

# All of the Joy, None of the Jesus

Susan Werner sings a different kind of gospel

**W**hat if you love gospel but aren't into Jesus? Susan Werner's got your back.

"I got a roof over my head; what do I do?" sings Werner in her second song on her new album, *The Gospel Truth*. A gospel choir echoes her: "What do I do?" The call and response ends with Werner saying, "I go out and help somebody get a roof over their

head, too." Not that Werner's a believer, despite her background: She grew up Catholic in a rural area near Dubuque, Iowa, and majored in opera vocal performance at the University of Iowa. Werner moved east, became a singer-songwriter and wowed the folk circuits with her classically trained voice and songs that ranged from heartbreak to sweet relief. But she returned to the



Susan Werner  
7 pm Friday, March 9  
Luna • \$14.50 adv., \$16 door

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**KESEY**  
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**TOOTS AND THE MAYTALS**  
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**KESEY**

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**FRIDAY MARCH 16**  
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**KESEY** **ON SALE NOW!**  
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GENERAL ADMISSION ALL AGES 7 PM DRS

Midwest and eventually drifted away from folk with 2004's charming, lively album of "new standards," a Cole Porter-ish appreciation of the Great American Songbook showcasing original pieces by Werner. Now, she's changed styles again.

"It's like language immersion," Werner says. "I'll immerse myself in the music for several months, and it will show up in songs that bear the markings of that genre." This genre began when she happened into the Chicago Gospel Music Festival, and then she started "doing her homework" — attending churches all over the country to hear the music, listening to Hazel Dickens and Ralph Stanley and the Bluegrass Cardinals. And much of the music on the new album shows off her new language skills, ones that don't come with a concomitant belief system.

In the rollicking banjo-holler piece "Our Father (The New, Revised Edition)," her trademark humor comes into play when she sings about preachers "with narrow minds and wide lapels." And in the gentle call-and-response of "Probably Not," which she likes to call her "gnostic gospel song," Werner sings, "Is there a god above? Is there eternal love?" and the gospel choir joyfully responds, "Probably not!"

Will the audience play the choir in Werner's Eugene show? "Yeah! It's too much fun," she says. "If there weren't humor in this, I couldn't do it, and it wouldn't be worth doing. We don't need more sermonizing on these topics; we really don't."

On the other hand, Werner's not averse to pushing certain ideas, as in "Help Somebody" and the final track, "Together." She explains that figuring out what to keep from a religious upbringing is "like going through your late parents' things." For people who grew up in conservative religious traditions but aren't conservative now, Werner says, "It's been as if we've had to drive off beyond the horizon and never look back, call all of it ignorant, medieval and backwards. But there are parts of it that I do want to claim now. It's important to be of service to community and other people." She mentions Bruce Springsteen championing the working class and Rosie O'Donnell working for children as other recovering Catholics who believe in taking action and doing good work without religious backing.

*Gospel Truth* is most successful when Werner's music reflects her immersion and her words simply state her own beliefs. "This is a project that's safe for agnostics to listen to," Werner says. "The music is about hope, positive anticipation. ... My life has a meaning and a purpose, my life is of use to others, and I want it to be so. But I don't have to resort to God or Jesus to get there." **EW**

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