

# From Glenburnie to centre stage

Deanna Johnston is one of 15 finalists vying to be the lead singer for rockers INXS

By Emily Sangster  
For The Whig-Standard

IF NOT FOR A YOUTH-FUL BETRAYAL, Deanna Johnston might never have stepped on a stage.

"When she was in her early 20s, Johnston dated a young man with many friends in the Kingston music scene.

"The relationship didn't last.

"He ended up cheating on me with one of the singers in the band," she said in a telephone interview from her home in Los Angeles.

"I was young and insecure and thought that if I learned how to sing, then maybe I would be loved more, or something," she said.

"That was my pathetic reason for starting."

Johnston is anything but pathetic today.

The performer from Glenburnie wrought musical success from heartache and now has a thriving entertainment career in California.

Now the 36-year-old has a shot at rock-and-roll superstardom.

Johnston is one of 15 finalists chosen from around the world for the reality



Deanna Johnston belts out a song during *Rockstar: INXS*

television show *Rockstar: INXS*, which premieres on CBS July 11.

The finalists are vying for the chance to take the place of former frontman Michael Hutchence as the lead singer of the Australian rock supergroup INXS.

Hutchence was found dead in a Sydney hotel room in 1997.

The winning artist will be handed a band, a new recording project and a world tour as part of one of rock's

biggest groups.

Hutchence may not be replaceable, and Johnston said that's not her goal. Instead, she said, her own established singing career might get a boost.

"There's a good chance of some doors opening, and I'm not quite sure what they'll be," she told *The Whig-Standard*.

"I'd be crazy not to do this."

Johnston's career is rooted in the Kingston music scene. A graduate of Ernestown Secondary School and St.

Lawrence College, she took piano lessons as a child but didn't stay interested in music.

"I totally didn't get it or like it," she said.

She didn't think seriously about music again until the dating relationship in the early 1990s that sparked her interest in the city's local bands.

"It's just big enough to be hip - there's a good music scene in Kingston," she said. "I eventually wanted to start [performing] myself."

Her boyfriend's dalliance kick-started her efforts and revealed her talent.

She was soon singing for local acts Gravity and 1-900 and spending hours at A.J.'s Hangar, which she remembers as the city's prime rock venue.

Under the guidance of local classic rockers Little Betty and a 1-900 bandmate, bassist Wil McGonegal - both of whom she still considers significant influences - Johnston began to dream of making a living at music.

"[McGonegal] is the one who inspired me to think of music as a career, and that I needed to go for it more than just a weekend hobby," she said. "He said, 'You have what it takes, and you really need to pursue it.'"

She took her "raspy, smoky" Janis Joplin voice out west with a band called Lois Lane.

The band spent two years touring Canada and five years based in Vancouver, performing covers and original material in venues all over B.C.

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# 'I figured out that I can make a living singing'

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The band cut a CD, *Mary Magdalene*, in 1997 but Johnston wasn't ready to make B.C. her final destination. Still seeking to grow as an artist, she took the advice of a producer friend and packed off to Los Angeles in 1999.

That producer was the only person she knew there but the move proved to be worth it.

"There's so much happening in L.A., a lot more opportunity, more money, and just a better chance," she said.

For the past six years, Johnston has been one of four lead singers and dancers for the energetic, nine-piece corporate party band The Most Valuable Players.

Her work with them has taken her across North America and as far away as Hawaii and Finland. The band has performed with artists like Ray Charles and Santana.

"[The MVPs] have been my musical source and my personal source," she said. "They've been great friends and [a] sort of family unit for me in L.A."

The MVPs were also the source of the *Rockstar* opportunity when a bandmate auditioning for the show's studio band told Johnston about the search for contestants.

At the end of February this year, Johnston tried her luck in front of *Rockstar* producers at The Whisky, a well-known Hollywood rock club. She said she couldn't pass up the prospect of performing in front of industry experts in her genre.

"I'm a rock singer in an R&B world here in L.A.," she said. "It's been hard to fit into that mould, so this was something that was actually what I was all about."

Johnston said she seized the opportunity to let loose with Led Zepplin's *Rock and Roll*.

"I'm a little nervous, a little bit on the way," she said. "As long as I'm giving up some sort of emotional energy that's what I'm into. I just like people to feel."

She produced an equally accomplished rendition of The Eurythmics' *Would I Lie to You* for one of a series of callbacks, this time with INXS in attendance.

The seasoned Johnston claimed she wasn't fazed by the audition hype. Unlike scores of young *Canadian Idol* contestants, she doesn't get nervous on stage.

"The performing part's easy," she said. "It's just interviews - trying to

St. Lawrence convinced her a career in music was a better option.

"Nine to five is just not for me," she said. "You work your butt off and you're always doing something wrong."

In music, she said, people relate immediately to her work.

"One person saying, 'I really enjoyed your performance' is so much more rewarding than a day job for me."

And although she has written her own material, particularly for *Mary Magdalene*, Johnston is happy covering other bands' music. She's even part of an all-women Ozzy Osbourne tribute band, The Little Dolls.

"I figured out that I can make a living singing," she said. "I didn't have to 'make it' and be on the radio."

Los Angeles has proved personally fulfilling as well, she added. In her six years there, she's settled in with a house, a car and a husband, Chuck Sparks, a drummer and musical producer she married last April.

Now that her last remaining family in Ontario - parents Grant and Pauline Johnston - have moved from Odessa to British Columbia, Johnston can stay close to them from Los Angeles.

Her three sisters, who also live in B.C., are following her *Rockstar* progress with interest, Johnston said.

True to her mellow persona, Johnston said she's going to use the *Rockstar* experience to improve her music and learn from her fellow competitors, whether or not she succeeds Michael Hutchence.

"I have lots of work and I earn a living, so I've already made it, on a certain level," she said, "so anything extra is wonderful."

"I'll just be ready and waiting."

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