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Hurricane Val



STRUMMING CHURNS: Valeria Wisnorscker and band mates Dave Nachamoff, center, and Mitch Master play at the South Florida Folk Festival in Oakland Park. PHOTO BY J. ALBERT BARNHILL/STAFF

She go-go danced in a bikini,
she sticks it to Disney, she can outrun the wind,
she's Florida in all its funk and glory

BY CHARLES FLOWERS
Special to The Herald

Valerie C. Wisecracker is on a tear.

The most misunderstood woman in Florida folk circles — so misunderstood she had to change her last name — is talking about high-tailing it to Everglades City, to avoid hurricane-force winds.

"I was running from a Category 5, and everybody else was running to Naples," she says, as she introduces her first song.

So she takes a hard left to the Captain's Table, which sounds like a place to eat but is actually a motel, where she is quoted a rate \$75 more than normal.

"You can't do that," says Wisecracker, who divides her time between Miami and Islamorada. "Why not?" asks the innkeeper.

"That's hurricane gouging," says Valerie.

"Nope," says the woman. "That's tough luck."

Then Valerie sings a dreamy, unrecorded song about Chokoloskee, a town and a place a little farther left of civilization than even the Everglades, in fact it's "a little left of the law." Her song is peopled with figures real and mythical. There's the three-fingered Indian chief who may have killed a Florida panther ("Here kitty, kitty"); the ubiquitous Hallandale guitar player who calls himself Ralford Starke, who in one of his songs falls for a "girl from Immokalee." Finally, there is Sweet Marie, a thinly-veiled reference to Marie Nofsinger, a waifish singer-songwriter friend from Delray Beach who is dwarfed by her Gibson guitar, and who possesses, according to Wisecracker, "a face that could launch a thousand bar fights."

These people are like the poker-playing dogs of velvet paintings. They hang on the walls of Valerie's song as they hang around the same end-of-the-road outposts where this music is played, among the sunburned, backyard orange-fed children in a Florida that has not yet been "run into the ground."

But you won't hear about them on a compact disc, at least not yet. Valerie, who has been at this musical game for more than 30 years — since she go-go danced (in a bikini, mind you) at the Castaways Wreck Bar at 163rd and Collins — hawks no disc of her Florida songs. To hear them, you have to venture to Clyde Butcher's backyard in Ochopee, where she played the Labor Day open house this year. Or saddle up and drive to Pete Gallagher's Ka-Tiki tent show on Treasure Island, north of St. Pete Beach.

A BIG HAND

"Her live show is so good, it should be a course of study at any major university," says Gallagher, who hosts a folk music show on public radio station WMNF in Tampa.

Valerie caught the outer bands of the "folk scare" in the 1960s when songwriters like Fred Neil (*Everybody's Talkin*, *The Dolphin*), Vince Martin, David Crosby and Jimmy Buffett were playing in Coconut Grove. And she learned crowd control when she worked as a floor manager and camera operator on the old Alan Burke TV show.

"I love it when people heckle me, 'cause they don't stand a chance," she says. "I've never met a heckler that I couldn't shut up and embarrass. And that's fun. 'Cause then the whole place is with you, you know? Someone is picking on you

and you pick back. But you've got the microphone. And then everybody else is thinking, 'What a jerk this guy is.' And the whole place just turns on him. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha," she cackles at the thought.

On this thunderous night, Wisecracker is playing McArthur State Park on Singer Island north of Palm Beach. She wears a long Honduran skirt she picked up at a resale store, and flip-flops with multi-colored daisies on them. Her toenails sparkle. She props up her instruments — a six-string guitar and an Appalachian style 5-string banjo that she plays sans pick — on a chair. She claims she left her instrument stands outside in the Keys the night before.

Wisecracker is like a comic who has an unbelievable story of how she got to the stage, fantastic, but mostly true. Nofsinger backs her up on the mood of the crowd at the Oyster House Bar in Valerie's Chokoloskee song.

GUNS AND POSES

"Everybody had guns but us," Nofsinger says. "We had to bust out a bunch of jail, whiskey, and marijuana songs just to get their attention. Finally, we played *Desperado* and they all pulled their chairs in real close and listened."

Of Valerie, for whom she wrote Valerie's *Backyard*, Nofsinger says, "She's a character, and as my father used to say, 'Better to be a character than have none at all.'"

Valerie is vigorous in her defense of Florida at the hands of developers. And yes, she names names.

"That's when it gets tough, when you stand up there and name names," says veteran Florida songwriter Dale Crider, 62, who makes his living playing environmental songs.

Her Disney opus, possibly her best protest song, is called *The Dirty Little Rat That Et Orlando*. It drew the ire of Disney lawyers when it played on National Public Radio. In it, she describes how in the 1970s, Disney bought up

acres of Central Florida land, dispossessing homesteaders like her aunt and uncle. She sings the chorus to the Mickey Mouse Club's farewell song: "And it's M-I-C (see you real soon) K-E-Y (why? Because we want your money) M-O . . . U-S-A."

The grand-daughter of orchidist Ethel Barbara Smith, Valerie has gotten her feet wet in the swamp. Last year, with fellow folksinger Cindy Hackney, she found four ghost orchids which Valerie says is "20 percent of the population known in Fakahatchee Strand," the only place the rare wisp of a plant is known to exist.

BUDS OF DOUBT

Naturally, she had a good time watching the premier of the movie *Adaptation* last year with park rangers from the Strand. At a theater in Naples, they all booed when the movie showed characters snorting ghost orchid dust to get high.

Wisecracker says, "Snorting ghost orchids? Pu-leeze. The only high you can get from ghost orchids is finding one."

Valerie bounces around in a van to play gigs, sometimes with her band, the Walking Catfish. She wanders from her Islamorada childhood home to less familiar places, including White Springs on the Suwannee where she is a regular at the Florida Folk Festival. She rarely leaves Florida, and credits the back roads with helping to balance the stresses of living in Miami-Dade.

"I love Miami," she says. "I guess because I'm so familiar with it. I know all the little corners, all the little dives. I know all the right people. I know all the doormen at all the good clubs. I go to some places where everybody else is paying a cover charge and in I go. And it ain't because I'm young and beautiful. It's because I've been around so long."

"I'm a third-generation Florida Cracker. You cannot believe the things I have seen."

The funny thing is, you almost can.



PRIVATE DANCERS: Karl Daringer of Hollywood and Becky Ginter of Fort Lauderdale dance behind stage at folk festival as Wisecracker's Walking Catfish play.