



## SUSAN WERNER

**For a computer illiterate, it's ironic that the Private Music recording artist is finding fame on the Internet**

A child of the mid Sixties, green-eyed Susan Werner was born in Manchester, Iowa and grew up on her father's hog farm, one of a German Catholic family of six children. At age five she made her stage debut, strumming a guitar while performing, ironically, *It's A Small World*. Six years later, Susan began piano lessons, going on to play saxophone in jazz combos and marching bands during her High School years.

After gaining a degree in voice, in 1987 she moved to Philadelphia to study for an MA and decided to remain in the city to pursue a career as an opera singer, an idea that she soon abandoned. As she told Holly Crenshaw of *The Performing Songwriter* in 1995:

"It became apparent to me that opera was not going to be my golden future, that I was not going to be a major league hitter in the world of classical music and that I would always play on a farm team. That was pretty discouraging, having moved myself halfway across the country on a shoestring budget and scholarship from

Iowa. It was one of those leaps, and then to have to leap turn out to be fruitless – it was really crushing."

Although Werner had never consciously followed developments in contemporary folk/country music, by chance she attended a Nanci Griffith concert towards the close of the Eighties. During the interview with Crenshaw, she summed up her joy at hearing Griffith perform: "Something about what she did just struck me as art with a capital A. This counts. This is as relevant, this is as artistic as Schubert. It's just in English with a Texas twang."

Shortly after hearing Griffith, Susan began performing as a solo act in local bars and coffee houses. While her set initially consisted of cabaret standards – one of her main musical interests pre-Nanci – she was soon inserting her own compositions.

She performed at the Philadelphia Folk Festival in 1992. As she told a Boston, Cambridge reporter a couple of years later, "My boyfriend and I went to collect our tapes that were being sold and there were

none left. And we got a lot of cash, too much, we thought. He counted it and was looking at me with glee and we walked away arm in arm and we felt as if we had just robbed someone. I said, I'm gonna making a living doing this. I can't believe it. I had scraped for years and this was the turning point. That's when I knew I was going to do it."

*Midwestern Saturday Night* was the title of Susan's independently financed debut album. Supported by local pickers and strummers, produced by Grant MacAvoy and recorded locally at Morning Star Studios, the set was released early in 1993. The set contains nine self-penned songs and one cover.

The album displays a fertile imagination at work. While many songwriters in the folk/country arena focus on the confessional, Werner is an observational writer and storyteller who laces her work with positive colours and barbed humour.

*Born A Little Late* is a skit on the baby boom generation. Featuring a self-deprecating lyric, Susan reflects on how



boomers have told her "you showed up just in time to miss the boat." As for the age difference, "they sit around the campfire singing the Beatles and the Byrds, and they laugh at me 'cause I don't know the words."

*Rubber Glove Blues* is a safe-sex anthem that is both amusing and honest. *Lullabye For One* focuses on the positive things in Werner's life, even though she lives alone. *Uncle John* is an affectionate epistle to a favourite relative. As for the only cover song, the narrator in Greg Simon's *The Great Out There* tells of a friend who travels to remote and exotic countries while "I spend my time wrapped up in my tribe, 'til she brings the world into view."

An initial aspect of Susan's career was the fact that she managed her own business affairs. A self-confessed computer illiterate, this included maintenance of a manually-generated mailing list, approaching clubs for dates, and sending out press releases and cassettes – all necessary and daily chores.

An approach to local booking agents Larry Goldfarb and Ric Cohen of Golden Guru Management produced positive results. Not only did they book her, they became her managers. Concurrently with this, Warner was becoming one of the most talked about new songwriters on the Internet. Debuting a self-penned composition in concert, by the time she reached the next town on the tour schedule, segments of the audience would request it. Werner found this unsettling. Prior to the widespread use of computer communication among hardcore music fans, writers had been allowed the luxury of road testing a new tune; in their infancy, songs require space to grow or wither.

An alternate view would be that the sheer fanaticism of this computer literate, underground audience confirmed Susan Werner's arrival as a full-fledged, developed writer.

