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ARTS AND LEISURE GUIDE

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Yet there is hope even for women who choose to submit to the whims of a Svengali like Phil Spector, who managed the careers of many early girl groups. Joan Jett eventually broke away from the Runaways and forged a memorable career in the 80's and early 90's that has made her something of a godmother to several waves of female musicians with loud guitars and idealistic dreams. One of Ms. Jett's biggest fans is Susan James, 25, a heavily courted Los Angeles singer-songwriter on the cusp of success.

ON A SATURDAY NIGHT IN April inside Largo, the West Hollywood club renowned as a petri dish for next big things, the atmosphere before one of Ms. James's concerts is upbeat and expectant. The small room is packed with glad-handing talent scouts.

That Largo is the place to be is confirmed by the presence of the actor and director Ben Stiller, the avatar of Hollywood hip. Also present is Rodney Bingenheimer, a disk jockey at the Los Angeles Top 40 radio station KROQ. Mr. Bingenheimer has been front and center for seemingly every rock happening since hippies rampaged up Sunset Boulevard in the great music riots of the late 60's. Most recently he championed the music of the rocker Ani DiFranco.

"Susan James is among the best of the new breed of women musicians who are going to set the industry on its ear," Mr. Bingenheimer says. "I was the first one to play Susan on the radio in Los Angeles because I think she's the new Ani DiFranco, the latest talented woman who has told the major labels to take a hike because she doesn't want to be a fad; she wants a career."

Indeed, Ms. James, who runs her own record label, Major Label Records, out of her one-room apartment in the San Fernando Valley, ignores the music-business types



working the room before her show, a one-night engagement, to schmooze with friends who have come to see her perform.

During the show, Ms. James, a master of the electric guitar who studied opera and musicology at the University of California at Los Angeles, rips through material from her critically praised 1996 album "Shocking Pink Banana Seat" and also performs some new tunes. With blond locks flying, she lurches between the experimental vocal stylings of Sinead O'Connor and the funky showmanship of P. J. Harvey.

Working as a secretary during the day to pay the bills, she has already opened for such disparate performers as the Grateful Dead guitarist Bob Weir, the avant-garde

bassist Rob Wasserman and Lindsay Buckingham, formerly of Fleetwood Mac. says she is happy to take her time remain the boss of her career.

"The same people who are so desperate sign me to a record label deal right now 'woman musician' are the same ones who cut me loose in a second if my first album for them didn't sell a million copies," said after her show. "I'd rather keep selling my records out of the trunk of my car keep developing as an artist so that when I do make my move nobody can turn me something that disappears when the flavor-of-the-month comes along."

"I don't want to be a trend. I want to be rock-and-roll."