

Grant Derigo

Final Feature: Sara Hickman

She makes her way past the giant paintings she made of her husband and two daughters as she walks to the corner of her living room. She picks up an old, no-brand model G-101 guitar and starts strumming. Her husband and oldest daughter peer back at her from their canvas perches.

“This was my very first guitar I got when I was seven,” Sara Hickman says. “I sold it to my friend, Grace Das, when I was 10. I went without it for 33 years until one day a couple years ago a large vacuum cleaner box appeared on my front door. I didn’t believe my daughter at first when she told me there was a guitar inside so I came in for a closer look. I immediately recognized it and went for the note inside which was signed ‘anonymous.’ I just fell to my knees and cried.”

Hickman is one of few musicians who have made a living catering to both adult and child audiences. She also escapes the criticism put on most activist musicians for singing about the world’s problems and not acting on them – she does both. Throughout her career she has supported many causes and has recorded 15 albums, three of which are children’s albums.

“Her heart is honest, generous and soulful, as evidenced by her work in the world,” said Kathleen Hudson, author of Women in Texas Music. “She wants to make a difference in the lives of others, and her music does just that!”

Sara even has a band made entirely of high school children called Super Pal Universe. The band’s goal is to get more children involved in community activism by singing songs about conservation, volunteering, and tolerance.

“The whole idea began about 10 years ago while I was on a plane doodling,” Hickman said. “I was drawing like figures of kids on a note pad and just thought about how great it would be if there was this ‘Super Pal Universe.’”

Super Pal Universe started out as just a website where children could spend time and learn. Sara would post children’s songs, interactive puzzles made from drawings she had done, recipes and other fun things.

With the help of her business partner, Alan Luecke, the idea eventually transformed into a full band composed of child musicians ranging in age from 13 to 17. The two are currently pitching a pilot for a Super Pal Universe television show in which Sara will teach young people about the music business, give them songwriting tips and teach them about community activism.

Hickman got some of her first tastes of community activism from her high school music department head Pat Bonner. While she was attending The High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, Bonner recognized her talent and sent her on various gigs to hospitals and psychiatric wards according to Hickman. Since then she continues to sing at hospitals, children’s wards, for hospice patients and others in need of music therapy.

“She is driven to help people who have no voice,” said Kathleen Jones, minister at the First United Methodist Church of Austin where Sara attends. “Since becoming involved with the church she has held an annual service of reconciliation to honor the quest of gays and lesbians to be fully included in the church.”

One of Hickman’s favorite groups to spend time with is the Austin Area Inter-religious Ministries which works to get people of different faiths cooperating through

various activities. Every member on the Board of Directors for the ministry, including Hickman, is of a different faith. The inter-religious ministry runs programs to teach English as a second language to refugees, holds an annual thermal underwear drive for the homeless and puts on an interfaith thanksgiving celebration.

“Sara has a special place in her heart for the homeless,” Jones said. “When homeless people come she is the first one in the church to welcome them, give them a hug and take them in.”

She has volunteered for over eight years with House the Homeless, an organization which provides services to homeless such as shelter, food and legal aid. Every year Hickman plays at a memorial sunrise service to pay respect to all of Austin’s homeless residents who have died that year.

“We are truly blessed that she has come to us so the cry of our people can be heard,” said Richard Troxell, president of House the Homeless. “As she reminds us, ‘We are each others' angels.’”

She even won first place in the USA Film Festival for a video she entered about a homeless woman named Joy. Hickman recalls her memories of Joy:

“I was taking the trash to the dumpster in my alley one day. I tossed in some bags and heard a voice say ‘ouch.’ I looked inside and realized there was a woman living in there. I said ‘Oh! I’m so sorry!’ and then she invited me to get in the dumpster with her. I’d never been in a dumpster so I climbed in and we talked for a while. It’s weird because I used to always go out there under the pretext that I was taking out the trash until I met her. I realized I had actually been bringing her

things like food and blankets. After that I would always stop and say ‘hi.’ Then I didn’t see her for a few months. I learned from some people later that she had passed away a few weeks earlier. I didn’t want her to go unremembered – like some nameless face – so I wrote her a song. I’d wanted to put it on my next album but my label didn’t agree. They would say ‘That’s a good song, but we want something more up-beat like this one...’ I told them I would make a music video for it and ended up spending my own money to produce it. The label still didn’t want the song on the album so I was stuck with this video I had spent a ton of my own money producing. So I decided to send it to the festival and I ended up winning.

“Her mother named her ‘Joy’

It was the last word from her lips

How strange a woman with not much more than a name

Can find such happiness”

“Joy” – Sara Hickman

Hickman toured last year in support of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and kicked it off with a performance at her church, First United Methodist Church of Austin.

“The coalition approached me and asked me to do a benefit concert and I declined,” said Hickman. “They looked a little surprised, but then I said we should do a tour instead because it would raise more awareness.”

The benefit concert was then expanded to a 12-show-tour with performances by Hickman, Kinky Friedman, Stacy Earl and others. The shows brought people on both sides of the issue together for discussion. Guest who spoke against the death penalty included parents of death row inmates, parents of the victims of death row inmates and the Rev. Carol Pickett, a death row minister who witnessed the executions of 95 inmates – some of whom he said were innocent.

Hickman was appointed to the Austin Music Commission this fall by city council member Laura Morrison. Her main focuses are getting healthcare and a minimum living wage for local musicians – two things she feels very strongly about as a result of her own experience as a musician.

“Because people see me as a working middle-class musician a lot of people assume I have healthcare and I don’t,” said Hickman. “Healthcare is just too expensive and I make too much to qualify for it through the Health Alliance for Austin Musicians.”

Hickman recently collaborated with the Teton Orchestra for a performance in Idaho Falls, ID. The orchestra arranges music for pop artists in an effort to revive interest in orchestral music and provide work for musicians.

“She’s on a platform that nobody really can touch,” said Eric Wenstrom, conductor and arranger for the orchestra. “She moved more people than our really, really big name artists.”

Those who wish to support one of Sara's many causes can visit her Web site www.necessaryangels.org. The site has links to the 12 groups Sara actively participates in.

"People always ask me 'what cause should I donate to' so I made this site," Hickman said. "Now I say go to this Web site and pick a cause. They're all good ones."

Sara has been playing music for a living for over 20 years now and shows no sign of slowing down. She says she will continue investing time in the Super Pal Universe and hopes to play many more shows in small towns that are deprived of cultural arts.

More on Sara Hickman can be found at www.sarahickman.com and at www.superpaluniverse.com.

Sara's first place film in the USA Film Festival:

You Tube video: Joy

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5idO-pOIbQ>

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