

Singing under an ocean of sky

Paul Weideman | The New Mexican



Susan Abod

details

- ▼ Susan Abod
- ▼ 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 10
- ▼ Gig Performance Space, 1808 Second St., Suite H
- ▼ Donation \$10-\$15 at the door; gigsantafe.com

One of Susan Abod's earliest memories of exercising her mouth, tongue, vocal cords, and lungs to make glorious music was when she was 7 years old, singing along with Mary Martin and Juanita Hall on the Broadway recording of *South Pacific*. It's no wonder the Santa Fe singer likes musical theater, but she is used to curbing the impulse to sing "those kinds of songs." And when she takes the stage at Gig Performance Space on Saturday, Jan. 10, she will stick to jazz and blues.

As a teenager, Abod dreamed of being a bohemian singer living in Greenwich Village. "What 'bohemian' meant to me was an alternative vision of lifestyle, at that point, in pre-hippie times," she said recently. "I was living in Chicago and my father was struggling to keep us in a house, but I remember being outside, sitting by this huge tree late at night and trying to visualize myself, where I'd be happy. I guess some of it's from movies like *My Sister Eileen*, where two sisters come from Ohio and they have an apartment in New York and they meet all these amazing people."

In her early 20s, Abod shifted her path to self-realization through feminism and music. She brought her philosophical impetuses down to earth when she joined the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band. She sang and played bass for the group, including on the 1972 recording *Mountain Movin' Day*.

Abod studied music composition at DePaul University in Chicago, and during that period she immersed herself in jazz for the first time. "My path went from Yes and Edgar Winter to Chick Corea, Gary Burton, and Weather Report. I just went crazy for that stuff," she said. While she was at DePaul, Abod was lead singer and played bass in a jazz trio, and she delved into the tradition of jazz vocals as practiced by such lights as Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan.

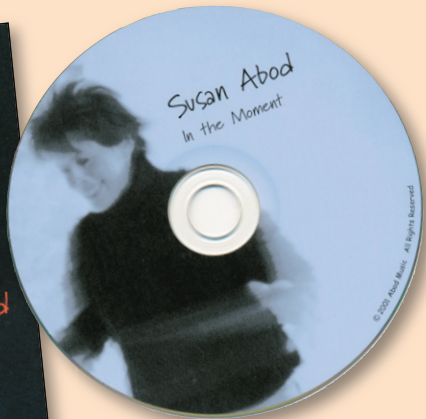
"All along, I was a closet musical-theater person," she admitted. "I loved musicals ever since I was a little kid, but it wasn't until I went to Boston and met a lot of gay men that I felt comfortable about it. Then I started putting some of that stuff in my show, and I realized I had a real flair."

After she graduated from DePaul in 1974, Abod moved to Boston to be part of the city's music scene and women's community, and she ended up living there for 20 years. In the beginning, she sharpened her performance and songwriting skills at Ryles, Club Café, and other Boston venues, as well as on a six-week tour of Europe. She was nominated Outstanding Female Vocalist for Excellence in Boston Cabaret in the Boston Encore Awards.

In 1986, she was singing and giving voice lessons and playing gigs in Provincetown, Massachusetts, including some cabaret stuff. Then she was diagnosed with chronic fatigue immune dysfunction syndrome and multiple chemical sensitivities. "That kind of knocked my socks off," she said, "and it was really hard to listen to music for a long time."

She decided her first priority had to be healing, but she couldn't stay away from music for too long. "I slowly started listening to music that I had no connection to, like Elgar. Then I found the Ella and Joe Pass duo albums and then Ella and Louis Armstrong and Frank Sinatra and Count Basie arrangements. I would do shows once a year in Cambridge."

A year or two after Abod got sick, a friend talked her into going to the Sunday meetings of the Living With AIDS Theatre Project. The stories told by participants fueled the writing of many songs by witnesses, including Abod's own "Soliloquy." In the setting of that song, she is hanging out with an AIDS sufferer, remembering a happy day spent at Walden Pond and now wondering, What do I say? What do I say?



Abod addressed her own condition in the 1995 documentary film *Funny, You Don't Look Sick*, which she produced. She is now working on a sequel called *Homesick*. "I only need \$3,000 more to finish this sucker," she laughed. "It needs a little more editing and some underscoring."

She started gathering material for *Homesick* in 1997. That year, she and a camerawoman drove to Santa Fe in a van to interview people with multiple chemical sensitivities and to find out how they were finding safe housing. (People with such sensitivities commonly are sickened by many of the building materials and finishes used in most houses.)

Among the people she talked with were Santa Fe architect Paula Baker and physician Erica Elliott, who together wrote one of the bibles for multiple chemical sensitivities sufferers, the 1998 book *Prescriptions for a Healthy House: A Practical Guide for Architects, Builders and Homeowners*.

Abod's music exhibits a fun, varied vocal style. She is always jazzy and often uses her voice like a horn. Listen to "In the Moment," her version of "Lullaby of Birdland," and you'll hear her rapid, fluid style shifts and some nice scatting in unison with the tenor saxophone. The mood changes with the bluesy "Lose Myself in You," and again with the more delicate "Under Santa Fe Skies." One of the lines in that song is, "I don't like feeling landlocked." What's that all about? "I really have always lived by water," she said. "But here the sky is like my ocean. That's where I get so much energy — the way the sky changes just pulls your attention out. If I'm kind of in a cloud, a negative space, and I'm coming from inside the house, I just get blasted by it. I can't ignore it, and it wakes me up."

"This past summer was the most work I've done in maybe 20 years, singing at Sunrise Springs and Galisteo Inn and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Guitarist Lewis Winn and I did duets, and we worked up a lot of new things, like off-the-beat standards, and my love of musical theater pops in there with a cool rendition of 'Never Never Land.'"

Abod promises to stick to jazz and blues for the Gig gig, in which she will interact with Winn and bassist Michael Olivola. The concert, which will be recorded, will feature two new songs: "What's Not Wrong Right Now" and "The Abod Name Song," a piece she created to clear up mispronunciations of her surname. "It's like a bebop tune," she said. "It goes, 'It started out as Obodofsky, from Russia it came/My granddad offed the ofsky, to make it sound more plain.'"

At some point, once her father's parents were in the United States, the "Obod" was changed to "Abod." It rhymes with "avid."

"One of the songs I do with Lewis, it's called 'Count Me In,' and we scat the whole thing. There will also be songs people expect me to sing, like 'You Look Swell in Nothing' and 'The Process Song' — which pokes fun at the life-by-therapy crowd in Boston and Santa Fe."

Abod will also sing some standards. A likely candidate is "In the Moment," in which she brackets the lyrics of the early-1950s song "Lullaby of Birdland" with a long intro of her own invention and the closing lines, "If I had my way I could sing all day. Sing all day ... I love to sing." ◀



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