack for musical improvisation into songwriting classes during her studies at New York's SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Music.

After graduation, Spektor started to play local coffee-houses and clubs like Fez, the Sidewalk Café, CB's Gallery and the Knitting Factory with tunes that often reflect upon her love of literature. "I try to write like a short-fiction writer or actor would," she says. "It's a combination of characters and situations. I try to not write about my not-so-important life and instead represent characters and situations and people using my own real emotions."

Spektor put out two self-released collections, 11:11 (2000) and Songs (2002), which helped her build a solid fan base. But it wasn't until a chance encounter

with the Strokes' producer Gordon Raphael that Spektor got the break she needed. Impressed with her ability to play piano with one hand while hitting a chair with a drumstick using the other hand, Raphael invited her to record a few songs with him. He ended up producing her full-length record. First released independently in 2003 on the indie label Shogun Records, Soviet Kitsch was re-launched on Sire Records after Spektor was invited by Strokes lead singer Julian Casablancas to open for the band on its world tour.

"It was really intimidating," Spektor says of the tour experience. "It was a quick education in the music business. It taught me how hard people work and how much time they spend on the road. I had no idea. I learned a lot about equipment, too. I didn't even know how to use monitors!"

Spektor recalls learning a few other useful things as well. "The Strokes taught me how to [stand up for myself] when I got heckled," she says. "People would scream 'Free Bird' at me while I was playing and I'd wonder, 'What is this free bird?' The guys said they used to get heckled and the main thing you have to do is turn it back on them. Finally, we were in Baltimore and someone screamed 'Free Bird,' and I screamed 'Fuck you!' The entire crowd cheered. I thought, 'Awesome.'" She giggles before adding, "That's rock and roll for you." 🎸

Spektor's Gear: Epiphone WildKat guitar, Yamaha P250 keyboard, Les Paul Jr. amp

"I try to write like a short-fiction writer or actor would"

