

Karen Mantler by Karen Mantler

I was conceived by Carla Bley and Michael Mantler at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1965. Born in 1966, I was immediately swept into the musician's life on the road. After having checked me at the coatroom of the Berlin Jazz Festival, to the horror of the press, my parents realized that I was going to have to learn to play an instrument in order to be useful. But since I was still just a baby and they couldn't leave me alone, they had to bring me on stage with them and keep me under the piano. This is probably why I feel most at home on the stage.

In 1971, when I was four, my mother let me have a part in Escalator Over The Hill and the next year I sang on another of her records, Tropic Appetites. By 1977 I had learned to play the glockenspiel, and I joined the Carla Bley Band. I toured Europe and the States with her several times and played on her Musique Mecanique album. After playing at Carnegie Hall in 1980, where I tried to steal the show by pretending to be Carla Bley, my mother fired me, telling me "get your own band".

I realized that I was going to have to learn a more complicated instrument. After trying drums, bass, and flute, which I always lost interest in, I settled on the clarinet. I joined my elementary school band and quickly rose to the head of the clarinet section. The band director let me take the first improvised solo in the history of the Phoenicia (a small town near Woodstock, NY) elementary school. After graduating to high school I continued to play the clarinet in the band, but didn't like the music we were made to play. This was when I realized that playing other people's music was not enough, and I was going to have to write my own. The music department agreed to give me school credit for studying composition with my mother and making a tape of the music I had written to play for them, but they hated the tape so much that I was banned from any future musical activities. For the remainder of my high school years, my major musical activity was getting kicked off the music room stairs for practicing the harmonica.

Luckily I soon got a scholarship to attend the Berklee College of Music in Boston. By this time I had given up clarinet and had been playing organ in a band with Jonathan Sanborn (another musician's kid). Of course organ isn't a very practical instrument, so I played piano at Berklee. I was determined to learn more about music and they tried to teach me, but in three years I learned virtually nothing. I had my own weird style, which I probably inherited from my father. I remember being interrupted during a solo in an ensemble class by an instructor yelling, "it's your solo Karen, solo!" "I am!" I screamed back. Still, I did meet a lot of nice people who would humor me when I played the piano and liked the music I wrote. My senior recital, called "A Little Knowledge Is A Dangerous Thing" had a lot of teachers in the audience and was a great success.

While in Boston I had made friends with other young composers and in 1986 we put together a concert of our music to play at the Mass. College of Art. Later, a group of older writers called The Jazz Composers Alliance asked me to be the guest for one of their concerts, and they performed my piece at a local jazz club. In 1987 I moved to New York City. By this time I had written enough music to make a record, so I put together a band featuring Eric Mingus, Jonathan Sanborn, Steve Weisberg, Ethan Winogrand, Marc Muller, Steven Bernstein and Pablo Calogero. We played together for about 6 months, then went into the studio and recorded My Cat Arnold, which was released in Europe and Japan in May on the XtraWatt label, and in the United States in the fall of 1989.

After noticing what a good harmonica player I was becoming, my mother asked me to be in her band for a European tour in October 1988. I enjoyed it very much, but I was eager to return to New York and start working on my own music. During July 1989 I toured Europe with my band, and afterwards appeared at the Knitting Factory and on Dave Sanborn's NBC "Night Music" television show.

Once again, I had written enough music to make another album for XtraWatt. No one in my band had quit or been fired, so in the summer of 1990 we went into the studio and recorded Karen Mantler And Her Cat Arnold Get The Flu. It was released in Europe in October, and in the United States in November.

We didn't play at The Montreal Jazz Festival in 1990. They asked us to, and we even went there, but it rained the whole time, and our stage was the only one without a cover. The festival felt so bad about it, they offered to let us come back the next year.

In October we toured Europe on a double bill with The Very Big Carla Bley Band. My mother agreed to let us come on the condition that she could borrow me and my two horn players for her band. The band was so big that a double-decker tour bus was too small for us, but somehow we managed to squeeze ourselves in, and the tour was a gigantic success.

Meanwhile, my father had been considering either giving up music or committing suicide, but instead chose to quit working for Watt and move to Europe. I had been innocently training to be his assistant for two years, so the promotion to general manager of the whole operation was quite a shock. I had no business experience, but somehow managed to learn as I went along.

