

Susan Werner
Kicking the Beehive

Called the empress of the unexpected by NPR, singer-songwriter Susan Werner turns another corner in her multifaceted musical career with her vibrant new album, *Kicking the Beehive*. It's an 11-song collection of provocative, poignant, lyrical originals that are infused with the rustic roots of American folk, blues and country music. Produced by Rodney Crowell, recorded in Nashville and featuring such all-star guests as Vince Gill, Keb' Mo' and Paul Franklin, *Kicking the Beehive* is a personal project where Werner intuitively explores the full impact of looking beyond the superficial and delving into soulful honesty.

With pockets of humor, wit, heartbreak, incisive social commentary and kick-ass rowdiness, *Kicking the Beehive* is the strongest Werner recording to date. On it she passionately tells condensed short stories of characters who confront such issues as homelessness, addiction, social alienation and disappointment. "A good song is a good window," Werner says. "All these songs can let us see outside ourselves. And as a songwriter, the best moments come when I can hold the songs up like a mirror so that people can also see themselves."

Kicking the Beehive is Werner's follow-up to her 2009 recording, *Classics*, a compelling pop-meets-classical album of contemporary standards supported by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. "That was a very conservatory project," Werner says. "There were a lot of string arrangements, and I learned a great deal about arranging and songwriting. But after that, I wanted to do something different." (*Classics* was the third in an ear-opening series of innovatively themed projects, including 2008's "agnostic gospel" album *The Gospel Truth* that melded Werner's own tunes written in the traditional gospel tradition and 2004's *I Can't Be New* where she channeled the cabaret standard songwriting of George Gershwin and Cole Porter.)

In a return to her musical roots, Werner decided to embark on a more down-home recording, inspired by her blues pilgrimage in the Mississippi Delta that started in Memphis, went through Clarksdale and led to New Orleans. An Iowan native, she desired to follow the Mississippi River downstream from where she had grown up. "It was perfect for me," says Werner, who is based in Chicago. "I rented a car, brought a guitar, a pad and a ball point pen with me. I left my computer at home. I wanted to keep it all basic. No high technology. I was thinking that I might have something to say."

That's an understatement.

The simplicity of that pilgrimage—from going to juke joints to having encounters with

regional musicians—bore fruit. “I had to go down that river,” she says. “And I’m glad I went. I experienced the music that I love firsthand, and I participated in a tradition that spoke to me.” One experience she had was going to Clarksdale, Mississippi, the historical city that not only houses a fascinating Delta blues museum but also actor Morgan Freeman’s Ground Zero Blues Club, where Werner participated in an improvisation-steeped jam. “I’ve sat in a million times in a million different settings, but this experience exceeded all my expectations,” she says. She laughs and adds, “It was exciting and scary.”

Through a series of coincidences that Werner attributes to a mojo bag that a voodoo shop owner in New Orleans put together for her (“I told her that I needed a mojo bag because all the blues musicians had one,” says Werner), she found fertile new ground. That “spell” not only resulted in an opportunity to sign on with legendary Nashville manager Burt Stein, but it also swung open the door to bring Crowell aboard as the producer of her new recording. In the *Kicking the Beehive* liner notes, Werner thanks him and engineer Steve Marcantonio for making “such a beautiful album” and salutes Crowell: “Rodney, you’re my hero.”

Werner says that Crowell “believed” in the songs she sent him and brought to the session and encouraged her to record the album live in the studio with a core session band that comprised electric and acoustic guitarist Stuart Smith, bassist Viktor Krauss and drummer/percussionist Bryan Owings. However, Werner had her doubts. “What if I screwed up on a song while singing and playing along with the best guys,” she says. “But Rodney sold me on it. We recorded in the old-fashioned way. I’ve worked with many great producers over the years, but Rodney was the best. He’s a legend and he lived up to it.”

Werner opens the album with the title track, an upbeat, straight-talking number that humorously sets the tone of her singer-songwriter role as, what she calls, “a troublemaker, an instigator, a provocateur.” In the tune she sings about how kicking over the beehive and playing with matches is the best way “to feel alive again.” The beehive metaphor came from the Dale Carnegie saying, “If you want to gather honey, don’t kick over the beehive,” that her longtime road manager used when advising her. Werner turns the adage on its head, promoting the notion of stirring up trouble. She opens the tune in the key of A and moves to G in the chorus. “I got that from listening to Rodney,” she says. “That makes the song have a very country-like, Texas-like feel musically. It’s a plain-spoken, nothing-fancy song.”