*Live At Tin Angel* was another tangible result of Susan's association with the guys at Golden Guru. Containing fifteen songs and recorded during three 1993 performances at the Philadelphia listening venue, it was issued locally the same year. Four of the cuts from her debut release reappeared on this solo acoustic set including *The Great Out There*. Supporting herself on piano, acoustic guitar and mouth generated trumpet sounds – on *Society Ball (Just The Band)* – the new material included such fine Werner songs as *Last Of The Good Straight Girls* and *Soul's Not At War*.

The CD recording that accompanied the July 1993 issue of the New York-based *Fast Folk Magazine* was (phonetically) titled *Philadelphia Phast Pholks*. Werner's

contribution to the album was her own *Irene*. (Curiously to relate, Greg Simon's version of *The Great Out There* was also included on the disc.)

During September the same year, Susan was invited to perform at the second Martha's Vineyard Singer/Songwriters Retreat which is organised annually by the irrepressible American folk giant, Christine Lavin. A two-CD compilation, *Follow That Road*, recorded during the three-week-long concert series, was released in



1994 on Rounder/Philo. Susan performs her *Born A Little Late* while the liner notes include her insight, "There are all kinds of songs – train songs, cowboy songs, love songs, story songs, and sarcastic political songs brought on by years of great personal suffering at the hands of an enormous but unfeeling demographic group. This particular song is a train song."

Garnering enthusiastic press notices from prestigious American news journals like *The New York Times* and the *Boston Herald* was becoming a way of life for Werner. Appearances on important syndicated shows such as *Mountain Stage* followed, while legendary Stateside DJ Gene Shay offered, "With so much talent and extraordinary musicianship, she not only deserves a standing ovation, she gets one."

When she appeared on Tom Rush's annual Boston Symphony Hall show in December 1993, the local press opined that "the concert may well be remembered for catapulting the least known member of its lineup to stardom." In January, 1994, Susan appeared on the 25th anniversary edition of the New York-based radio programme, *Woody's Children*, along with Pete Seeger, Odetta, Tom Paxton and Judy Collins.

Warner was convinced that her third release would enjoy national, if not international, distribution.

*Last Of The Good Straight Girls* was released in the US and UK in March 1995 by Los Angeles-based Private Music. It was produced by Fernando Saunders whose previous clients included Lou Reed and Joan Baez. As Susan told *Dirty Linen's* Michael Parrish, "I went to New York to see him. We both sat down in a restaurant and ordered carrot juice at the same time. Good symbiosis beginning. Fernando is a very sweet, soulful, tiny man. He was a good foil for me. I'm this sort of tall, Dairy-State, over-educated woman. I needed someone to draw me into the more tender intuitive parts of music. I just love Fernando. Love him to death as a person. He's a great musician – unbelievable bass player. It was really wonderful to work with him."

Apart from Paul Simon's *Something So Right*, Werner penned all the cuts, while Saunders is credited with supplying additional music to three of them.

Pop rocker Marshall Crenshaw supplies the electric guitar work on the title cut while k.d. lang/Dave Alvin associate Greg Leisz brings his mandolin and pedal steel skills to bear on a couple of songs. Famed producer Mitchell Froom (Paul McCartney, Elvis Costello) also added keyboard parts and zydeco champion Zachary Richard played accordion on *Still Believe*.

Cut during a "year of romantic upheaval", many of the songs on *Last Of The Good Straight Girls* reflect the ending of and aftermath of a relationship, as in the heartfelt *St. Mary's Of Regret*, *Man I Used To Love*, *Yes To You (Tappan Zee)* and *Through The Glass*. Rather than wallow in navel-gazing self pity and on what could have been, Werner's lyrics are honest and even handed. Optimistic even.

Analysing the half decade in which she has honed her skill as a second-to-none songwriter, Werner told Holly Crenshaw, "I usually get a phrase or a sentence that has a musical style attached. That's it – that's the whole song. It's as if, in one little cell, all the DNA is there and all I need to do is just go home and let it write itself at that point. Because that little kernel will contain all the information. One gesture can write the whole song."

Susan Werner's major label deal marked the transition from the endless small club tours, leavened with the occasional opening slot at larger venues, to the point where she is now the headliner. Who said there was no justice anymore? ■