

**Warner Sings the Blues: She and Her Band Put Their Own Twists on “Old Stuff**, by Bill Craig. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 20, 2003.

With a pair of soulfully powerful albums and regular work in and around the Richmond area, Sheryl Warner and the Southside Homewreckers (guitarist Gregg Kimball and harmonica player Rick Manson) have quietly established themselves as a king fish in the modestly sized pond that is the central Virginia blues scene.

Lead vocalist Warner, a product of Virginia Commonwealth University's jazz studies program, entered the world of acoustic, country blues through a side, if not a back, entrance. "Like most middle-class Caucasian folks, I got into the blues through a white artist, which would have been Bonnie Raitt," said Warner in a recent phone interview.

"I just sort of stumbled across her when I was 15 and liked her and didn't know why and didn't think about it much. I just started listening to her lots. . . . Then I evolved into listening to jazz and Billie Holiday and Miles Davis. Even though it was a different kind of music, the same feeling was there."

Warner credits former Homewrecker John Bradshaw for her introduction to the Delta, Piedmont and ragtime styles that make up the bulk of the band's current set lists. And, she admits, those styles are acquired tastes.

"I didn't start listening to the old stuff until I started singing with John. . . . When I first started listening to the acoustic stuff, my contemporary ears said 'I don't get it.' I had to listen to it a whole lot. . . . The more we got into it, the more of a feeling I got for it and the more I could see the diversity in what was there. It's a lot more complex and subtle than it sounds on first hearing. I hope that when I sing some of this stuff, it makes it accessible to people. It's definitely got a place in my heart now."

The Homewreckers are obviously deeply moved and influenced by blues pioneers such as Big Bill Broonzy, Blind Boy Fuller, Sippie Wallace, Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson. Warner is quick to point out that, despite their reverence for the masters, she and the boys are musicians, not preservationists.

"It's not our desire to copy lick for lick and note for note what the original artist

did," Warner said. "What's the point of that? Stuff changes and evolves. We want to make it interesting to ourselves. We each have an individual style and way of expressing ourselves."

Though the Homewreckers' music has yet to enter the new millennium, the addition of Manson's harmonica has at least pushed their sound into the 1950s. "With a female vocalist, we can cover the classic blues as well as the country blues, and we've always done that," Kimball explained. "But being a harp player, Rick's expanded our direction. . . . We want him to do his thing and play tunes that he likes. That gets you into Little Walter and things like that that we weren't doing before. We tended to do pre-war stuff before."

When they're not playing clubs in Virginia and North Carolina, the Homewreckers are collaborating with blues societies, museums and schools to bring educational programs to classrooms and galleries. Kimball, director of publications and educational services for The Library of Virginia by day, is currently piloting a "Blues in the Schools" project at Richmond's Mary Munford Elementary School.

"Because everything is SOL-driven, we try to cover a lot of different topics which they need to know in fifth grade," Kimball said. "We want to give the students some idea of where this music came from. We mapped all of the different artists on the map. We've done things that are topical and include geography. One session will talk about floods and all kinds of other things that these songs are about. We'll do one on simple instruments and introduce them to a variety of homemade instruments and simple instruments that people played on the street."