The best part of my new job was that Arnold and I could be together again. But Carla and Steve were always on the road, so we were all alone. The winter of 1991 was long and hard. By spring, we were both very depressed. The ten pounds I had gained Arnold had lost, and on April 25 (my birthday) he died.

I spent the next three months composing a requiem for him called "Arnold's Dead", which we premiered at The Montreal Jazz Festival in July 1991. Just as it had the previous year, it rained the whole time we were there, but luckily the promoters had the foresight to give us a stage with a roof this time. I was still very depressed about Arnold's

death, and I guess the audience could tell because by the end of the concert the whole audience was howling "Arnold" in despair.

I returned home with not much hope of performing again, but luckily Steve Swallow hired me to play synthesizer on his record Swallow, which we recorded in September 1991. It was great playing with such advanced musicians, but I missed my band and was determined to continue performing with them.

My second record had gone without much notice from the media, so there was very little interest from promoters. With nowhere else to turn, I convinced my father to become my booking agent, and he got us a weeklong tour of Germany in October. I was distressed to learn that my baritone player was busy playing with Mario Bauza, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise because I ended up hiring Gary Valente.

Later that month I was hired to play organ on a recording by drummer Motohiko Hino. Sailing Stone was released in January 1992 and also featured Mike Stern, Steve Swallow and Dave Liebman.

Not much happened during the following six months. Most of my time was spent running the business. I also wrote a lot of depressing songs.

It was starting to seem like I would never get another gig. So I called my father in Copenhagen to see how he was doing. He had been writing music, and asked if I would like to play piano on a recording he was planning to make in June with The Balanescu String Quartet. I also got to sing a duet with Jack Bruce, and the resulting compact disc, Folly Seeing All This, was released on ECM in March 1993.

In July 1992 I returned to Europe as the organ player in The Very Big Carla Bley Band. We spent a week at the Glasgow Jazz Festival, and another week at The Umbria Jazz Festival in Italy.

By this time it was becoming apparent that I was better suited to music than business, and Carla suggested I start training somebody to take over my responsibilities at Watt. We were lucky to find Ilene Mark, and by January 1993 I was able to move back to New York City.

There didn't seem to be much work for me in the city, so I was about to look for a job as a waitress when Motohiko Hino called me to play with him again. We recorded an album in March called It's There, and also played a gig at The Knitting Factory.

A few months later I got a call from Terry Adams, the leader of NRBQ, who asked me to sing one of his songs at The Bottom Line in New York. I considered it a great honor, because I'd always admired Terry, and I even got paid!

Once again, in July 1993, I went to Europe as my mother's organ player. We toured for a month and recorded Big Band Theory.

In February 1994 I got another call from Terry Adams, who wanted me to play glockenspiel and harmonica in a band he was putting together to accompany David Greenberger's Duplex Planet Radio Hour. We performed it at St. Ann's church in Brooklyn, it was broadcast on public radio and later released as a CD.

After doing another European tour with The Carla Bley Big Band later that month, I returned to New York City and once again found I had no way to support myself. I began playing solo piano at a restaurant in exchange for free meals. Occasionally I got a call for a paying gig. I played with guitar player Dan Rose, and also made a few guest appearances with a band called Lazy Boy. Times were hard. The Internal Revenue Service was after me for not paying taxes, and Con Edison (the local power company) had turned off my electricity. Three years had passed since my last record, and there was no way I could afford to hire a band.

Luckily, in 1995 I ran into Michael Evans, a drummer I had met while living in Boston. He expressed interest in playing with me, and we began sorting through the pile of music I had written since Arnold's death. Since we both play a variety of instruments, we realized that we could work as a duo. During this time we also realized that we had fallen in love and moved in together. After playing a few gigs on the east coast, we went into the studio and recorded Farewell in December 1995. It was released in Europe in the spring, and in the United States in the fall of 1996.

I spent most of the summer of 1996 in Europe. First, I did another tour with The Carla Bley Big Band in July. During that tour we recorded a live album in Italy called The Carla Bley Big Band Goes To Church. After that I went to Copenhagen to work with my father, who hired me to sing in an opera he had written called The School Of Understanding. This also concluded with a recording, which was released on ECM records in 1997.

In September, Michael Evans joined me in Europe for a tour to promote our newly released cd. It was just the two of us and about 400 pounds of musical equipment. We traveled everywhere by train, and just barely made it to each gig. Our hard work paid off though; the music was well received, and we went home with money in our pockets.