The blues tradition thematically informs some of Werner’s tunes on the album. For example, the heartfelt, acoustic-guitar, foot-tapping “Doctor Doctor” is about a dying partner. “The experience of illness and mortality has always been a part of blues songs,” says Werner. “That’s when personal experiences show up.”

Keb’ Mo’ guests with a killer slide accompaniment. Werner toured with him for a month early in 2010 and was schooled in the blues acoustic guitar styling by him. “I had been

doing my blues homework listening to Otis Spann and Muddy Waters, and I learned how to play a bottleneck slide by listening to Bob Brozman, but to learn directly from Kevin was special,” says Werner. “Every day he would show me something new by telling me how to place my hands. Sharing this tradition with me in person made it true for me.”

The blues also plays a role in the deeply emotional song, “My Different Son,” written from a mother’s point of view about an atypical child (“schools and rules were never made for him”). It’s written in a Chicago style blues form that brings to mind classic laments from B.B. King and Muddy Waters. Werner adds, “If women wrote the blues, they would sing about love, of course, but they’d also sing about family and children.” And the determined character on the rocking “I Know What I Want” borrows much of her phrasing from field hollers Werner studied as part of her blues pilgrimage.

Featuring lap steel legend Paul Franklin, “The Last Words of Bonnie Parker” is an intimate and moving piece about loving someone no matter the consequences. “When I started writing this, I knew somehow this wasn’t exactly me speaking, but who was it?” Werner explains. “And, almost like a painting, the song revealed itself – and the character revealed herself to be the legendary Bonnie from Bonnie and Clyde. I researched her a bit, found that she had been married before – that was interesting to me - and that she wrote poetry, which gave me the courage to try to write for her and hopefully with her. And you know you got some of it right when you feel all your guy band mates leaning in and listening as you sing the track – which is exactly what happened in the studio. It’s probably the most gorgeous piece of music I’ve ever recorded.

Like many songwriters with a literary bent, Werner worries that much of pop music is a mile wide and an inch deep. “But seems to me, the best songs are more like an inch wide and a mile deep,” she says. That comes through in the poignant tune “Manhattan, Kansas,” the story of a single woman and a difficult decision to make. “I’ve always admired Jimmy Webb’s songs, songs like Wichita Lineman and Galveston, songs with towns in the title and a story in the town,” says Werner, “And I may have stumbled on my own kind of tribute to him, with this. He himself has been encouraging of my songwriting, and hopefully I’ve lived up to that.”

Other story songs include the smoky jazz waltz, “Botanical Greenery Blues,” flavored by Tony Harrell’s Hammond organ, about characters whose habit of getting high conceals all kinds of lows; the practical and discouraging details of homelessness in “Sleeping on a Train”; and the gospel-tinged final song “On the Other Side” about a light and a voice that “I’d surely like to see for myself.” Of the latter Werner says, “This is a song that’s much less certain than songs I’ve written even a few years ago. This isn’t buttoned up, not at all. Maybe if you don’t tie something up in a neat bow, it’s more real. And real life is messy, intense, uncertain—that’s what makes it human.”

Kicking the Beehive offers up some of Werner’s signature dry wit in the bass thumping, jazzy “Irrelevance,” which is a song that Werner says “I just couldn’t stop myself from

writing, unfortunately.” She adds, “It’s the unvarnished truth - there are no bumpers on this tune, nothing to soften the blow. Comes a time in your life where futility hits you straight on, and you either crumble beneath it or laugh your way through it. Rodney

brought in this great jazz trumpeter and kept telling him to play worse – imagine that, worse. So you hear him starting a fantastic phrase and then failing spectacularly. Good metaphor for ambition, seems to me.”

And *Kicking the Beehive* also delivers sexy fun in the hot country cooker “Red Dress” where such main guests as Gill and harmonica ace Trina Hamlin as well as Crowell on acoustic show up to join in on the rollicking ride. “This was so much fun to play,” Werner says. “I even got to do some honky-tonk piano myself. It’s funny about this song –people read different meanings into it. Is this a straight couple or two lesbians? Everyone brings their own experience to the songs. And the good news is, this song is equal opportunity fun.”

Werner credits part of the success of *Kicking the Beehive* to it being recorded in Nashville (“That’s where the tradition of a character speaking in a song is really appreciated”). But she’s also frank about the fact that this album, unlike her last few efforts, was not based on a concept. “I didn’t set out to shape this album at all,” she says. “I didn’t herd the songs into a corral. This is more about being out in a field someplace or on the plains. It’s almost like a herd of bison roaming. That freedom gave me the opportunity to speak more directly without artifice. I had no intention of impressing anybody. Every song on this album is one hundred percent heartfelt and honest.”