

IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS, a soft, rose-grey fog rolls in from the Pacific Ocean, shrouding beach communities like Santa Monica and Venice in a moist murmur. By noon, the warm sun will burn away the clouds, but that gentle feeling often lingers, dewdrops on leaves, reminding residents of nature's presence amid the urban setting. This is one of those special, seemingly immutable things about living in Los Angeles—just one of many reasons people come and stay. ¶ Over the last five years, LA has experienced its share of tumult, dealing with a troubled national economy and a fresh wave of Californians heading eastward for new opportunities. People began to wonder and worry: Could it be that LA, which has exerted such a powerful pull on the global imagination, was losing its sway? More than a century after Hollywood began spinning out stories here, was this town still a magnet for dreamers and a window to the future? ¶ Through a series of portraits, we take the city's pulse to rediscover what draws people here, and what keeps people here. A marketing mogul, a radio personality, a painter, an acting coach, an environmentalist, a musician. What we find with each is an intensified entrepreneurial mind-set, in which there is rarely one singular path to success. This is enriched by a city that inspires—indeed, demands—passionate self-expression. With an openness to new ideas, an expanding sense of possibility and a readiness to work hard, these ambitious Angelenos are not looking back at the city that was, but looking forward to what can be.

Six Los Angeles Portraits. By Steven Beschloss Photography by Dave Lauridsen

DREAMLAND



Janet Robin

Musician | West Hollywood

LA native Janet Robin calls her second-storey home studio "Robin's Nest." It's a cosy, sunny spot in West Hollywood—"my little tree house," she says—where you can hear the birds singing when Robin's not playing guitar or singing herself. A world-class rock guitarist who has been performing professionally for three decades, Robin has toured with the likes of Fleetwood Mac's Lindsey Buckingham and Air Supply.

But in recent years she's decided to focus on her solo career as a singer-songwriter, recording several albums augmented by live shows, with an expanding portfolio that includes teaching, producing demos for other artists, occasional sessions gigs, and scoring for film and TV. "You really have to think outside the box if you want to be a successful working musician," she says. "My life is full. I'm not rich and famous, but I'm doing what I love."

While Robin may wax nostalgic over the vibrant club scene on the Sunset Strip for rock bands in the 1970s and '80s, she remains convinced that LA is, for her, the only place to be. **"You still have really creative people flocking here trying to make it," she says. "There is still a lot of opportunity here."** She enjoys touring Europe or playing in such music towns as Nashville and Austin, but she's always glad to get home. "I love it here," she says. "I'm an LA girl. Period."



Shane Guffogg

Painter | **Hollywood**

Shane Guffogg creates paintings that draw the subconscious into the conscious. There is a meditative quality to his work—"in the viewing and in the making," he says—and a multi-layered experience of light that pulls you in and holds you. Guffogg has a strong sense of place, enhanced by living in LA. ***"There's an energy to this city that I feel in sync with," he says. "My paintings are directly influenced by it."***

A California native with a Hollywood studio, Guffogg describes the "ceiling" he felt when he spent time in Chicago—a sense that you can only go so far. Living in New York City, as well, "I felt very stifled." Even in the open spaces of New Hampshire, where he went to paint, "nothing really happened." But LA "doesn't seem to have a ceiling on it."

Guffogg has made the most of this sense of possibility, launching artist groups to showcase fellow painters and frequently hosting dinner parties with a diverse list of guests. "Everyone is here for a reason," he says. "Unless they're very famous, people are open to meeting and exchanging ideas." And that includes buyers from around the world, who have discovered the burgeoning art scene. "Who would have thought that LA would be a destination for serious art collectors and dealers?" he asks. "Suddenly, LA has become a vital place where art is being made and viewed."

Madisun Leigh

Radio Personality | **Los Angeles**

An on-air radio personality from Detroit, Madisun Leigh first came to California in 2011 and moved to LA full-time less than two years ago. She's still trying to find her way, she admits, a common refrain from newcomers. Still, Leigh is bursting with enthusiasm for her new home: ***"Driving is one of my favourite things—the topography, the geography, the climate, the mountains. I'm driving and I've never seen it before. I'm in wonder."***

As inspiring as the scenery may be, it's the personal connections she has forged that have made her life into something new, "like black and white versus Technicolor," she says. "I'm not really into schmoozing, but I've found that it's been easier to make things happen here—faster—than anywhere else. People get me. Everywhere I look, I see me. . . . Everyone is interested and willing to share their contacts and information. I haven't found that anywhere else."

