

LOCAL YOKEL :: SUSAN RUSSELL

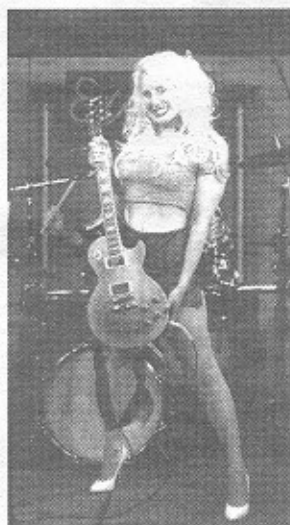
THE HOST OF "EXPOSE" REVEALS MORE
THAN UR BARGAINED FOR

By Jennifer Wehunt

At first doubletake, Susan Russell is the epitome of hair band groupie, a bombshell maxima with bigger than life bouffant and tinier than FCC-approved wardrobe. With her shoulders-back, chest-forward posture and She-Ra stance, she almost draws a giggle. But Russell's the one with the last laugh.

A graduate of the School of the Art Institute (Bachelor's) and Columbia College (Master's), and an active visual and performance artist, Russell has hosted her own Chicago-based TV show, "Expose," for more than two years, first on cable access, later nationally syndicated, now airing on CAN-TV. Each episode features Russell interviewing an artist, actor or, most commonly, band or musician, sometimes big names in the shadow of their glory (Vanilla Ice, Motley Crue's Vince Neil), sometimes local metalsmiths-in-the-making.

In a conversation with *UR*, Russell sends a subtle, subversive message to her male-skewing audience: There's more here than meets the eye-popping eye.



You've had a pretty diverse past, but it seems like music has always been a substantial part of your life. Yes, definitely. I started playing violin at age 4, and I even played Carnegie Hall. As a teenager, I got into rock & roll, and (with band TV Set), I played the Chicago club circuit. Later on, when I decided to do this show for me, it was nothing to think about; it had to be about music.

When did you move to Chicago? I've been in Chicago for over 10 years, and I've been doing the show for a couple of years now. I call it "Expose," and people associate that with different connotations. I think exposure is the best thing a performer can get; it breathes life into an artist. We've had some big names (REO Speedwagon, Tesla), but the bulk of the show is interviewing up-and-comers who are hungry for exposure. And since TV is mainstream, it's not like a club that you have to pay to get in; TV is accessible and available constantly.

You were previously on the cable access show "Motorsports Unlimited." What lessons did you take away for starting your own show? There were aspects I was diametrically opposed to, and then there were aspects I appreciated. I did develop a good fan base, and it also taught me how to put a whole production together.

I'm a perfectionist in many ways and detail-oriented in ways others aren't. And just philosophically, the position of women in that show ... I think women can be easily stereotyped as different types of images, and that show definitely had a Las Vegas-style association. When I was on that show, I always tried to be very vocal; I wanted to have an in-depth interview as opposed to something too casual, friendly or shallow. I tried to use that time to find out something new that I knew nothing about previously — like the engine of the car — so that the interview would have some kind of gravity.

People commented on that contradiction, that I was standing there with that outfit on — a leopard leotard, spike heels, feathers — and espousing something with some intellectual content. So when I started my own show, I took that with me, but I toned it down; I modified what I wore and created something of my own.

Even toned down, some of your outfits still support a certain stereotype about women. What I aim for is an image that will arrest the viewer and make them draw a certain conclusion, and then I manipulate them to make them realize they've drawn the wrong conclusion. I'm trying to create a stir in that respect.

At Columbia, I did a performance art piece called "Superheroine" that pointed out and exaggerated women's characteristics. Women have to realize there's something intimidating in that, so I play on the empowerment women have.

It draws from when I was growing up in the Bronx without a father; I grew up in areas where I was scared of bad things happening. A few bad things did happen — my mother pounding on the door, being mugged by heroine junkies. I took that fear, and instead of letting it consume me, I took it the other direction. I use the same persona on the show.

I also learned to treat everyone with respect. Anyone who comes on my show, I try to make them feel good about themselves. Then, when camera is on them, they won't hold back, because they feel the best about themselves. If there's tension on set, which occurred at the other show, people don't feel as comfortable opening up.

My
wor
dec
eme

assi
plan
all t
befo

sex
ing

cor
ably

for
this
an h
the

fire
get

afte

Got

H

LI
I
TO
OF

W
YO
A

