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Musician gives boundaries the brush off FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 2005

By Andrew Gilbert
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

At least six days a week, Beth Custer drives her old red Toyota pickup truck from her apartment in Bernal Heights to a small room in an old warehouse tucked away in the mostly deserted Hunters Point Naval Shipyard in San Francisco. The setting is a post-industrial wasteland with hardly a soul around, but for Custer the meat locker-turned-studio is an oasis of creativity.

"I try to take off one day a week," says Custer, an accomplished clarinetist, pianist, vocalist and composer, sitting on the sun-splashed steps of her studio, a stiff breeze from the bay ruffling her unruly red curls. "I used to be so compulsive about composing that I came in every day."

What's striking about her choice of desolate digs is that Custer is more than anything a virtuoso of collaboration. With a musical palette that seamlessly blends vivid shades of jazz, funk, Afro-Caribbean, contemporary classical and American roots music, Custer has developed a multifaceted compositional style that has enhanced an array of creative endeavors, from film and dance projects to a variety of musical settings.

Since the early 1990s, she has evolved into one of the region's most versatile musical talents, an inveterate band builder who has assembled or sparked a bevy of acclaimed ensembles, such as Trance Mission, Eighty Mile Beach and Club Foot Orchestra.

Over the next three weeks, Custer brings some of the fruits of her recent labor to Berkeley. She celebrates the release of her new CD "Respect As a Religion" (on her BC label) at Ashkenaz on Thursday with the Beth Custer Ensemble, an eight-piece funk-powered group featuring drummer Jan Jackson, guitarist David James, keyboardist Graham Connah, bassist Craig Broussard, and a wind section boasting clarinetist Ben Goldberg, reed master Ralph Carney and trombonist Marty Wehner. Vocalist Michael Ward's Dogs and Fishes opens the show.

Combining captivating grooves with scathing lyrics about

Live

► The Beth Custer Ensemble performs 9 p.m. Thursday, Ashkenaz, 1317 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley. \$10, \$12. (510) 525-5054; www.ashkenaz.com.

► Clarinet Thing performs 8 p.m. May 24, Freight & Salvage, 1111 Addison St., Berkeley. \$17.50, \$18.50. (510) 548-1761; www.the-freight.org.

U.S. foreign policy and the oil-driven economy, the CD was inspired by a poster Custer saw in Barcelona.

"I saw the words 'Respect as a Religion' on a poster where I was staying near Las Ramblas, and I just became obsessed with the phrase," Custer says. "I thought, if we had respect as a universal religion, we'd have a lot fewer wars. We're going to do the whole CD in order, like the rock stars do it."

Custer brings a very different group, Clarinet Thing, to Freight & Salvage on May 24 to celebrate the release of "Agony Pipes and Misery Sticks," an album that collects some of the reed quintet's best performances dating back to its founding in 1990.

Inspired by the Rova Saxophone Quartet, Clarinet Thing explores a wide variety of material, from relatively recent works by John Carter and Abdullah Ibrahim to classic Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington pieces. The repertoire also includes polkas, choros, klezmer tunes, and original pieces by every member of the band, which features Goldberg, Carney, Sheldon Brown and newcomer Harvey Wainapel.

"She created an environment where I'd feel free to bring in whatever I wanted and we'd try to do it," says Brown, a multi-instrumentalist who brings his own band into the Jazzschool on May 21. "There's an openness and willingness to experiment and take chances, and a high level of musicianship all around."

One factor behind Custer's recent burst of activity is that she's been the curator and composer in residence at the San Francisco multidisciplinary performance space The Lab, a position supported by a prestigious, three-year Meet the Composer Residency Grant. The grant allowed Custer to launch several new projects and continue her several longstanding collaborations, particularly with the Joe Goode Performance Group, an innovative ensemble that blends dance, vocals and spoken word.

She has been composing scores for the dance company for more than a decade, and she'll be performing her latest work with the company's new production, "Hometown," at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts June 10-19.

"Her music has that soulful quality, a real human voice to it," says Goode, who often discusses basic ideas with Custer, and then starts choreographing to the sketches she brings back. "She can have a real rock 'n' roll sound. Some of her songs should be on the radio. But she can go to the other end, very serious high-brow concert music. And both ends of that spectrum are really authentic. Her music has a humanity and human scale that's very satisfying. There's always something there for me to love. The pleasure this time is that her band is playing



JOHN O'HARA / The Chronicle

Beth Custer has composed music in a variety of styles for film scores and dance.

live with us."

Custer traces her catholic musical tastes to her childhood, when she soaked up Motown on the radio and listened to her father play classical pieces on the piano in the evening. "That mixture from my

in school.

As a student at State University of New York Potsdam's Crane School of Music she focused on the clarinet and the European classical tradition, and also began immersing herself in jazz. After a

year of graduate school at Michigan State, she decided to make a major geographic change in 1981 when a bike trip to the Bay Area convinced her

that she belonged in San Francisco.

She first gained attention with the Club Foot Orchestra, an ensemble that won a large popular following with its original scores for classic silent films such as Fritz Lang's "Metropolis." She finished her master's degree in clarinet performance at San Francisco State and continued her studies with Carmel clarinetist Risario Matzeo, who encouraged her writing.

Custer supported herself with a series of odd jobs, including working in a record store and running her own bookkeeping business. By the early '90s, she was coming into her own as a bandleader and composer, winning grants and commissions, such as a recent commission from the Left Coast Chamber Ensemble to expand her "Bernal Heights String Suite."

She has continued her film score work without Club Foot, for instance, writing an original score for "My Grandmother," a caustically satiric Soviet silent film from 1929 that will be released on DVD in the fall.

"That's my absolute favorite, composing for film," Custer says. "Dance is up there, too, because you're actually working with people. But there's something about film. It's a solitary thing, but then you bring in other musicians and you pull it all together."

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JOE GOODE, performer

early youth is what ultimately created my style," she says. "I love anything that's truly funky, George Clinton, Del the Funky Homosapien, international rap. Then there's these weird classical melodies that come out, too. I love Chopin and Bach and all that stuff."

While growing up in Freedonia, N.Y., Custer started her musical odyssey on the piano, but by age 9 she had taken up the clarinet