

Words & Music by...

Bloomington singer/songwriters are riding high
By **Jeremy Shere** Photography by **Steve Raymer**

When Carrie Newcomer goes on tour, other musicians want to know: “What’s in the water in Bloomington that produces so many great songwriters?” Newcomer, one of a cadre of local singer/songwriters, says, “There’s general acknowledgement around the country that this area is a hotbed of interesting writers.”

That shouldn’t surprise anyone here. By any standard, Bloomington is a musical town. There’s the IU School of Music, of course. There’s jazz at venues all over the city. And there’s John Mellencamp, our resident rock star, whose newest hit, “Our Country,” is high on the charts. Add a community of well-established and rising singer/songwriters and you have a musical life that is stunning for a city the size of Bloomington.

Many Bloomingtonians know the music of Newcomer, Malcolm Dalglish, Tom Roznowski, Tim Grimm, and Jason Wilber. Fewer probably know talented, rising artists like Krista Detor, Sophia Travis, and Jason Fickel. All are songwriters and performers whose music runs the gamut from traditional folk to hammer-dulcimer-inflected choral compositions.

EXIT

(from left) Carrie Newcomer,
Jason Wilber, and Tom Roznowski.



With so many voices, is there anything like a “Bloomington sound?” Not exactly. The city’s remoteness from the centers of the music business allows for a sense of artistic freedom and an eclectic body of work that is hard to pigeonhole. Carrie Newcomer usually performs solo acoustic songs but also records and plays with a backing band. Krista Detor writes, records, and performs on piano. Malcolm Dalglish plays the hammer dulcimer and composes folk-inspired music for choirs and vocal groups.

At the same time, though, Bloomington songwriters do cross paths in ways that make it possible to talk about a local songwriting community. The artists profiled here are all storytellers whose songs often feature sharply drawn characters. And some of these artists have begun to work together. This past November, Carrie Newcomer and Malcolm Dalglish performed at a benefit at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, and in December, Newcomer was guest artist at a Christmas concert featuring Krista Detor at tutto bène. Grimm, Roznowski, Detor, Newcomer, and songwriter Jason White meet regularly to share ideas and critique each other’s work. In December, these songwriters collaborated with local writer Scott Russell Sanders (see page 64) on a show in Columbus, Indiana, performing songs based on Sanders’ book of short stories, *Wilderness Plots*.

These local songwriters follow in Bloomington’s rich musical tradition. This is where, in 1927, the great American songwriter and troubadour Hoagy Carmichael composed “Stardust,” widely considered to be one of the best ballads ever written. (“Stardust” has been recorded more than 2,000 times.) Carmichael was one of a kind, but today Bloomington is home to countless accomplished players, singers, and composers. Local singer/songwriters don’t have to look far to find talented musicians with whom to play and record.

But for all of Bloomington’s songwriting richness, you wouldn’t necessarily know it by spending a weekend out on the town. There are simply not enough regular venues supporting local singer/songwriter acts. So for some readers, the following profiles might be an introduction to Bloomington’s top songwriters. For others, here’s a closer look at the scope and depth of local talent. In either case, check out the music when you can.



Carrie Newcomer

“Holy is the dish and drain

The soap and sink, the cup and plate

And the warm wool socks, and the cold white tile

Showerheads and good dry towels”

“Holy As a Day Is Spent”

There’s something organic and real about Carrie Newcomer’s voice. It’s a voice that dignifies and enlivens, that adds resonance and weight to the quotidian, domestic images—dish, drain, cup, plate—that often populate her songs.

But Newcomer, 48, is more than just an alluring vocalist. A Bloomington resident since 1990, she has written nine albums of original material.

“I’m sort of a workhorse writer,” Newcomer explains. “Some people write when they’re inspired, and I do that too, but I try to write as consistently as I can, wherever I am—in airports, hotels, restaurants. I see writing, not only songs but also poems and stories, as my job, as what I do every day.”