Leigh is tapping into the film business, working as a creative executive at a production company, seeking more voice-over work and producing a documentary. While film and television may dominate the conversation in LA, and still define the dream for many, she is convinced that the city's limitless potential goes well beyond any single industry. "I'm black, gay, middle-aged, slightly overweight," she says. "I'm just a girl from Detroit—and LA has completely embraced me."





Marjo-Riikka Makela

Acting Coach | Los Angeles

As an acting coach, Marjo-Riikka Makela talks to her students about the importance of empathy, trust and joy, three qualities that enable them to become not only better at their craft, but also happier human beings. Makela, a native of Finland, practices what she preaches, a process made easier by her choice of professions and her choice of homes. ***"I love Los Angeles. I love that people are allowed to be happy here," she says. "I am happy. I'm living with a purpose."***

Makela first came to LA a decade ago for graduate school, then started her own enterprise, Chekhov Studio International, in 2009, amid the economic downturn. "It was the worst timing," she says. "I didn't sleep much the first year." But she was determined to do what she loved, even if some of her students could not pay her at first and the city's competition was stiff.

Through those initial worries, friends and clients sustained her by reminding her how much she was needed. She didn't expect it: "I was overwhelmed with gratitude." Today she runs a successful business that trains newcomers and high-profile actors alike, working "26 hours a day" pursuing her passion. "I love this town because people are really open to new ideas," Makela says. And whereas "maybe as a Finnish person, you don't really dream out loud," she says, in LA, "now I really am living a dream."

Ken Markman

Entrepreneur | Los Angeles

Ken Markman has scored more than US\$2 billion in licensing deals, and marketed or licensed the rights to more than 450 movies and hundreds of hours of children's animation and television programming. A self-described "myth-maker of the storytellers," he came to California from New York in the 1970s, worked at a number of major film studios, then decided to follow his entrepreneurial instincts and launch KKM Global Brand Strategies 17 years ago. ***"I wanted to write my own story—and this is the place that lets me do that,"*** says Markman, who also teaches marketing at the UCLA extension school.

While movie posters and one-sheets may be the lexicon of his trade, he's thought a great deal about how to give voice to the unique characteristics of LA and why it remains such a powerful lure. In short, this is a place "to dream things that never were," he says, where "fantasy fulfilment drives people," giving them the feeling that they "want to be something more."

True, this quest is riddled with the threat of rejection and failure. But Markman is deeply optimistic about his city's and state's continuing impact—and why the ambitious who hear the siren call can still succeed. "Talent always wins out," he insists. Talent and something more: "It takes passion, persuasion, persistence, personality, perseverance—and it's entirely personal."





Benjamin *Kay*

Marine Biology Teacher | **Santa Monica**

Some weekend mornings you might find Benjamin Kay riding his surfboard, but most days his biggest thrills come in the classrooms at Santa Monica High School and Santa Monica College. Trained as a marine biologist, with experience researching the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, this California native and environmental advocate delights in sharing his enthusiasm. “I love teaching science, conducting research and working with students,” he says. ***“I’m very passionate about protecting the environment and introducing students to what’s happening on the planet and how to think critically and find solutions.”***

There might be other places where the 35-year-old Kay could pursue his passion to protect the planet and its ecosystems. But here he has found a forward-minded community that truly cares about making a difference. This has helped motivate such after-school projects as measuring the impact of a citywide plastic-bag ban, converting a 1971 Volkswagen Beetle to all-electric, and helping build a functioning boat with 15,000 recycled plastic bottles. “There are enough people here who are awake to the science and awake to the reality of what’s going on,” Kay says.

While Kay gives the credit for his passion to his students, his energy is palpable—and infectious. “We can get things done here,” he says. “We can keep setting a higher plateau.” ■

Steven Beschloss is a writer and filmmaker whose work appears in outlets including *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker* online. He has been based in New York, London, Helsinki, Moscow—and L.A.