

Little Sue, shining in a whole new light

The Portland singer, songwriter uses crowdsourcing to put a new album on the market, with proceeds to help support local organizations

BY SUE ZALOKAR
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Susannah Weaver. Why does that name sound familiar? Weaver, otherwise known as “Little Sue” has been a light in the Portland music scene since she moved here 20 years ago. She put out five albums in that time, and then, seemingly, disappeared from the public eye. But she has been here all along and is re-emerging this spring and renewing her love for her Portland fan base with her sixth album, “New Light” which came out April 15.

Weaver raised the money to mix and master the album through a Kickstarter fundraiser and has some unconventional plans for distribution. She sat down to talk to Street Roots recently about the new album, motherhood and the ever looming topic of water fluoridation.

Sue Zalokar: So, I read on Facebook that you will be playing in Salem in early May for the opening ceremonies of the Oregon State Senate's floor session. How did that come about?

Susannah Weaver: Sen. Chip Shields invited me to do this, and I am thrilled. Vaden, my son, and I were at a friend's fifth birthday party about a month ago. Senator Shields was there too. He approached me and said, “You're Little Sue! I used to go see you all the time!” I recognized his face, but we had never spoken much before. He asked me to play the opening ceremonies for the Oregon State Senate's floor session in Salem on May 8. I get to play one song. I will likely choose one from my most recent album, “New Light.”

S.Z.: For those who might not be familiar with your music, how would you describe what you do?

S.W.: It's evolved over the years. I've put out six records since 1997, including “New Light.” There's country and I've always got a show tune on my records. It's like I have these different pocket of influence. It's original music, yet derivative at the same time.

S.Z.: You opened for Bob Dylan in Bend, Ore. in 2004. That's pretty remarkable. Tell me about that.

S.W.: It ended up being one of the worst experiences of my life.

S.Z.: Why?

S.W.: I got a phone call asking if I would like to open up for Bob Dylan. I was like, “Ha, ha” (Laughter). Monqui called this friend of mine and said that Bob Dylan's people were looking for a female-fronted rock band from Portland. They wanted three submissions. At that point, they had two groups and they were looking for a third. My name came up.

We got the call that we got the gig and we had a week to prepare. We really had no time to rehearse. My bass player at the time lived in Salem. We had our weekly gig at the Laurelthirst, and we planned to use that as our rehearsal.

My friend who had set up the connection for the Little Sue band to be the third group vouched for us, but with one condition: he would get to play the Bob Dylan gig with us. I had agreed to this, partly because I thought it would be a non-issue. I didn't think for a second that we were going to get the gig, but we did.

After the Laurelthirst show, my band was

in the back room and they were all sitting very sullenly in a booth and I came up to them and asked if they were OK. They weren't OK. They did not want this friend to play the Bob Dylan show with us.

I spoke to Bob Dylan's people and there was only one monitor mix, meaning we couldn't have someone come up for just one or two songs — it was all or nothing. I paid my friend for the gig and sent him a letter apologizing, but explaining that as a band, we did not want him to play with us.

The backlash was horrible. People ripped me apart. I felt horrible, but I knew that was the decision that I had to make for my band. And this all happened basically in a week.

We went and played the show to 8,000 people at the Les Schwab Amphitheater. It was a great audience and they were completely supportive. It was very exciting, but I was just torn up inside. It took years to reconcile the relationship I had lost with my friend over that.

S.Z.: What a remarkable part of your history and legacy as a musician in Portland. Not everyone can say that they opened for Bob Dylan.

S.W.: A lot of people don't even know that happened.

S.Z.: You have a son Vaden. How has motherhood impacted your life?

S.W.: Hugely. Motherhood has made my life so much better than I could have imagined. It changes your outlook completely. Everybody looks different to you. It is really eye-opening. It's such a big responsibility. Motherhood has made me a complete person.

S.Z.: You have been outspoken in the social media sphere about the impending addition of fluoride to the City of Portland's water supply. What are your objections?

S.W.: (She pulls out an anti-fluoride fact sheet from her bag and hands it to me.) So, I'm leaving these about town.

S.Z.: People who support fluoridation would say that it is a mineral, it's not a drug and that it is not toxic.

S.W.: A month and a half ago I was like, “Fluoride? I guess it's good for people's teeth, but I don't want it in the water.” I didn't know much about the issue. I knew that I was against it, but I didn't feel like I had any argument or information.