Back in New York City, the new cd had just been released and we needed to promote it. Unlike in Europe, this meant spending money, not earning it, so we could only afford to play a few clubs before we were broke again. By chance, a friend of mine who worked at a local Starbuck's coffee house was setting up a new music series to take place there every Friday. Although there was no real stage or sound system, they were offering a guaranteed salary, so we started playing there once a month. This went on for most of the winter and spring of 1997.

At this stage in my life, I finally resigned myself to the fact that my time was best spent working on my own music, since I rarely received calls to play with other bands. However, there were a few notable gigs during that winter: my mother was asked to write an arrangement for David Byrne, and she hired me as the organ player. Another dubious honor was being asked to play in "The Most Unwanted Orchestra", a band put together

by David Soldier based on a survey of what people's least favorite instruments were (the band included tuba, bagpipes, banjo and harmonica). We played one gig at the knitting factory, but then I never heard from him again.

In May 1997 The Carla Bley Big Band did a tour of England. Carla had also been commissioned to put together another band called Fancy Chamber Music featuring classical musicians along with herself and Steve Swallow. My responsibility as organ player in the big band was expanded to include being the page-turner for Carla during the chamber music portion of the show.

About one year earlier, Carla had been approached by a promoter in Cologne, Germany to organize a performance of Escalator Over The Hill for June 1997. When Escalator was originally recorded I was only 4 years old and had a very small part. Now she was asking me to sing all of her parts and play synthesizer. I also did a lot of the copying for the band and helped coach the singers.

My exposure to "opera" continued that winter when I returned to Europe for a performance of The School Of Understanding at the Hebbel Theater in Berlin. I returned to New York City, and continued playing gigs at local clubs like The Knitting Factory and Tonic as a duo with Michael Evans. However, I was no longer happy with this limited format, and began dreaming of writing an opera of my own. Since Arnold had now been dead for many years, I decided that I should search for a new pet, and that this could be the theme for my new project. I spent the winter writing songs with titles like "Turtles", "Life Is Sheep" and "Why Not A Bear?"

In the summer of 1998 Escalator Over The Hill toured Europe. When we played in Paris I was introduced to a man who worked at EMI France. At the time I didn't think much of it, but a few days later this same man, Jean-Philippe Rolland, contacted me and expressed great interest in my future recording plans! It sounded too good to be true, but when I told him about my pet project he loved the idea and said he would like to release it on Virgin Classics.

For the next six months all my time was spent writing music. Choosing who would be in the band was easy. I wrote parts for Eric Mingus without even thinking about it. I was lucky to have met a great bass player the previous year, Kato Hideki, who had been playing with my drummer, Michael Evans extensively and seemed like the perfect choice. Finding a keyboard player was easy too. Arturo O'Farrill and I had both been in my mother's band when we were just teenagers, and when I called him he agreed to do it even though he was very busy working with his father Chico O'Farrill.

I started playing gigs with this band, and although I now had a great rhythm section, it was missing something. I needed a guitar player. I decided to go straight to the top, and called Hiram Bullock. Now all I needed were some horns. Steven Bernstein had played trumpet in my original band, and although he was working full-time with The Lounge Lizards and his own band Sex Mob, he agreed to squeeze me into his schedule. It seemed obvious to me that I should also hire the baritone player Pablo Calogero,

another member of my original band. Finally, I called Gary Valente.

In August 1999 we went into the studio and recorded Karen Mantler's Pet Project, which was released in 2000 by Virgin Classics.

I was very happy with the way the cd turned out and I figured that with such a great product all I had to do was sit back and wait for the offers to come flooding in. It didn't quite work out that way. Plagued by a relentless series of mergers and takeovers, Virgin Classics no longer wanted to have anything to do with interesting, original music and Jean-Philippe Rolland was forbidden to have any further contact with me. Attempts to book a European tour for my band failed. It took a few months for me to realize that nothing was going to happen unless I took matters into my own hands.

If I wanted to continue working with my decidedly unprofitable band I knew I was going to have to find an alternate source of money. I took a job serving coffee and sandwiches at a place called Olive's, which was very popular with the fashion and advertising industry in Soho. After I had saved enough money, I booked a gig at The Knitting Factory in July 2000 to celebrate the US release of Pet Project. I had a lot of fun playing with my new eight-piece band, but nobody from the record label came and after paying the band out of my own pocket I was back to square one.

