

Photo by Scott McCormick

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Defying genre:

Local artist Coles Whalen refuses to be classified

By Holly Hatch

Each new tune from Denver's local Coles Whalen and band is a new experience – transitioning smoothly through upbeat country to intimate soulful acoustics. Whalen's voice soars powerfully and effortlessly through a crowded concert hall, her band known for keeping its audiences surprised and moving along in tempo.

Touring the country multiple times, Whalen has held steadfast her fan-following and musical footing in Colorado. She spent two years in Nashville with big-name country recording artists, rediscovering a voice of intimacy and uncharted flavor. After spending more than two years writing and recording to redefine her style and sound, Whalen's efforts will soon pay off. Whalen and her bandmates are excitedly announcing the Feb. 25 release party at Casselman's Bar and Venue for their new album, *I Did This For You*.

During our exclusive interview, the petite and mysterious Whalen spoke unabashedly about her sexuality, her new album, finding beauty in struggle and the band mate who helped make it possible.

Now that you've toured all over, what makes Denver audiences special?
Denver is a really active city; it's a progressive city, growing so much. More and more things are starting to happen here. I think there's an energy that flows through everyone in the community. So when you put on a live show, people are more personally encouraged to come out. And, Denver people have a lot of pride in their own city. They want to support local people, which is one of the main reasons I moved back.

You identify as bisexual?
Not really, I really hate that word. I think technically that's what I am; I'd much rather describe myself as 'sexually-fluid.' My life is a very intricate puzzle piece that needs a match. There's not a lot of give there, so if I can find a person who fills in those gaps that's a pretty unique thing.

You haven't wanted to talk about your sexuality before. What changed?
The thing I came up against the most when trying to describe my sexuality is the gay people I was talking to think that if you don't identify as a lesbian, than you're a coward. Straight people are like, "can I get in on that?" they don't take it seriously. So here I am, fighting on both sides to be taken seriously, and it just sucks. So I stopped talking about it, for a while. It didn't seem worth the fight.

But my idea of what my sexuality is has changed a lot over the last ten years. It feels like it's ever-evolving and it will continue to evolve.

What's your philosophy of love?
Well, love, yeah love is such a tricky thing, isn't it? I think mostly its just about understanding a person and knowing how to fit your life into their life. Which is, for me, a difficult thing because it's a complicated lifestyle that we have, ya know? And I think – (laughs) and I hate to say this – but I really think sex is the last thing on my list as far as love is concerned. When I am looking for love I don't think actual physical attention is as important as being able to connect with somebody. (Laughs again) I'm blushing. It's really hard to describe.

Do you think those struggles helped you develop your music?
Yes! Yes. We've had lots of discussions about how my songs are really gender-neutral, which I didn't do on purpose. It's just that you try to be as honest as possible and that's the way it was written. People ask me all the time whether I write about women or men, and I tell them I don't want to color anyone else's experience of the songs, except what you would gather as you personally experience it. Does it really have to have a gender on it? Hopefully not.

What is your biggest hope for your music?
Wow, that's a very grandiose question. I guess one of my main goals of my music is that it helps people escape from the hardships they are going through right now. The economy is shit, people are really having a hard time, but we have noticed that there hasn't been a decrease in attendance at our shows. And I think that's because it really gives people, not necessarily hope, but just a release where they can dance and sing along. The new record is really happy, so I hope it re-ignites people's personal enjoyment and joyfulness.

Talk to me a little bit about the importance of the music industry in the LGBT community.
I think that it's important to remember that within the struggle there's a lot of beauty still. I would hope that art of any kind can remind people of that. We try to give back as much as we can – we do the HRC gala, we do all the charitable gigs – and just through the music we can hopefully make people's situations better in small ways.

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