

# Inspirit

## Helping others to help keep live music alive

by Bill Meredith

As the music industry continues its ongoing profit-balancing act between the Internet and recorded music, a second act appears.

The music biz doesn't pay as much attention to the current crisis befalling live music, where quality bands can only get gigs by playing for free "exposure," and deejays have replaced musicians in many paying situations. This is where Lake Worth-based not-for-profit organization Inspirit enters in a supporting role.

But Inspirit also stars in this saga. It's mission statement is to provide live entertainment for the oft-forgotten people who [i]don't[i] have the option of leaving the place where they reside to experience it. And its leading lady is co-founder and executive director Ginny Williams.

Williams, a Lake Worth-based violinist (who performs with acts from pop singer/songwriter John Ralston - leader of the touring South Florida rock band Legends of Rodeo - to the bluesy, roots-music Banyan Street Jug Band) started Inspirit in 2000 to send performers to Palm Beach County veterans' hospitals; pediatric, rehab and mental health centers, cancer clinics, youth shelters, retirement and nursing homes, and even prisons.

Williams was inspired with how music enriched her [i]own[i] life as she was enduring chemotherapy after a breast cancer diagnosis in 1998. She's been in remission ever since, and saw Inspirit as a way to give something to people in predicaments similar to hers. And with her primary career involving writing grants for non-profit organizations, Williams also obtained enough funding to pay each performer.

"Music is everywhere, so we take it for granted," she says. "Our mission is to bring the joy of live music and the performing arts to the people isolated from society - who [i]can't[i] take music for granted. And in so doing, we're also helping to keep live music alive."

West Palm Beach Mayor Lois Frankel took notice while attending an Inspirit fund-raising cocktail party, saying, "Music can reach our shut-ins like no other medium. "It lifts the spirit and can make somebody's day. I salute Inspirit for its great work."

Inspirit was inspired by Bread and Roses, a program started by Mimi Farina (sister of folk singer Joan Baez) in San Francisco in the early '70s. While attending college in Utah, Williams was further inspired by Janna Lauer and her Salt Lake City-based non-profit, Heart and Soul (New York City also has a similar organization called Musicians On Call). Since 2000, Inspirit has sent more than 50 different performers - from acoustic soloists, barbershop quartets and full bands to spoken-word artists, dance troupes and storytellers - to entertain 10,000 confined people ranging in age from age 2 to 102 - at 100 different facilities.

"People are finally starting to understand the relationship between music and healing," Williams says. "I have seen Alzheimer's patients faces light up as they hear and recall words to songs from an earlier time in their lives."

Jacquelyn Dwoskin, a Ph.D. and Palm Beach Gardens psychotherapist, agrees. "Music and healing are familiar within African traditions," she says. "A group of Malaysian origin uses ritual singing sessions to encourage healing. Many indigenous groups have utilized rhythm and song for physical and mental ills for centuries. Pythagoras, the ancient Greek philosopher, was a mystic who investigated the 'music of the spheres.' Homer recognized the ability of music to counterbalance negative emotional states. In a time closer to our own, physician Robert Fludd [1574-1637] described music as the vital link between God and the universe."

Like most performers, the artists that Inspirit employs - ranging from the teenage professionals of tomorrow to the retired octogenarian bandleaders of yesterday - understand such a link.

"It's very inspiring," says classical guitarist Donald Dawson, "since often the people are more receptive than when I perform at clubs, restaurants or parties. Plus it's for a good cause, which makes a big difference."

"I experience things through playing for Inspirit that I never even saw performing in New York City," says 83-year-old drummer and vocalist Nat Epstein. "To entertain people in need is equal parts music and therapy - for both myself and the audience."

