

SIT A SPELL WITH CHERYL WHEELER

She sings, jokes and carries on at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Art Center

By Lisa Reisman

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OLD SAYBROOK » Near the end of a performance, folk luminary Cheryl Wheeler brings out the "Fake Last Song."

Its purpose: to prevent the almost inevitable encore at the end of every folk concert.

As the celebrated songwriter, who will appear at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center tonight, put it at a recent concert, "We're happy to sing another song, but it's the leaving and going back we're not doing." After the "Fake Last Song," she instructed, the audience could pretend she went away. Then, she said, "We're gonna do another song, and then when we get up and leave we'll be done."

That "Fake Last Song" just might be Wheeler's hymn "Lady Gaga's Singing Program," in which she takes the Westboro Baptist Church, which is unaffiliated with mainstream Baptist churches and preaches a gospel of racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia, to task for its opinions about Lady Gaga.

That hymn showcases the two Cheryl Wheelers that have been entertaining audiences since, at the age of 10, she said in a recent email, she found an old toy ukulele in a neighbor's attic and serenaded her mother who was taking a bath at the time.



CONTRIBUTED

Cheryl Wheeler

There is poet Cheryl, who has a rare gift for writing songs with luxuriant melodies and some of the most lovely, well-crafted, and intelligent lyrics on the folk scene. This is the critically acclaimed tunesmith whose songs have been covered by such bold-faced names as Bette Midler, Kenny Loggins, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Garth Brooks.

This is also the deft finger-picker and rich silken alto renowned for her live performances with its mix of complex melodies and what the Boston Globe describes as her "achingly honest songs of love and loss."

Then there is comic Cheryl, who's known to take shots at society, culture and pretty much anything she finds funny.

This is the cutting satirist who finds material in life events such as applying for a home mortgage and news stories about

IF YOU GO

Event: Cheryl Wheeler.

When: 8 tonight

Where: Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook

Tickets: \$35

Info: 860-510-0473
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stranded cruise ships. One Carnival cruise ship, in particular, whose passengers were treated to a helicopter-dropped care package of Pop Tarts and Spam. The story inspired a song titled, well, "Pop Tarts and Spam."

It's the seasoned storyteller who bravely details the daunting challenges she faced early in her career. Specifically, her first professional gig at the Steak and Ale Restaurant in her hometown of Timonium, Md. The establishment had only one PA system. In the middle of her songs, as she

tells it on her website, you would hear: "Jones, party of four ... Jones, party of four." She finally convinced them to get a second PA system.

Otherwise, there might never have been "Shutcher Piehole," a song Wheeler conceived when the tune to the Mexican Hat Dance got stuck in her head while walking her dog one day.

Using that melody, she decided to create a tongue-twisting song about potatoes. The expression, "shut your pie hole," became the song "Shutcher Piehole," which Wheeler wrote envisioning fans would shout out "Shutcher Piehole!" when requesting it.

And yes, it's been suggested that Wheeler could be a stand-up comedian.

Nonsense, she says. "I'd have to be a sit-down comedian. I'm 62. I ain't standing up."

Certainly not to come back for an encore.