

A Healing Song

In music, Claudia Schmidt believes, is the power to heal and restore



Human connections: singer/songwriter Claudia Schmidt.

Claudia Schmidt sings for audiences who, she says, "are 20 percent student and 80 percent community." In 1980, she settled in Milwaukee and this, she boasts, is now "my community." She was born in Detroit in 1953, moved when she was three, and spent "the wonder years" growing up in New Baltimore, Michigan. She attended the University of Michigan "for a little while" and the University of Wisconsin — Green Bay for a couple of years. She hasn't graduated.

"I just seem to be allergic to the ivy-covered walls," she says. "I fantasize that I'll end up in college in my twilight years."

George Vukelich is the host of Wisconsin Public Radio's "North Country Notebook."

I'm saving Math for when I'm 65 or 70."

When she was four she started singing with the church choir in New Baltimore and kept on going, learning along the way to play the 12-string guitar, the dulcimer and "that funny instrument," the pianoline.

Her live appearances have taken her to festival stages in Philadelphia; Winfield, Kansas; Wheatland, Michigan; Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, and the Cambridge Festival in England.

She has performed on Wisconsin Public Radio, on Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion," and was the subject of a half-hour documentary "I Sing Because I Can't Fly," produced by KTCA-TV in St.

Paul for the Public Television Network in 1984.

She has recorded four albums for Flying Fish Records of Chicago: "Claudia Schmidt" (1979), "Midwestern Heart" (1981), "New Goodbyes, Old Hellos" (1983), and the newly released "Out of the Dark."

"I just don't know how to describe my music for you," she agonizes. "The newest album is more jazz than the others, but I really don't have a particular genre." She pauses, watching a butterfly from a park bench overlooking Lake Michigan. "Let me put it this way. In New Baltimore, my early influences were dorky choir music and Motown. If that doesn't breed eclecticism, I don't know what will."

"There's a whole sort of belief, you know, among healers and folks who do that kind of thing, that people choose the work that will heal them.

"A friend told me that a woman she knew chose for her job just going around and collecting lullabies. She would go around and talk to old people; then she collected and archived all those different lullabies. It finally came to her that she had never had any lullabies sung to her when she was a child. She had never been sung to sleep. So she had created a job where she could go out and talk to old people and get sung to.

"I think that's just delightful, and it's true of me, too. When people come up to me and say to me, 'I was really affected by your songs,' or, 'Your music came into my life at a time when I really needed it,' I don't tell them that nobody's been more saved by the music than I have been over the years.

"I'm always singing. It's not even something I think about as 'practicing.' I have to think about practicing the guitar or practicing the dulcimer but I'm singing all the time without even thinking about it.

"Singing has always been a very healing process for me — which is maybe why it has evolved as a career for me. As I've gathered in audiences on a larger scale over the past 12 years, singing — music — in turn becomes a healing process for everybody.

"I feel that this is the real key to what's been happening over the years musically for me. For all those early years, music was just something that I did. Even when I went into music full time — professionally — it was still something I 'just did.'

"But, as I've gotten older and deeper into the process, I'm understanding more the compelling side of it.

"Some people, traditional purists especially, were always real suspicious of me because I was always 'theatrical.' There was a lot of feeling in my songs and some people felt that a song was just supposed to be sung. They felt that if there was interpretation by the singer, that was just an egotistical attempt at getting attention — that sort of thing.

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ed that into 'high selfishness' and 'low selfishness.'

"Low selfishness is the level at which something is done purely to get attention, to get strokes, that kind of thing. High selfishness is that process in which you're doing what you have to be doing, but with that consciousness of the universal good. Frankly, I wouldn't have the power that I can have as performer if I didn't feel completely unequivocal and committed to what I'm doing.

"Probably the most recurring theme in my work — starting with the poetry I wrote when I was eight years old — has been the theme of nature and connection to nature and the environment. It keeps coming up again and again, whether it's completely ecstatic celebration like the replenish poem on 'New Goodbyes, Old Hellos' or whether it's put in a more somber motif as in the 'Broken Glass' song.

"The theme of nature and the cycles inherent in the natural world: birth and death and transformation. This theme, or these themes, come up again and again.

"Now, that sounds pretty somber, but what happens in a performance is that I really work with the audience from moment to moment.

"As the years have gone by, I am really able, as a performer, to *connect* with the moment and go with that, rather than a set song list and patter, doing a spiel. So, the themes will really vary from night to night. One night, there will be incredible laughter and the very next night we'll get into all sorts of heavy stuff.

"Over the last year and a half, I've been dealing a lot with themes of old age. Just a lot of material and ideas have been coming up that seem to deal with that, and with death as well, much to the dismay of some listeners who wonder where the old,

goofy gal went.

"I mean, as an earlier performer I was probably more into the 'cutup' motif. At this point, I'm as apt to make you cry as I am to make you laugh, but the idea of connection and interconnectedness is always the basis of it.

"I think that sense of connection has atrophied in many people today, particularly people who live in urban areas. God, you live on top of somebody, you don't *know* them, you don't *talk* to them, you feel nothing for them — that's alienation. It's logical that such people are going to rip each other off. There are no roots there. There is no tribal consciousness.