Her songs range across themes and tempos from gentle, acoustic ballads to energetic, boo-



gie-infused folk-rock. Many of her best tunes, such as those on her latest release, *Regulars and Refugees* (2005) tell stories about ordinary people.

“The music supports the story, and I like to tell stories about things that you don’t get to hear much about in popular music, like family relationships and politics,” Newcomer says. “At the end of the day, no matter the topic, the hallmark of a really well-written song is elegance. It has to be a story that reaches out and touches a person in a very human way.”

Newcomer tours throughout the United States and Europe and has carved out a career on the folk/roots-rock circuit. She’s played with such stars as Alison Krauss, Bonnie Raitt, Rosanne Cash, and Mary Chapin Carpenter. The string band Nickel Creek played her song “I Shoud’ve Known Better” on its 2003 Grammy-winning album, *This Side*. So why not relocate to Nashville or New York and really go for the big time? Because, Newcomer says, Bloomington offers things, musically and personally, that those places can’t.

“About ten years ago I became comfortable with my own voice, and it’s a voice that comes from a very Midwestern sensibility,” she says. “I enjoy being on tour and seeing other places, but I love being able to come back to a place where there’s a deep appreciation for good songwriting and such a love of great music and art.”

Malcolm Dalglish

“Squall of crows above my street

There in boundless joy we meet. Here, I carry you.

Here as I live, so do you.

I will carry you here.

I carry you. I carry you. I carry you.”

“Here, I Carry You”

Among Bloomington songwriters, Malcolm Dalglish is probably the hardest to characterize. Here’s what it says on his website: “Malcolm Dalglish is a choral composer and director, hammer dulcimer, spoons, bones, and chin music virtuoso who presents programs of original folk choir and dulcimer music, stories, mime, thyme, rhythm, and song.”

Attracted by the local culture and music scene, Dalglish came to Bloomington in 1983 with a reputation as a talented hammer dulcimer composer and performer. As his career grew, he began expanding into spoken word and performance art. Then, in 1999, he received a commission from the American

Boyschoir (of which Dalglish was a member as a 5th grader in the ’60s). That single piece he wrote for the choir evolved into the full-length album *Hymnody of Earth* featuring songs based on the work of poet Wendell Berry. Recorded in Bloomington with Dalglish’s ensemble, Ooolitic, the album took off, and boys’ choirs around the country took note. Since then, Dalglish has been writing for and working with youth and professional adult choirs around the country.

And the music? It’s easy to fall back on superlatives like “ethereal” and “soaring.” Dalglish’s compositions *are* ethereal and soaring, but so is much choral music. What distinguishes his work is the way he combines the vocal and harmonic power of a choir with the earthy sounds of old dance tunes and Irish and American folk songs and melodies.

“I try to write choral songs that are fun to sing with lyrics and melodies that come out of a Midwestern, American experience” says Dalglish, who has recorded ten albums of original music. Inspiration can come in unexpected ways. “I was recently commissioned to write



an operetta for a boys' choir in Appleton, Wisconsin. I was running near the Bloomington Y one evening last summer and saw some Little League games in action. That brought me back to when I played Little League. Listening to the cacophony of 'hey batters' and other baseball chatter, I was struck by how musical it sounded. So I decided to write the operetta about Little League baseball."

Like many of his fellow Bloomington songwriters, Dalglish appreciates Bloomington as a small town brimming with culture.

"As a family person it's a wonderful place to raise kids," he says. "And as an artist, there's just such a wonderful music community here. You can go out any night of the week and hear amazing music."

And make it, too.

Tom Roznowski

Like a boat it kind of floated

Then exploded as soon as it hit the floor

No sound uttered until my brother

Screamed out to mother

It's me he pointed toward

"Gravy Boat"

Put on a CD by longtime Bloomingtonian Tom Roznowski, close your eyes, and you can't help but hear shades of Hank Williams. Not that Roznowski sounds like Hank Williams, exactly. It's more a sense of kindred songwriting spirits, a similar soulful yearning that meshes bright, sharply realized melodies with lyrics at once playful and grounded in human emotion.