"Inspirit booked my first gig for them at the Palm Beach County Work Release Center," says Rod MacDonald, a preeminent Greenwich Village singer/songwriter in New York during the '80s and '90s before moving to Delray Beach to help care for his parents. "They did the paperwork, provided sound equipment, got me past the guards, and invited the inmates," he says of the minimum-security facility, "all so I could sing for these guys who were probably glad to have anything to break up the boredom of prison life. They're a good audience. They listen and get involved. Real music fans."

Like many not-for-profit organizations, Inspirit gets by with a small staff (primarily Williams, performance coordinator Anne Devine and public relations consultant Karen Antonucci), board (headed by President Lenny Berger), and annual budget. But there have been recent signs of hope.

Before moving to Switzerland in June of last year, director Erica Eichenberger created a three-minute documentary video on Inspirit for her local Viewfinder Films company out of sheer respect for the organization's work. The film can be accessed through the Inspirit website, [www.inspiritlive.org](http://www.inspiritlive.org), and features the guitar work of blues artist Theresa Lindstrom and narration of spoken-word artist Melkisedek.

In February, the National Endowment for the Arts - the official arts organization of the United States government and the largest annual funder of the arts in America - made Inspirit one of 171 national groups to receive a 2005 "Challenge America Fast-Track Review Grant." The \$10,000 pays Inspirit performers, who earn \$50 to \$100 for a one-set performance, for one year. But Williams sees it as a step toward a more important goal.

"I think getting such a grant from the NEA gives our organization more credibility," she says. "Maybe now some of the most loyal arts supporters in our community, who usually only donate to larger arts organizations like the Kravis Center, will see Inspirit in a different light."

Williams recently got an opportunity to showcase Inspirit for an audience of those supporters at the Palm Beach County Medical Society's "Heroes in Medicine Awards Luncheon" at the Ritz-Carlton in Palm Beach. Inspirit hired teenage vocalist Lindsay Blount, a recent graduate of the Dreyfoos School of the Arts who's preparing to attend Boston's esteemed Berklee College of Music on a scholarship this year, and Lake Park singer/songwriter Jeff Harding for musical entertainment.

Eichenberger's Inspirit video, which aired at the luncheon, makes the point that the organization gives people in need an entertaining break from their daily monotony. But it also points out that those same people give something back to Inspirit's hired performers in addition to their pay - an appreciative audience. In the NEA's words, it chose Inspirit to "extend the arts to underserved populations whose access to the arts is limited by geography, ethnicity, economics or disability," and to help "individuals who are unable to attend regular performance venues."

But unlike Bread and Roses, which has succeeded in part due to the connection to the internationally-known Baez, and Musicians On Call, which received a healthy dose of grant money from Bruce Springsteen, Inspirit hasn't yet been discovered by the wealth of South Florida musical celebrities. Williams, who has worked full-time in child abuse and neglect prevention agencies the whole time she's doubled as Inspirit's executive director, finds this both tiring and frustrating.

"We may not be dramatically changing peoples' lives, or the world," she says, "but we are spreading hope and joy. If good and evil are warring against each other as in the [i]Star Wars[i] series, I like to think Inspirit is helping people to choose light over darkness. Music is the universal language, so we're adding more light to the good side of our existence, and ultimately that's what [i]does change the world."

Williams, and many Inspirit performers, view Inspirit as a higher calling - especially after a performance like the recent one on Mother's Day by Delray Beach singer/songwriter Marie Nofsinger. The setting was Harmony House, a shelter for abused women and children in West Palm Beach.

"I really felt the old heart strings at work on that sunny Mother's Day," says an equally-inspired Nofsinger. "It wasn't so much thinking about what those women and children had been through while I performed, but more about the expressions on their faces, the smiles, the laughter, and the momentary distant looks that I was drawn to. It was a joy to see them dance and laugh, and to watch their children watching their moms have fun."

"I have performed in many settings for all kinds of audiences," Nofsinger concludes, "but being invited to share music at this safe place for women and children gave me a tremendous spiritual boost and renewed hope for our planet." [www.inspiritlive.org](http://www.inspiritlive.org)