"A friend of mine who is a native American storyteller and holy man described growing up in northern Saskatchewan when his tribe was still nomadic and ran trap lines. He said the worst thing you could say to somebody in the tribe then — the absolute worst thing, and you said it only if the individual was really out of line — was: 'You act as if you have no people.'

"When you think about that, it's connection again, interconnectedness again, and it's really family. Not just your own parents, your own brothers and sisters, but extended family as well.

"That's what Milwaukee has given me — an extended family. I believe that at

some primitive level I knew that family was here for me because I moved here on the spur of the moment. Milwaukee has simply been a rebirth of family for me.

"I left my home before high school commencement. I took my last exam and I was gone, on the road, with a theater troupe. That's when I left home. That's when I left my parents. I started creating my own home, here and there, and I didn't think much about family those years. It's just the last few years that I've started thinking about family again. Maybe it's just getting older and watching my parents get older.

"A lot of people that I know are really groping because they're alienated from their families — almost every man I know hates his father — and there's this incredible vindictive energy going back and forth. Everybody's disappointing each other, parents and children alike.

"Well, it's not humanly possible for one person to be a perfect role model for a developing human being. It's not humanly possible for two persons to be perfect role models, either. It's not humanly possible to do everything right, and when I say that the nuclear family has to change or die, people know what I'm singing about. It touches them — both men and women.

"That's why I never really had a desire

to move into the women's music realm. I think I'm identified as a feminist performer because I'm clearly doing what I want to be doing, working from a woman's perspective and a woman's heart, but I've always felt the need to reach men as well as women with my music.

"Some of the things I've been singing about over the last year or two involve this family stuff. One song in particular that I wrote for my mother about our relationship just seems to reach out to people, and not just women, because it's about that bond with mother.

"That song gets an incredible response from men and not all of them come up and tell me that face to face. After a performance, other people will come up and say they were sitting at a table with a man and he wept during that song.

"I know I could go play for all-women audiences and have a wonderful time and it would be very powerful, but I feel like I'm doing my best work when I have the most diverse audience possible: men, women, old people, young people, children. That's when I feel I'm doing my best work. That's when I'm in my element. My element is really *community*.

"I think I first realized that when I was growing up in Michigan. I was very religious as a child and completely self-moti-

vated. Religion was really important to me. If I had to miss Sunday school for some reason, I'd sit out on the porch and sing and pray to the trees for the whole hour that I would have been in Sunday school.

"Well, it was a small-town Lutheran church, with the dogma and the patriarchy, and I was starting to be aware of the options, searching for female role models within the Christian structure, and I wasn't seeing anything that was too promising. There was sin and guilt and what these things meant, and even then I had the seeds of a 'born-again pagan.'

"That reminds me that my native American friend I mentioned before told us once that when the first missionaries came to his people, one of the toughest problems they had was talking about sin, because his tribe had no words for sin or guilt in its language. 'There was no word,' he said, 'that covered that territory.'

"I got so disillusioned with my church that I quit it and turned my back on 'manifestation of spirituality' because I felt that wasn't what I needed. But I stayed good friends with my minister, and when I was about 17 or 18 I met, through him, some people from a church in Detroit.

"This was a Lutheran church, too, but it was an all-black Lutheran church and

they invited me to come down to one of their services.

"So I accepted and went with a friend of mine and it was like going to church for the very first time in my life because these people were joyous! There they were, dancing around the communion table. The choir director was saying things like, 'Come on now. Get on now.'

"I kept on visiting them and every time I would go visit, I simply had to trade them something in order to feel right about experiencing this incredible life. So I sang for them. I would sing "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" and "Amazing Grace" and that would be my offering for the day.

"The audience wasn't just a few of the old people who came to church. It was old people and young people, men and women, children. They were all singing. They would be crying. It put me back in touch with that joy. They weren't just a 'congregation' as most churches are, just sitting there like stumps. *They were a community*. When I sing in front of audiences I think, 'We are a community.'

"I think that's why it has always been easy for me to communicate with an audience, to sing to them and talk to them. I've never had stage fright. I have no concept of it.

"At the same time, I know that you

can't please everybody, that not everybody is going to like you, but that doesn't frighten me on stage.

"One night a friend brought a friend to hear me and he was really disappointed with the concert. 'Why is she singing about whales,' he asked, 'when there are people being shot in El Salvador?' He felt that I had really missed the mark.

"I thought about that. Am I glossing over something I should be doing? When I think about it, I come back to the sense of everything being connected; a reverence for life connects them for me and so I can't sing about whales without at the same time, on another level, singing about the people being shot in El Salvador. Or a woman walking down the street at night afraid that she is going to be raped.

"They're all interrelated, and while I may be focused on the whales in one song, everybody else is in there, too. In another song of mine, "Empathy Waltz," I focus on the woman walking that street at night, afraid she's going to be raped, and I think the whales and the people being shot in El Salvador are in that song, too.

"Performers focus on different things at different times, and eventually it all gets sung about and talked about and communicated. I think between us, we're covering all the bases." ■