"One of the things I love about Hank's work is that it's so conscious of human emotion. When he sings, 'I'm so lonesome I could cry,' you believe it," Roznowski says. "I started writing songs a long time ago, and I always try to go for what I hear in great songwriters like Hank Williams, Dylan, and Randy Newman—songs that are in a sense very private and very much the product of a singular mind, but that somehow reach out to others and draw them into the songwriter's world."



A music journalist and writer and performer of radio documentaries as well as a musician, Roznowski, 55, produces the public radio program *Hometown* about Terre Haute in the mid-20s.

"Life in southern Indiana is a big part of my music," says Roznowski, who has three albums to his credit. "One thing I love about Bloomington is the meeting of the urban and the rural, the past and present, that you find here. In a way, that's what a lot of my songs are about."

Krista Deter

"A cherry cola down at the station

A souvenir from Coney Island and

The roof was leaking

The floor was sinking

Was kinda pretty if you were drinking"

"Gaslight"

Krista Deter is sometimes described as an "up-and-coming" singer/songwriter. Listen to her piano-driven songs, though, and you'll hear a songwriter who, lyrically and melodically, has arrived.

"Writing a good song comes down to one thing—the clarity of the idea being put forth," says Deter, 40, who grew up in California and has lived and recorded in Bloomington for seven years with her husband David Weber of Echo Park Studios. "Great songwriting requires crystal clarity of the lyrics and an original musical idea that creates a musical construct that fits the shape of the song."

Deter's songs on her three CDs—*A Dream in a Cornfield*, *the silver wood*, and *Mudshow*—are lyrically clear and musically original. *Rolling Stone* magazine called *Mudshow* "a



small miracle—intense and wonderful." For all the beauty of the harmonies and the hushed but powerful quality of Deter's voice, there's a surprising toughness to many of the songs—a subtle, raw edge that on repeated listening comes to define the music.

"I'm part of an amazing peer group of songwriters here," says Deter, who tours regularly in the United States and Europe. "People like Carrie [Newcomer] and Tim [Grimm] keep me on my toes, musically. There's so much going on in Bloomington musically, it keeps the bar high for me and for everyone."

Tim Grimm

"Me, I'm trying to learn the old ways

Of the heart and of the land

Of people growing old together,

Of families working hand in hand"

"Better Days"

Tim Grimm, 46, is a folk troubadour in the spirit of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. He was voted one of the best songwriters of 2005 by the radio program *Freeform American Roots*. Like many Bloomington songwriters, Grimm is a storyteller whose songs are sharply observed vignettes of Midwestern people and places.

He has recorded five highly acclaimed CDs, tours all around the United States, and is widely considered by critics to be one of the country's best folk/Americana songwriters and performers. Bloomington and southern Indiana, Grimm says, are a big part of his success.

"The songwriting community in Bloomington is as good a small group of songwriters and musicians as can be found anywhere," says Grimm, who returned to southern Indiana after a successful acting career in Los Angeles. "Living in a small town, away from the spotlight, you can take a lot of musical risks."



Jason Wilber

"I love to watch the wind in the locust trees

And the way the sun feels so warm on me

And on you too, and everyone who has come to sit

Out in this lazy afternoon"

"Lazy Afternoon"

Jason Wilber has collaborated with legendary songwriter John Prine on the Grammy-winning album *Fair & Square*. He's performed on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, *Austin City Limits*, and *Live with Regis and Kathy Lee* (as the show was called at the time), and at The Grand Ole Opry. But the typical labels—alt-country, folk, folk-rock—don't really describe Wilber's music.

"When I'm asked what kind of songs I write, I usually say that I try to make the kind of music that I would like to listen to," says Wilber, who grew up in Bloomington and, aside from touring and working in Nashville, Tennessee, has never really left. "I try to make everything I write come from me, from who I am, and the way that things sound right to me."

