
Mad Folk NEWS

Newsletter of the Madison Folk Music Society

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Susan Werner celebrates CD release here April 7

Chicago-based songwriter Susan Werner is known nationwide for her spirited, and often hilarious, live performances. She returns to Madison's Wilmar Center, (953 Jennifer Street, Madison, WI), on Saturday, April 7, 2007 at 8 p.m. to celebrate the release of her new CD, *The Gospel Truth*.

Iowa farm girl Susan Werner began playing guitar at age five and piano at age 11. With a strong musical background from the University of Iowa and Temple University in Philadelphia, Werner dreamed of opera stardom. But when friends and musical colleagues heard the wit and warmth in her original songs, they insisted she bring them to a wider audience. It wasn't long before Werner was touring with the likes of Richard Thompson and Joan Armatrading. Since then, she's been hailed as "one of the most innovative songwriters working today." (*Chicago Tribune*).

While Werner's CDs are often found in folk bins at record stores, she's not easily categorized. "The music industry loves to pigeonhole recording artists," Werner says, "but I like to see myself as having more of a painter's career, giving myself the freedom to try entirely new things, to incorporate new colors, new language into my songs."

Her 2004 release, *I Can't Be New*, was a throwback to the tin pan alley days of Harold Arlen & Cole Porter. In 2001, she offered up pure folk-rockin' goodness with *New Non-Fiction*, and combined folk, jazz & blues in the critically acclaimed *Time Between Trains* (1998).

With *The Gospel Truth*, Werner has jumped genres yet again, while also capturing the dynamic performance energy and presence that have long set her apart. Beneath her stunning vocals & instrumental work, Grammy Award-winning producer/engineer Glen Barratt paints a folkie new-grass backdrop that hums with organic warmth and gospel power.



Werner claims onstage that she's created the world's first "evangelical agnostic gospel album," but the doubtful and devout alike will enjoy her characteristic quirky humor and soulful searching.

"Overall, these songs convey my belief that doubt and faith can reside side by side in a good person," says

Werner. "Some of these tunes are uncertain and distrusting, for sure, but some of these seem more beautiful and true than I'd ever written in any other style on any other project. And I had to go back to church to get them."

To learn more about Susan Werner and to preview clips from *The Gospel Truth*, visit www.susanwerner.com.

Tickets for Susan Werner's performance are \$14 advance/\$16 at the door and can be purchased at any of the following outlets: Borders Books East & West, B-side Compact Discs & tapes, Orange Tree Imports, Spruce Tree Music, and Steep'n'Brew on Odana Road. Call 608-846-9214 for more information, or visit www.madfolk.org. Non-perishable food items will be collected at this show for local food banks.

Helen Schneyer Scholarship to fund folk music education

In an effort to encourage the next generation of folk musicians, the Madison Folk Music Society has established The Helen Schneyer Memorial Scholarship to fund folk music lessons of the applicant's choice. Two scholarships of \$300 in lessons per year will be awarded annually, to be paid directly to the folk music instructor of choice. Budding folk musicians of all ages are encouraged to apply.

The scholarship is named in honor of the late great folk singer Helen Schneyer, who has played memorable house concerts in Madison at the home of her sister, Mad Folk member Mona Wasow. Upon Helen's death on July 16, 2005, in Vermont, Mona's colleagues from the UW School of Social Work took up a collection in her honor, which Mona contributed to the Madison Folk Music Society. The funds were initially used to bring Ed Trickett to Madison for a Spring, 2006 memorial concert, at which contributions were added for an additional memorial.

Helen Schneyer was known for her renditions of lugubrious ballads, work songs, African-American spirituals and Baptist hymns, which she sang, among other places, on *Prairie Home Companion*, at the White House at the request of Eleanor Roosevelt, and in Mona Wasow's living room. She shared the stage with



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Scholarship

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many of America's best-known folk singers and songwriters, including Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, who urged her at an early age to sing.

To apply: A simple application form can be downloaded from the Mad Folk web site or by writing to Mad Folk, P.O. Box 665, Madison, WI 53701.

Applications will also be available at Spruce Tree Music and Madison Music. Applicants should identify the folk music teacher with whom they wish to study before applying; scholarships will be paid in advance, directly to the instructor. Deadline for applications is September 1 annually.

Winners will be announced and presented at the Madfolk annual meeting in October.

Help keep it going! Tax deductible contributions to continue this memorial scholarship may be made payable to Madison Folk Music Society, with "Helen Schneyer Scholarship Fund" noted in the memo portion, and sent to Mad Folk, P.O. Box 665, Madison, WI

53701. This can be done at any time including when dues are submitted. In addition, there will be a donation box at Madfolk events to allow for

donations to the fund as inspired by the moment. In this way, Mad Folk hopes to ensure that there is a new generation who will attempt to replace those who have gone on to sing in the "Angel Band."

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All Strung Up

by Greg Linder

When I first began reviewing performances and recordings more than 30 years ago in the Twin Cities, many music critics felt entrenched in the ennobled soil of cultural combat, waging a battle that was moral, not just musical. Lester Bangs, Paul Williams, Jon Landau, Lenny Kaye, and many others raved about what they believed was great (anti-establishment, generation-validating) music and ranted tirelessly about bad (evil and corporate-fostered) music. The mortal enemies of the music revolution had us surrounded by then-soft rock, adult contemporary programming, radio-bland bands like Foreigner and Boston, lowbrow heavy metal, nostalgia parasites like Sha Na Na, disco, wimpy singer-songwriters, boardroom-created supergroups, and purveyors of the banal in all disguises.