I didn't want to spend the rest of my life serving coffee, so I decided to try panhandling on the street. I had an old accordion that I had never really learned to play, and I had the idea that I could earn some spare change while practicing. I took it out to the busiest corner I could find in Greenwich Village and put out a sign that said: please help me pay for lessons. Most everyone who passed me commented on how badly I needed lessons and gave me a few coins. By the end of the night I had earned fifty dollars! I might have continued doing this, but the accordion was so heavy that one night I dropped it and it broke. To be honest, I was sort of relieved. It was hard work carrying that thing around.

In December I booked another gig for my band at The Knitting Factory. This time I cut two of the horns and just used Gary Valente on trombone. I still lost money, but one good thing came of it: I shared the bill with David Garland, who hosted several shows on the radio station WNYC. He invited me to be a guest on his weekly program "Spinning On Air". Based on this rare chance of publicity I booked a gig in February 2001 at Tonic and decided to use the full eight-piece band. This time I almost broke even.

In June 2001 Robert Wyatt was the host of the Meltdown Festival at the Royal Festival Hall in London and invited me to participate by singing a few of his songs with the band SoupSongs, led by Annie Whitehead which also featured Julie Tippetts and Elvis Costello. Robert told me that I was the only singer he had ever seen who could stand so perfectly still.

In November I was hired by Woodstock legend Artie Traum to play a harmonica solo on his recording South Of Lafayette.

Things picked up a bit in 2002. I put together a smaller version of the Pet Project band featuring Michael Evans, Kato Hideki, Arturo O’Farrill and Gary Valente (who was now singing Eric Mingus’ parts as well as playing the trombone). We played in New York City at Fez in February and at the Lizard Lounge in Boston in June. After that I traveled to Ferrara, Italy to play with The Peter Blegvad Band, which included Chris Cutler and John Greaves.

After my performance at the Meltdown festival Robert Wyatt and I kept in touch. He was working on the concept for his next recording and asked if I would be interested in playing and singing on it. Better yet, he decided he wanted to include three of my own compositions!

In July 2002 I toured Europe once again with The Carla Bley Big Band and after the tour was over I traveled to London to record with Robert. The resulting CD, Cuckooland, was released in October 2003.

During that summer I fell in love with Gary Valente (much to the dismay of my boyfriend and drummer Michael Evans) and when I returned to New York in September I played what would turn out to be the last gig with my own band for many years. It was in New York City at Fez and nobody was hurt although Gary spent much of the gig expecting a drumstick to come flying through the air.

In October I played organ on another Carla Bley recording, Looking For America. By now I was not only Carla’s organ player, but also her copyist. Along with my job at Olive’s, this extra income would have allowed me to continue booking low paying club dates for a band of my own, but I decided to marry Gary Valente instead. I also started teaching harmonica lessons. Trombone players are expensive.

Peter Blegvad came to New York City in April 2003 and we played at the Bowery Poetry Club and Tonic as a trio with the bass player Dave Hofstra.

In June I played organ and harmonica with The Carla Bley Big Band in New York City at the club Iridium and in July we played in Minneapolis. Even though Carla’s last recording had been nominated for a Grammy, this was the only work that the band got in the United States.

My calendar for the rest of the year was completely empty, but before I had a chance to sink into depression I got a call from John Greaves. There was a man, Patrice Boyer, who ran a festival in Charleville-Mezieres, France that wanted to put together a tribute to Robert Wyatt. Thanks to John and Robert’s recommendations, I was lucky to be selected as the only American in the band. The concert was titled “Dedicated To You – Variations on the music of Robert Wyatt” and the band consisted of Sylvain Kassap - bass clarinet, Dominique Pifarély - violin, Hélène Labarrière - bass, Jacques Mahieux - drums, John Greaves – piano/vocals and myself – organ/harmonica/vocals. Each of us arranged a Wyatt song and also wrote one original (“dedicated” to Robert). Although it was intended as a one time only event, this band went on to play many gigs in the

following years despite the amount of improvisation and scarcity of Wyatt hit songs. 2004 started out on a sad note. Paul Haines had died and since my mother was out of the country I was elected as her proxy to attend the memorial for him at the club Tonic in New York City. Gary Valente and I performed my two best-known songs about death, "People Die" and "Surviving You" as a duo.