The songs on his latest release, *Lazy Afternoon* (2006), feature evocative lyrics and solid melodies brought to life by Wilber's rich, lilting vocals. He sings with confidence and apparent ease.

"One of the things that makes you a good songwriter is being confident about what makes a song good," he says. "If I can't listen to a song and determine whether it's good or can be changed into something worthwhile, then it becomes really hard to write well."



Sophia Travis

"She's a wingwalker

She's a wingwalker

2200...

Revolutions per minute"

"Wingwalker"

Sophia Travis doesn't see herself as a singer/songwriter. Yes, the 40-year-old president of the Monroe County Council has written two albums of infectious, mercurial electric pop songs (think Elliott Smith meets Kate Bush). And, yes, she performs several times a month in and around Bloomington and Indianapolis. Still, Travis says, she's more of an ensemble musician, having played in bands including the Mary Janes and, more recently, the Vulgar Boatmen.

Listen to her music, though, and it's difficult to conclude anything other than that Travis is indeed a songwriter.

"I've been writing things down and cobbling words together ever since I was a little girl," says Travis, who's lived in Bloomington since she came to IU as an undergraduate in 1984. "I've got tons of papers lying around with patches of a poem or song lyric, stuff that I fiddle around with, kind of like dabbling with a set of paints."

Travis' true musical love, though, is being part of a band.

"I'd give up songwriting before giving up playing with other musicians," she says. "There's just something about being on stage as part of a band that's totally, musically fulfilling."

Jason Fickel

"Cause anthracite coal burns like a skylark

My love, baby, finds its way in the dark"

"If I Still Had a Buick"

As a teenager growing up in Colorado, Jason Fickel fell in love with the blues. So he packed up his guitar and headed down to Mississippi to learn the craft from blues masters like James "Son" Thomas. Soon he was gigging with other blues players throughout the South, establishing himself as a fine blues guitarist.

Fickel was writing songs, too, but in a way that surprised him. "I was playing blues music all the time, but when I went to write my own

songs they sounded completely different from the music I'd been playing with bands," he says. The songs on his three CDs, while infused with a blues sensibility, come across as a composite of folk, country, blues, and lyrical ballad. And they are clearly the product of his assured songwriting voice.

"A great song is one that has a complex emotion behind it," says Fickel, whose tune, "If I Had a Buick," was recently featured on NPR's *Car Talk*. "There has to be ambiguity and ambivalence not only in the lyrics, but in the music, too." ✨



Discography

Carrie Newcomer:

Regulars and Refugees (2005)

Betty's Diner:

The Best of Carrie Newcomer (2004)

Gathering of Spirits (2002)

Age of Possibility (2000)

My True Name (1998)

My Father's Only Son (1996)

The Bird or the Wing (1995)

Angel at My Shoulder (1994)

Visions & Dreams (1991)

Malcolm Dalglish

Pleasure (1999)

Hymnody of Earth (1999)

Morning Walk (1988)

The Great Road (1988)

Jogging the Memory (1986)

Metamora (1985)

Thunderhead (1982)

The First of Autumn (1978)

Banish Misfortune (1977)

Tom Roznowski:

This Place in Time (2006)

Voice Beyond the Hill (2001)

A Well Traveled Porch (1999)

Krista Deter:

the silver wood (2006)

Mudshow (2005)

A Dream in a Cornfield (2003)

Tim Grimm:

The Back Fields (2006)

Names (2004)

Amber Waves (2004)

Coyote's Dream (2003)

Heartland (2000)

Jason Wilber:

Lazy Afternoon (2006)

Live and Otherwise, Vol. 1 (2006)

King for a Day (2004)

Amber Waves (2004)

Behind the Midway (2000)

Lost in Your Hometown (1998)

Sophia Travis:

Music for Swimming (2004)

Music for Picnics (2003)

Jason Fickel:

Kerosene Cologne (2005)

True, Kansas (2003)

Rio Rancho Drive (2002)