Musician who got start in Richmond joins Owen in ‘American Idol’ Top 24

BY COLLEEN CURRAN
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Rayvon Owen isn’t the only contestant with Richmond roots to make it to the Top 24 on “American Idol.”

Joey Cook, 23, who plays accordion and ukulele, lived in Richmond for four years and got her musical start at such venues as Poe’s Pub. She made it to the Top 24 on Wednesday night’s episode of “Idol.”

She currently divides her time between Woodbridge and New Orleans but said, “I really love Richmond. It’s one of my favorite places. Richmond has a huge music scene.”

Cook moved here when her sister was attending Virginia Commonwealth University. Cook took a few classes at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College and started playing open-mic nights around town.

“I was actually intimidated by the musicians in town,” Cook said in a phone interview. “I was this little 18-year-old with a ukulele. It wasn’t until I started going to Strange Matter all the time that I realized, ‘That should be me up there.’”

Cook started performing as a street musician in Carytown, something she still does in New Orleans. She also began playing accordion in Richmond when a friend loaned her a squeezbox. The accordion is now her signature sound and part of her appeal on “Idol.”

Cook lived in Richmond’s Fan and Museum districts before moving to Church Hill, where she lived out of her car for a few months. Then she and a group of like-minded artists rented a house in Church Hill and turned it into an art collective called “The People’s Art House of Richmond.”

“I wrote my entire album while I was living there. I played Poe’s Pub open mic every night,” she said. “That was the moment I realized that I’d rather be doing this for the rest of my life and broke than work as a receptionist and hate my life.”

Cook recorded an album of ukulele love songs on her iPhone using voice memo. It’s available for download by donation on Bandcamp, an online music platform.

Wednesday night, she performed at the House of Blues in Los Angeles, powering her way to the Top 24 contestants.

Next up, she will travel to The Fillmore Detroit theater, where the Top 12 women will sing for the judges and for America’s vote on Thursday at 8 p.m. on FOX.

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