In February the French Wyatt "tribute" band, now called "Dondestan!" played its second gig at the Faches-Thumesnil festival in Lille, France.

April brought the good news that the producer Hal Willner was putting on a Nino Rota tribute at the Barbican in London. My mother pushed for me to be the organ/glockenspiel player on her arrangement of 8 ½ and after putting me in touch with Hal I sold him on the idea of letting me do an arrangement of The Godfather theme featuring Gary Valente. The night also included arrangements by Roy Nathanson, David Thomas, Michael Gibbs and Roger Eno. Special guest singers were Marianne Faithfull and Beth Orton.

"Dondestan!" was inexplicably still getting many offers to perform in Europe even though I had to be flown over from New York for each one. In November we played in Vienna at Porgy & Bess and at a festival in Wels, Austria. In January 2005 we played in Angers, France. In February we appeared at the French festivals Sons d'Hivers and Vaulx en Velin. In June we got another gig in Pontarlier, Switzerland and John Greaves arranged for me to travel to Paris first so I could play harmonica on his next recording, Verlaine. At this point the violinist, Dominique Pifarély, left the band and was replaced by guitarist Jef Morin. Our final gig of the year was in Huesca, Spain.

In May 2006 there was another performance of Escalator Over The Hill at the Philharmonie in Essen, Germany. As well as being one of the featured performers, I was put in charge of organization. We decided to make this work available for purchase so other people could perform it in the future without Carla's involvement. I created detailed lists for everything from casting tips to rehearsal checklists for each song. I also typed out the full libretto. We were so well organized that it turned out to be the best live performance yet.

That summer I toured Europe again as the organ player in The Carla Bley Big Band. During that tour we recorded Appearing Nightly at The New Morning in Paris.

Very little happened in 2007 to boast about. In order to make a living I resumed working at Olive's, teaching harmonica and piano lessons and doing whatever music copying jobs my mother and Steve Swallow needed to be done. The only performance of the year was in June with "Dondestan!" in Bari, Italy.

2008 was a little better. In January I played in New York City at The Stone with Terry Adams and guitar player Skip Heller.

In April I got a call from Hal Willner who was putting together a show at Saint Ann's in

Brooklyn featuring music from his compilation album *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films*. Garth Hudson needed a chromatic harmonica player. Hal also asked if I would like to do something else and since Terry Adams was there we quickly put together a rendition of *In A World Of My Own* from *Alice In Wonderland*.

In October I worked again with “Dondestan!” at the Frankfurt Jazz Festival. It was another tribute to Robert Wyatt with many bands interpreting his music. This concert was especially notable because my father, Michael Mantler, played trumpet with us and also because Robert and Alfie attended the performance.

In the spring of 2009 John Greaves contacted me about a residency he was doing in Bourgoin-Jallieu, France at the club Les Abattoirs in May. Since we had been working together in a variety of formats, he suggested that I come over with a book of my own compositions and we could share the band he had put together. Peter Blegvad was also bringing a set of his music. John had arranged for “Dondestan” to play the night before and then we presented our concert of Blegvad/Greaves/Mantler music featuring a 10-piece band (which was strangely billed in the program as *The Chris Cutler Trio*).

The next week we traveled to Troyes, France to play a concert of John’s Verlaine music with a slightly smaller band. After that we headed to Paris and played a concert at *Sunset*. Peter Blegvad had returned home, so this time we played one set of John’s music and one set of my music.

In July “Dondestan!” got a gig in the beautiful town of Rovinj in Croatia. Somehow my plane ticket was booked to have me arrive two days before the band and I had wonderful time swimming in the Adriatic sea and lying in the sun.

There was another European tour booked for the Carla Bley Big Band at the end of the month, so rather than return home I went to Paris for a few weeks. In exchange for free room and board, I did some work of dubious quality with Jef Moran and Nico Mizrachi. They had a trip-hop band called *Les Recycleurs de Bruits* and I wrote words and sang them on a recording we did that was (thankfully) never released.

After the big band tour, Gary Valente and I returned to New York City. The future looked bleak. There was less work than ever for a trombone player and I was finding it increasingly hard to support the two of us.

Fortunately, in October 2009, “Dondestan!” was booked to play two concerts. One in Argenteuil, France and another in Strasbourg, France. Unfortunately, the second concert in Strasbourg was cancelled due to low-ticket sales. Since we were already there, we decided to spend what was now a free day recording at the venue in Argenteuil. That recording was never released and sadly, this was the last time that band ever played together.

