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Music's Mystery Woman

Beth Custer composes, plays, and sings in an awesome range of styles. So why have so few of us heard of her?

BY DERK RICHARDSON

My Grandmother, MAY 30, **Folk**, JUNE 19–22, 26–29, YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS, 701 MISSION ST., S.F., (415) 978-2787. **Beth Custer Ensemble**, MAY 31, INTERSECTION FOR THE ARTS, 446 VALENCIA ST., S.F., (415) 626-2787.

Beth Custer is the perfect desert-island musician. Clarinetist, pianist, singer, accordionist, trumpeter, keyboardist—she could bring enough cultural survival tools to a desolate atoll to keep Robinson Crusoe, the Swiss Family Robinson, and every *Survivor* castaway entertained for years. This is different from being a

“desert-island disc” musician, like Bob Dylan, Miles Davis, the Beatles, Norah Jones, or whoever made the records you’d have with you on that proverbial exile to remotest Bora Bora. It’s more akin to being a private house pianist, on call to play “Misty” or “Smells Like Teen Spirit” on a moment’s notice.

Born in South Bend, Indiana, but a San Franciscan for 22 years, Custer has held me in her sway ever since I first heard her in the Club Foot Orchestra. That’s the eccentric little big band that made its mark here in the 1980s and early ’90s with original live scores for such classic silent films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, and *Metropolis*. At first it was her clarinet that beguiled me. A few other musicians, notably Don Byron in New York and Ben Goldberg in the Bay Area, were also bringing the “licorice stick” back to prominence in compelling jazz-related contexts, but Custer’s playing was uniquely poignant and sensual. She suggested the heady avant-garde harmonies of ’60s free-jazz



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icon Eric Dolphy while connecting directly to the raw emotions of joy and heartbreak. In a way that only someone like Joni Mitchell has done for me in pop music, Custer could convey the bitter and the sweet while pushing at the bounds of musical convention.

She's a composer, too, reflecting influences as varied as Eastern European folk tunes, Duke Ellington, Igor Stravinsky, the visionary 12th-century theologian-composer Hildegard von Bingen, Argentinean tango master Astor Piazzolla, Karlheinz Stockhausen, tangy country-and-western tearjerkers, and Afro-Cuban dance rhythms. Since she moved west, she's amassed a body of work that encompasses melancholy ballads, complex jazz improvisations, playful film scores, and funky rock 'n' roll.

While Custer's music touches more shores than a Carnival cruise, it all wells up from the same oceanic imagination. Her focus seems to shift faster than an eyeball during REM sleep, but her music rarely feels scattered; its myriad inspirations fold into coherent, lyrical statements that inevitably sound like, well, Beth Custer. Where does it all come from? "I always have the same answer," she says. "Nature. The music just comes into my brain."

And all her music—the songs, the symphonies, the film scores and improvisations—is both visually evocative, conjuring up dreamlike imagery, and powerfully kinetic, triggering a visceral impulse to move. "People always tell me my music is cinematic," she agrees. "I've often worked from visual stimuli. And there isn't anything more gratifying for me than writing for dance. There's something incredible about watching my own music being danced to by these beautiful bodies. I guess I've always been a closet dancer as well."

These days, both film and dance figure prominently in Custer's work, and Bay Area audiences can get a taste of each in three radically different performances. If you saw *My Grandmother*, Georgian director Kote Mikaberidze's long-suppressed 1929 slapstick-Expressionist satire of Soviet bureaucracy, at the Castro last winter, you heard the Beth Custer Ensemble performing Custer's newly written score. Alternately wistful and comical, subtle and bombastic, *My Grandmother* lives up to Custer's billing as "the best piece I've ever written." That performance featured her working Ensemble—guitarist David James, bassist

David R, and drummer Jan Jackson—augmented by a trumpeter, a violinist, and a cellist. Later, Custer reconceived portions of the music as a postmodern chamber-music suite for the Turtle Island String Quartet, which is performing this version of *My Grandmother* at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum. The following day, the Beth Custer Ensemble performs its offbeat rock at Intersection for the Arts.

On the dance front, Custer continues a decade-long collaboration with the innovative San Francisco choreographer Joe Goode and the Joe Goode Performance Group. Back at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Goode is premiering his latest dance theater piece, *Folk*, the first part of a trilogy centering on people at the margins of American society. For this piece, which is set during the California gold rush, "Joe wants me to draw from music of the 1850s through the early 1900s," Custer says, "and also investigate the Mexican music of that era and the hymn-based shape-note singing of the southeastern United States."

Clearly, Goode's ambitious plans will put many aspects of Custer's talent into play: The second part, *Grace* (to premiere in 2004), will tackle the country's jazz and blues heritage; the third, *Hometown* (2005), will be set in the modern-day Mission and call for contemporary music.

Custer's propensity for working all over the place—yet always under the

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mainstream radar—prevents her from gaining the recognition that more compactly packaged and marketable musicians get. It has also worked against her recording that elusive desert-island disc. A few CDs—with the hypnotic ethno-ambient group Trance Mission, the ethereal electronica band Eighty Mile Beach and programmer-turntablist Christian

Jones, Custer's Latin-tinged pop band Doña Luz 30 Besos—catch marvelous facets of her gifts. *Vinculum Symphony* is a staggering document of the 1999 magnum opus Custer conceived for 32 musicians playing conventional and home-made instruments. And her anthology CDs—*The Shirt I Slept In* (1995), *In the Broken Fields Where I Lie* (1999), and, especially, *Maverick Strain and Other Stories* (2002)—provide tantalizing surveys of her musical depth and breadth.

But Custer has yet to go into a studio and produce the mind-blowing recording that captures her genius in full flower—her *Blood on the Tracks* or *Kind of Blue*. Still, she's the one I'd take with me to Palau or Polynesia just so that I could watch her turn everything she touches into music. ●

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