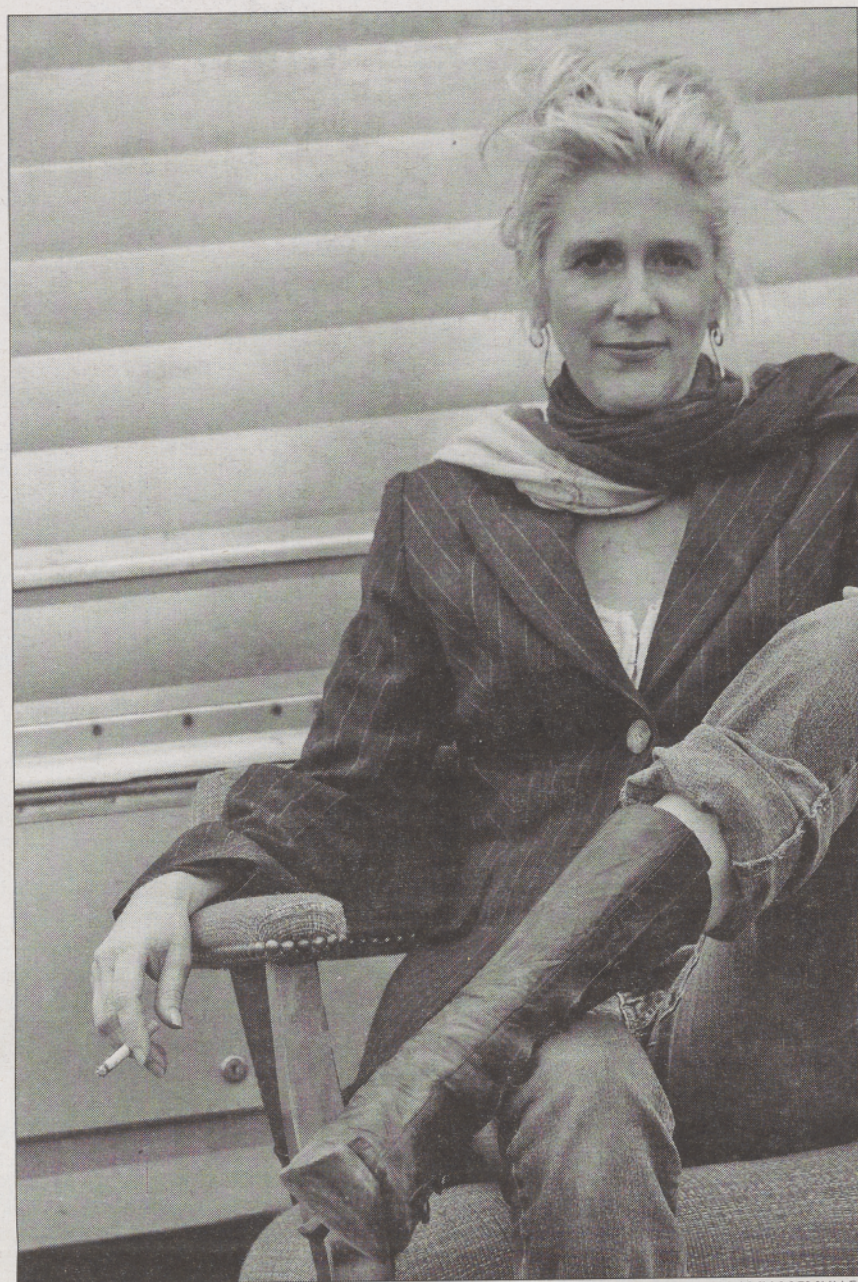
So, I started looking around and — of course — I heard that people who are against fluoride are “crazy.” I spent hours reading and researching online. What I found out was mind boggling. I found out where these chemicals come from. It's the chemical waste by-product of the phosphate fertilizer industry.

S.Z.: What would be some alternatives for children who are experiencing poverty?

S.W.: The people who suffer the most from fluoridated water are the poor — people who don't have enough vitamin C, people who don't have enough calcium. They suffer the most damaging effects of fluoridation.

They offer dental sealants now through the Portland Public Schools, free dental clinics, free dental tablets. If fluoride is your thing, there is absolutely no way you can't get it.

S.Z.: The album “New Light” features —



BY AMY MCMULLEN

other than producer and player Mike Coykendall — some great Portland female players.

S.W.: Well Jenny (Conlee, The Decemberists) and Jill (Coykendall) are really the backbone of the recording. And the three of us worked really hard on pre-production. We recorded all of that live, sitting in Mike and Jill's living room — they are married, Mike and Jill. The album also features Annalisa Tornfelt, Michael Jodell and Wendy Pate. I wanted just the most natural feeling possible and I wanted my mistakes in there. I wanted vocal mistakes. I want people to think that they can be musicians. I don't want everything all slick and (people think) only Taylor Swift can be a songwriter.

S.Z.: What is the music scene like for women in Portland?

S.W.: I don't feel comfortable speaking for everybody, but I think it's pretty damn good. I don't really like to play live that much anymore.

S.Z.: Why not?

S.W.: I guess I do (like to play out) if I don't have to do anything, I don't have to ask anybody to get there. As long as it's not featuring me. I went to Ashleigh Flynn's CD release and it was amazing. It was one of the best shows I have been to in a long time. The band was awesome and a packed house full of love. I was watching her and I realized, I could never do that again. I could never be on a stage like that. I don't want to do it anymore. I like to sit in, play a few songs. It's just different now, I guess.

S.Z.: What was that like — raising funds through Kickstarter?

S.W.: Kickstarter is kind of like getting a grant. Crowdsourcing is amazing. Just watch the power of a lot of people with 20 bucks. That's powerful shit. I feel like this decision works for me not only because of my decision to step back from my music career,

but also to honor the people who believed in me — and they still do. I want to be clear that I do believe that musicians should be paid.

S.Z.: But you are giving “New Light” to people who not only supported your kickstarter project, but also people who donate to some of your favorite nonprofit organizations (including Street Roots). Can you talk about your music distribution decisions for this album?

S.W.: I don't want anyone to think I'm not charging money for the album — in the traditional sense — because I don't think it worthy of money. I feel the opposite. I'm asking people to donate money to one of a few organizations that I love in exchange for my CD, for free: The Jeremy Wilson Foundation, Street Roots, and Donorschoose.org, which is for school teachers. That last organization is all over the United States, so wherever you are, you could donate to a school that is in your district. I'm also asking people to donate to pear: Impact NW, Outside In.

S.Z.: All awesome organizations. How does it work?

S.W.: They are all listed on the album and I am operating on good faith that people will make a donation in turn for receiving my CD for free.

S.Z.: What's next for Little Sue?

S.W.: I will use my songwriting powers to raise money for my classroom.