I decided it was time to start playing my own music again, but I had only written one

song in the last seven years. Just as I was mulling this over I got a call from David Garland. He was booking The Stone in New York City for the month of December and asked if I would like a night. I gratefully accepted. I knew that whatever I did, it would have to be economical and be something I could put together quickly. I called my old bass player, Kato Hideki. He already knew most of my songs, so all I had to do was arrange an hour of music for piano and bass. Kato and I played so well together that after this gig we agreed that we should continue to work together as much as possible.

I needed to start writing. In order to do this I realized I would have to make a sacrifice and that ended up being Gary Valente. I just couldn't afford him anymore! We were divorced after seven years of marriage. The exact amount of time I hadn't been able to write. My ability to concentrate improved instantly and I started writing some of the best music of my life (so far).

Meanwhile, Kato decided he wanted to get out of the dark death ambient music scene he had helped create and asked if I would be the singer in a rock and roll band he was putting together called Plastic Spoon. The songs were decidedly simple, but he put a twist on it by hiring some very complicated and interesting musicians: Chris Cochran on guitar and Shazad Ishmael on drums. We played our first gig at The Stone in October 2010 to a noticeably dismayed audience. Then we tried again in November at a more appropriate venue, some dive on the lower east side called Fontana's. At least nobody there knew us, and the drunken crowd seemed to enjoy it.

In January 2011, Kato booked us at The Rock Shop. We were starting to become disillusioned, realizing that breaking into the rock and roll club scene was not as glamorous as we had imagined. It was just as bad as the downtown improv scene. It was expensive to play and hard to draw a crowd. Chris Cochran quit the band and Kato decided he didn't enjoy playing live gigs, so he set up a recording date in April and replaced Chris with Doug Wieselmann. My job was easy, so while I dutifully learned Kato's melodies and came up with little harmonica solos, I had plenty of time to write music. Doug turned out to be such a good fit with Kato and I that I started writing music with him in mind and dreamt about expanding my band to a trio.

In May I was hired to be in another Robert Wyatt tribute band. This band, called Comicooperando, had been commissioned to put together an evening of music in Modena, Italy the previous year. There were nine members and apparently the collective aspect of it proved to be unwieldy. When more gig offers presented themselves, Chris Cutler suggested they downsize the band and bring me on board. I traveled to London for several days of rehearsals with the new line-up: Dagmar Krause – vocals, Annie Whitehead – trombone and vocals, Michel Deville – guitar and vocals, John Edwards – bass and vocals, Chris Cutler – drums and myself on Organ, Harmonica and vocals.

We did a little mini tour starting at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London and then continuing on to Stazione Leopolda in Firenze, Italy, Rote Fabrik in Zurich, Switzerland, Bimhuis in Amsterdam and finally, the Victoriaville festival in Quebec, Canada.

At the end of May Plastic Spoon performed live on David Garland's WNYC show "Spinning On Air" and then did a gig in Brooklyn at a club called Littlefield. There were only five people in the audience and they were all in the band playing after us. That was the last gig we ever played.

In August I returned to Europe. Les Recycleurs de Bruits had moved to Rochefort, France and made friends with a local promoter who ran the festival Rochefort En Accords. They convinced him to bring me over for the festival. He suggested I arrange a set of my music for a ten-piece band using the pool of musicians that were participating in the festival. In exchange for this opportunity, I would come a week early to play a concert on Ile d'Oleron with Les Recycleurs de Bruits. The concept of this festival was that nobody brought his or her own band. All the musicians would meet on the first day and choose whom they wanted to play with. I was very relieved to discover that H el ene Labarri ere was there (I didn't know anybody else) and with her help I put together the ten-piece band I needed to play my arrangements. It wasn't easy, but it turned out to be a wonderful band and the concert was a huge success. I also played harmonica with the singer Vic Moan's band.

After the festival I traveled to London in September to play with The Peter Blegvad Trio (featuring John Greaves and Chris Cutler) at Caf e Oto and another concert for Peter's birthday celebration at Bush Hall with special guest John Paul Jones (from Led Zeppelin).

