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One clarinet can be quite enough. But five of them playing together? For Beth Custer, that is heaven.



BRANT WARD / The Chronicle

By Jesse Hamlin
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The other afternoon, the Clarinet Thing, led by the hydra-headed talent Beth Custer, was rehearsing in Ben Goldberg's South Berkeley bungalow for a show at Freight & Salvage on Tuesday night celebrating the group's new CD. Ralph Carney, best known for his work with Tom

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Waits, was playing Sheldon Brown's bopping "Touchy" on the big contrabass clarinet, blowing deep, rubbery tones that blipped and bounded.

"I figured out what to do," said Carney, a sly cat with rimless specs and light-brown mutton-chops. "I'm gonna lay out on the hard parts and play the easy parts." Laughter all around.

Brown suggested he try a free (totally improvised) walking bass line. Carney played a few bars and smiled. Yeah, that works, they agreed. Sounds good. So the collaboration goes with these flexible musicians, most of whom have worked together in this and other creative Bay Area bands for years.

The Clarinet Thing is a killer quintet that plays a rich, woody blend of original music and Ellingtonia, Polish polka, Brazilian choro, Kurt Weill Weimar waltzes and other

Beth Custer is surrounded by members of her band Clarinet Thing: (from left) Ralph Carney, Sheldon Brown, Harvey Wainapel and Ben Goldberg.

The Clarinet Thing plays at 8 p.m. Tuesday at Freight & Salvage, 1111 Addison St., Berkeley. Tickets: \$18.50. (510) 548-1761 or www.freightandsalvage.org.

pieces that pop and sway with the pregnant sound of an improvising clarinet choir.

In addition to this band, Carney and Goldberg sometimes play in the Beth Custer Ensemble. Brown plays with the Club Foot Orchestra — noted for its original scores to silent movies — of which Custer is a founding member. The excellent reedman Harvey Wainapel, replacing Peter Joshoff in the quintet, has played with Brown and Goldberg, but had never done the Clarinet Thing until this rehearsal. He dug it.

"I saw right away it was collaborative," said Wainapel, who has played saxophone with stars like Ray Charles and McCoy Tyner and has spent a lot of time in the past few years playing clarinet with musicians in Brazil.

"It's open for everyone to make this work as a group. It's not like, 'This is my thing, I have to play this part, I gotta play this melody.' It's about what makes the best sound. And man, the sound of five clarinets of all different types! There's so much wood. Even the metal ones sound like wood," Wainapel added, referring to Carney's contrabass and the contra-alto clarinet that Goldberg plays.

The band's pleasing new disc, "Agony Pipes and Misery Sticks" — nicknames for the hard-to-master clarinet — comprises cuts recorded live over the past 15 years at local venues like the Lab, the Jazz House, St. John's Church and the Berkeley Store Gallery. The group was formed by Custer,

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Clarinetist puts her money where her mouthpiece is with her label

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who loves contributing to the sound of horns “blowing together in harmony and dissonance, both in and out of tune,” as she put it.

This is one of a half-dozen eclectic bands she’s put together. They include the jazz-Latin-rock band Doña Luz 30 Besos — she eventually dropped the name because most people couldn’t pronounce it and incorporated the music into her eponymous ensemble — and a triphop duo called Eighty Mile Beach.

In addition to Club Foot, she was a founding member of the “4th world ambient” dance band Trance Mission, and has written a number of silent-movie and cartoon scores, as well as music for Joe Goode’s dance company. She’s currently writing a musical comedy for Campo Santo with playwright Octavio Solis called “The Ballad of Pancho and Lucy,” based on the couple that robbed Mission District bars in the 1990s and made their getaway by taxi at gunpoint.

“I enjoy a wide range of music, and I believe, to a degree, that I can compose in any style,” said Custer, a live wire with curly strawberry-blond hair and amused blue eyes. The quirky music on the just-released Beth Custer Ensemble disc, “Respect as a Religion,” variously brings to mind Joni Mitchell, Charles Mingus, James Brown and Neil Young. She has a knack for twisted pop songs.

