

CHICKS WITH PICKS

Continued from Page 21



Rene Corbin dishes up her Celtic tunes at Touchstone

The whole affair is—how shall I say?—intimate.

"Enough of that love jazz; let's talk about real life," Hale chuckles, then glides into a story-song about mothers and fathers.

Although I sense strains of Joni Mitchell melodies in her music, the songwriter constructs beautiful guitar lines and metaphorically rich lyrics. Hale's fingers know the neck of the guitar like a woman knows the touch of her lover, and her voice is butter, dammit, butter.

Why would Hale pass a whole Saturday night playing music for a small group of strangers? Probably the same reason dozens of other performers grace Touchstone with their own music every single weekend: the intimate nature of the venue.

The hub is the creation of Becky Bilyeu.

She started becoming a well-known face in Portland's lesbian community when she ran the Sacred Grounds coffee shop in the converted garage of It's My Pleasure in 1998. It was there she began playing host to live music by local lesbian performers.

In early 1999, she jumped at the opportunity to buy the humble business space at 7631 N.E. Glisan St., a small building that had been occupied in the past by a dentist's office and a chiropractor. Bilyeu—not only a devoted proprietress but a talented artist—transformed the building into the cozy haven it is today by giving it a pink-tinged paint job and by hanging up women-positive inspirational art.

She named the joint Touchstone because she "carries" rocks that are soothing to the touch. Appropriately enough, the shop feels like a blissful marriage between the natural and material worlds, a healthy mixture of indoors and out. The ceiling of the main room is painted to look like a partly cloudy sky. When the weather is warm, some musicians perform in the real outdoors: the not-so-Secret Garden.

Bilyeu admits to loving all forms of creative expression, which is why she puts so much effort into Touchstone's live music scene. She says her booking philosophy is casual. "I'm not a professional judge," she says. "If a performer believes she can get up in front of a group of people, I'll give her a chance to play."

She recommends Touchstone's open mike night for people who might not want to commit to playing for an entire evening, however. Bea Simonds serves as the host Thursdays between 7 and 9 p.m.

Regular performers list several reasons why

Touchstone is a great place to play.

"Not only is it an inspirational place, it's really great because it's so small. You can fill the room; it's intimate," says Juliet Wyers, a performer who also teaches a songwriting class in Portland. She recently played a gig at Touchstone to a standing room only crowd; as a special treat, she also invited some of her students along to perform.

Wyers' take on songwriting is quite lyrically intensive. "Songs are like spells. You better believe what you're saying," she says.

On her four-song demo CD, Wyers shows equal amounts of

ambiance and attitude with rich songs such as "Light Moving Across You" and "Bully on a Bad Day." Her next gig at Touchstone is set for April 13.

Kim Rheul not only shares a similar songwriting philosophy as Wyers, she has the same

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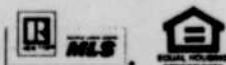
Maria Webster performs original music in many styles



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