In 2012 I was finally ready to book a gig for my new trio featuring Kato Hideki and Doug Wieselmann. In June we played at Barbe s in Brooklyn. The listing in The New Yorker said: "Smarts and whimsy intermingle freely and charmingly in the work of the singer-songwriter Karen Mantler." It was a wonderful concert. The packed house consisted of some of the best musicians in New York, including my mother and Steve Swallow. Carla liked the band so much that she suggested we plan to do a recording for her label XtraWatt in the fall. We played again at Barbe s in September and then went into the studio to record the basic tracks for my album in October.

Another musician that attended those shows was Anton Fier. He asked if I would like to join his band, The Golden Palominos, for two concerts he had coming up. I jumped at the chance! When I was a teenager, my mother played in that band and I had done all the transcribing for her. I still had all the charts I had written in big purple magic marker.

Unfortunately, he wasn't playing that music. This version of the band featured two singer-songwriters, Lori Carson and Lianne Smith (both of whom Anton had produced albums for). This was no problem for me though, as transcribing music is one of my specialties, and I was just so thrilled to finally become a Golden Palomino. The other members of the band were Tony Scherr and Aaron Lee Tasjan on guitar, Chris Morrisey on bass and Anton on drums. I played synthesizer, harmonica and sang background vocals. In December we played at the Detroit Institute of Arts and a few weeks later in New York at Les Poisson Rouge.

During the winter of 2013 I continued working on my recording with Kato Hideki at his studio in Brooklyn.

Tony Scherr and Anton played every Monday at The Living Room in New York City and I was invited to sit in on organ and harmonica, which I did several times. Anton encouraged me to get out more and become a part of the lower east side music scene, so I started accepting offers to sit in with just about anybody who asked. It was a good education to give up my usual method of meticulous transcription and tireless preparation for a gig. I even started memorizing music!

A list of the places and people I sat in with that winter: The Rockwood Music Hall with Brittany Anjou, Joe's Pub with Carol Lipnik, Littlefield with Pete Galub, and the PATH Café with John Kruth.

It was fun and I learned a lot, but all this took time (I still couldn't exactly "wing it") and I was relieved when Brittany Anjou called me to offer a gig that actually paid something. She was doing a recreation of the Portishead album "Live at Roseland" and I sang two songs for that performance in July at Les Poisson Rouge. After that I decided enough was enough. I needed to go back to some more complicated music.

In November Hal Willner contacted Carla and me for another Nino Rota tribute at the Barbican in London. Once again, we presented our arrangements of 8 ½ and The Godfather. Other arrangers included Steven Bernstein, Kate St. John and Michael Gibbs. The special guest singers were Richard Strange and Marc Almond.

The following week I played another gig with my trio at Barbe's and this time so many people showed up that some of them couldn't even get in. Finally, after 5 years of catching up with all the writing I hadn't done for the previous 7 years I can proudly announced that my new CD, Business Is Bad, will be released this spring.

Karen Mantler Discography

as a leader:

Business Is Bad (XtraWatt/14)
Karen Mantler's Pet Project (Virgin Classics)
Farewell (XtraWatt/8)
Karen Mantler And Her Cat Arnold Get The Flu (XtraWatt/5)
My Cat Arnold (XtraWatt/3)

with others:

Appearing Nightly (Carla Bley – Watt/33)
Verlaine (John Greaves – Harmonia Mundi)
Looking For America (Carla Bley – Watt/31)
Cuckooland (Robert Wyatt - Rycodisc)
South Of Lafayette (Artie Traum - Roaring Stream Records)
The School Of Understanding (Michael Mantler - ECM)
The Carla Bley Big Band Goes To Church (Carla Bley - Watt/27)
The Duplex Planet Radio Hour (David Greenberger - Carrot Top Records)
Big Band Theory (Carla Bley - Watt/25)
It's There (Motohiko Hino - Fun House/Gramavision)
Folly Seeing All This (Michael Mantler - ECM)
Sailing Stone (Motohiko Hino - Fun House/Gramavision)
Swallow (Steve Swallow - XtraWatt/6)
Carried Away (Robbie Dupree - Village Green/Gold Castle)
The Very Big Carla Bley Band (Carla Bley - Watt/23)
The Watt Works Family Album (Watt/22)
Fleur Carnivore (Carla Bley - Watt/21)
I Can't Stand Another Night... (Steve Weisberg - XtraWatt/1)
Musique Mecanique (Carla Bley - Watt/9)
Tropic Appetites (Carla Bley - Watt/1)
Escalator Over The Hill (Carla Bley - JCOA/EOTH)