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SONGWRITERS IN THE ROUND

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BY BETH FEINSTEIN-BARTL
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

Chrystal Hartigan is responsible for bringing plenty of music to audiences throughout South Florida. Yet, she's never warbled a note.

Rather, Hartigan lets others take the stage. It's a formula that's worked for the promoter from Hollywood. She's become a well-known force behind the scenes, bringing a revolving array of performers from Broward County and beyond to eager listeners at a series dubbed Songwriters in the Round.

Performances are at 8 p.m. the third Tuesday of each month in the Abdo New River Room at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts. There's nothing canned about the acoustic concerts. The songs are originals by artists that Hartigan plucks from a large personal directory accumulated through her company, Hollywood East Music Group.

The shows are among many projects Hartigan has undertaken during a 20-year career devoted to giving a place and voice to the music community. The gigs have become her baby, coddled and carefully cultivated.

Hartigan has been organizing the songwriter showcases in one form or another since the late 1990s. This latest spate of concerts is a comeback of sorts, revived after an illness that forced her to take a break in 2004.

The rebooted program marks its first anniversary Tuesday -- celebrating the same way the series was inaugurated one year ago, in conjunction with the annual Daniel Pearl Foundation World Music Days Harmony for Humanity.

Songwriters in the Round will join an international network of concerts to foster tolerance in memory of Pearl, The Wall Street Journal reporter murdered in 2002 by terrorists in Pakistan. Five musicians are slated to play the anniversary show. They include Puerto Rican-born alternative country singer Vickie Raye and Inez Barlatier, daughter of Haitian musician Jan Sebon.

The lineup is similar to what Hartigan puts together every month, always keeping things diverse and budget friendly. A typical concert is a mixed bag of beats, from blues to straight up rock 'n' roll. Admission is \$5 at the door.

Shows kick off with an hourlong open-mike session, available to anyone who signs up in advance. It's followed by a concert with usually three to five featured musicians. The acts range from local performers to out-of-towners traveling through the area, said Hartigan, who began doing the showcases in 1996.

Hartigan said she got her start coproducing events with award-winning songwriter-producer Desmond Child in Miami. She branched out on her own in 2002, doing a two-year run in downtown Hollywood.

After regaining her health, she restarted the series in October 2007 at Laughing Matterz in downtown

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Fort Lauderdale. When the comedy club closed this spring, she settled in May at the Broward Center at 201 SW Fifth Ave.

From moving across county lines and changing locations, the idea behind the concerts has always stayed the same, Hartigan said.

“It’s important to give songwriters a venue to showcase their works,” she said. “A lot of people don’t have a clue about the talent that’s in this town and I’m happy to provide them with the opportunity.”

Angie Chirino, a Latin Grammy Award-winning songwriter from Miami, played the Abdo room in September. The room has a good vibe, with few distractions. There’s no clanking plates and noisy crowds, she said.

“It’s wonderful to express yourself to crowds who are willing to listen,” said Chirino, daughter of Cuban-born bandleader Willy Chirino.

Ian Lee, a singer-songwriter from Miramar, has played several times during the show’s open-mike portion.

“It’s pretty awesome,” he said. “It’s a great forum for live, original music. And the acoustics are incredible.”

Hartigan has carved out a deal with the Broward Center to book free shows every few months in the courtyard, as opening acts for patrons arriving for concerts.

Other plans include creating a songwriting program for at-risk students, Hartigan said.



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