From my home base in Minneapolis-St. Paul, I did my share of demonizing and my share of evangelizing. I stomped on radio-rich Boston with a highly against-the-grain review titled—“Less Than a Feeling.” I exalted the rock and roll renewal presentations of Bruce Springsteen, a young George Thorogood, Elvis Costello, Patti Smith, REM, and Tom Petty, and sang the praises of local heroes like bluesman Willie Murphy, the Jayhawks, the Sussman Lawrence Band (which spawned Peter Himmelman), and others. I also fell hard for a covey of songwriters ranging from Townes Van Zandt to Jackson Browne, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Randy Newman, Lyle Lovett, Steve Earle, Leonard Cohen, the Roches, Joni Mitchell, the McGarrigles, and so forth. Many remain iconic to me even now.

In those days I fought in print on behalf of something I vaguely defined as “important music.” Today such an attitude seems profoundly old-fashioned, even delusional. There is no longer a good fight to fight, unless you’re a pumped-up advocate of death rock or some other fringe music, which I am not. The music revolution has long since been squelched and seems an illusory commotion in retrospect. It was, after all, only rock and roll—or folk music, or bluegrass, or whatever. We were fighting for the poisoned real estate of mass persuasion, which we had no chance of attaining and wouldn’t have wanted had it been thrust in our laps.

However, we do have considerable territory left to us. Most notably, we have the value of the music itself—as various and sundry as ever despite the industry’s heavyhanded efforts to standardize and commodify it. And we have freedom. Knee-jerk moral judgments need not be made; minds need not be snapped shut. We can approach the music with reasonable expectations, asking only that it entertain and occasionally enlighten or inspire us. If a given breed of music represents an insidious trend foisted upon us by the recording industry, we’ll recognize it. We are, if nothing else, market-savvy and hip to their tricks. We can simply listen elsewhere or tune out altogether. We can be less about moral and more about aural.

As a result, my perspective today is drastically altered. Especially in the context of this newsletter, I see no point in self-righteously ripping anyone’s music to shreds—or even in writing predominantly negative reviews. Many of the performers we’ll feature here have paid their dues and then some but are still scraping to make a living. Others have yet to venture giving up their day jobs. A few may be homeless folks who sleep on hardshell guitar cases inside of cardboard boxes. What’s the point of

picking on them? “Folk” performers of all stripes have a hard enough time already. So instead of taking my pet peeves out for a monthly walk, I intend to use this limited space to comment on recordings that I feel have some merit. The others can just pass on by. The only exception to this public-service philosophy might occur when a major performer releases a deeply disappointing CD. In such a case, I may attempt to issue a warning label.

For the record, I’ll employ the loosest possible definition of folk music. It may include roots music, ethnic music, world music, protest, singer-songwriters, traditional folk and bluegrass, newgrass, medieval music, folk rock, new age, old age, middle age, and just about anything else that strikes me as having a connection with “folks.” Consider yourself forewarned.

Just one more note to my unwieldy preface. Though I reviewed music for some years, I’m something of a rusty nail these days. I’ll need to ask your forbearance. As a friend of mine often writes in her e-mails, “Please read with forgiving eyes.” That goes for you, too. After all, if I make too many mistakes you can always haul off and fire me.

Now on to the primary subject. The music.

Hayward Williams, *Another Sailor’s Dream* (Machine 1). Williams, a Milwaukeean, is 26 years old but looks much younger. During his “first major car tour” with Jeffrey Foucault this month, he joked that most audience members guess his age at between 13 and 17 (I had him pegged for 20). He is grasshopper-thin with long hair that hangs limply over his bespectacled eyes, and in live performance he never quite dares to look directly at the crowd through his thick lenses. He is low-key and self-deprecating, but his music, both live and on CD, evidences firm backbone and in fact real fire. *Sailor’s Dream* is a brand-new release preceded, I believe, by just one EP, and it has its rough edges but mostly from the perspective of production. One track sounds coffeehouse-live, featuring just Hayward and his guitar. The next is rawboned and propulsive, snare-driven folk rock sounding for all the world like Dylan and the Band tearing it up in somebody’s basement. Ten of the 11 tunes are original, and if you’ve been listening long enough you might hear similarities to Bruce Cockburn and Warren Zevon in Williams’ intense and brooding but understated delivery. One characteristic of a Williams song seems to be avoidance of the obvious. This makes remembering the titles of his songs a challenge. For example, a song in which the repeated lyrical motif is “daddy’s little girl” turns out to be entitled “Problems with Hemingway.” But throughout, the lyrics are thoughtful and prone to taking unexpected turns, and the intensity of his performance is unwavering. The CD’s last track offers quite a surprise ending. Williams deconstructs Bruce Springsteen’s fast-car rock anthem “Thunder Road,” performing it slow and solo as if it were a disassembled outtake from *Nebraska*. Then, just when you’ve reconciled yourself to this highly languorous interpretation, an instrumental ending starts building layer by layer, adding up to a grand crescendo that involves guitar, harmonica, glockenspiel, piano, and the kitchen sink. It’s a “Hey Jude” of a finish to a CD that could be an early salvo in a long and fascinating lifetime in music. For more info, check: www.haywardwilliams.com.

I want to close by thanking Darlene Buhler for inviting me to contribute scratchings to these pages. Barring the unforeseen, I’ll visit with you again next month with reviews of CDs by David Mallett, Jack Williams, and bluegrass artists.