“I listen every day to Miles Davis. I love Duke. I love Stravinsky. I listen to the Nigerian singer Keziah Jones, who sounds like a cross between Prince and traditional Nigerian music,” said Custer, a soulful clarinetist who also sings and plays keyboards, and takes tango and salsa lessons to get the feeling of that music in her body. “It’s a matter of being open-minded, and I think the other guys here are pretty open-minded.”

That accounts for the band’s far-ranging repertoire, which includes the late avant-garde clarinetist John Carter’s “Sticks and Stones,” Gold-



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Ralph Carney plays with Beth Custer’s clarinet ensemble.

berg’s lovely arrangements of Eubie Blake’s “Memories of You,” based on Thelonious Monk’s solo piano recording, and South African composer Abdullah Ibrahim’s lyrical “Mountains of the Moon.” There’s also a fresh take on a traditional 19th century American tune Goldberg calls “Primitive Southern Brass Band Piece.”

Custer composed two of the tunes for a score the Pacific Film Archive commissioned to accompany Georgian director Kote Mqabridze’s 1929 silent expressionist film “My Grandmother,” a biting satire of Soviet bureaucracy.

“Sweeping Staircase” is a wistful waltz with delicate counterpoint and swelling chords. “Fired Manager Blues” is a moody piece of floating impressionism, with Custer’s Gershwin-esque lead singing and sighing on top, and some slap-tongued barks and muffled bellows from Carney on the bottom.

Custer composed the “Grandmother” score, performed live at the Castro Theatre a few years ago, with support from New York-based Meet the Composer, which gave her a residency grant of \$40,000 a year for three years. One of four awarded nationally, the prestigious grant also allowed her to compose for Goode and to make her two new records. A \$15,000 Aaron Copland award went to pay for the recording of “My Grandmother,” which will be released in September, when Custer’s augmented ensemble performs it at New York’s Merkin Hall.

She puts all this music out on her own label, BC Records. It’s too frustrating to pitch some record company and wait forever to hear back that they’re passing on it.

“I just put out the stuff myself,” Custer said. “I’m bound and determined. I’ve got to just put it out there using the grant money I can get and gig money.”

She feels fortunate to get those

grants, and to be working “with the creme de la creme” of the Bay Area arts scene — the brilliant comic actor Geoff Hoyle just tapped her for a gig — but it’s still touch and go making a living playing creative music.

“My income drops to zero in July, so I’m kind of flipping out,” Custer said with a laugh. She did land a Gerbode Foundation grant to write the music with Solis. She has already sketched out the music, which she describes as “urban Tom Waits with Latin tinges.”

Custer started playing music at the age of 9 in grade school in Fredonia, N.Y. She wanted to play drums — “that’s where all the boys were” — but was assigned the clarinet. She took to it in a big way.

“I love the sound,” she said. “The tone. It’s dark, gorgeous, mysterious and lusty.”

Brown offered his thoughts on the licorice stick.

“It’s a very flexible instrument,” said the ponytailed clarinetist-composer, who also works with his own group and the San Francisco Klezmer Experience, or Klez-X. “You can do virtually anything with it. It’s easy to play fast lines, and it’s easy to jump around a lot, big register jumps, and it also has a very blendy sound.” Then there are the glissando and flutter-tongue techniques that expand the instrument’s rich sonic palette.

Custer developed her technique and musical ideas at the State University of New York at Potsdam just below the Canadian border, where she cross-country skied to school. She played in clarinet choirs there and at San Francisco State University, where she went to graduate school.

She began composing film music after joining the Club Foot Orchestra, which has performed

scores to silent classics like “Nosferatu,” “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” and “Metropolis.”

“I come up with an idea then I go for a big long walk in nature,” said Custer, who often roams Bernal Heights, where she lives.

“I get ideas from that. The rhythm will be in my arms and legs, the melodies will be in my head, and then I start singing things that will go with the counterparts.”

She and Goldberg (whose Plays Monk band appears at Berkeley’s Starry Plough on Friday) are the only ones in the Clarinet Thing who don’t double on saxophone.

“I’m doing the world a favor,” Goldberg said.

“That’s how I feel, too,” Custer chimed in. “One less saxophonist.”

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