Award-winning song teaches moving on in the face of difficulty

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Sue Horowitz won the 14th Annual Songwriting Competition in Maine Sunday, Nov. 3. *Kristian Moravec / The Times Record*

On a crisp Sunday evening, bards — many of whom were Mainers — gathered at Cadenza, an intimate performance venue in Freeport.

The songwriters faced off in the Maine Songwriters Association's 14th annual Songwriting Contest. The six finalists — Sue Horowitz, Wes Covey, Carole Wise, Aaron Barber, Tom McKeon and duo Janice O'Rourke and Mark McDonough — were selected through an anonymous screening process out of a record turnout of 61 entries. The songwriters brought stories of loved ones, enjoying Maine post-tourist season and living in the pandemic, but ultimately, the winning song, "Step on the Gas," taught the audience about moving on and finding a better life in adversity.

The master behind the winning song, Sue Horowitz, an Americana and folk-blend artist who calls Maine her home state, earned first place in the competition and received a $300 cash prize and “bragging rights,” said Doug Kolmar, president of the Maine Songwriters Association. She was followed by Wes Covey in second place and Carol Wise and Aaron Barber tied for third. All finalists, who were judged on a 10-point scale for lyrics, form, impact and originality, got a half-day recording session at the Forest Audio in Belfast.

“It was an incredible honor to be in it in the first place,” Horowitz said shortly after the competition concluded. “I just entered on a whim, I don’t usually do a lot of contests. And to get first place — I was completely shocked. Completely shocked because the quality of the songs were so good.”

She said that winning the competition, while shocking, was like a “pat on the back” — it felt good to be recognized.

“As songwriters, we kind of toil away in isolation a lot of the time, and you don’t know how a song is going to land,” Horowitz said. “So, it’s really just lovely touching somebody in some way.”

Horowitz showcased the lyricism and performance ease of a seasoned musician Sunday night, captivating the audience and ultimately winning first place in the competition. *Kristian Moravec / The Times Record*

Each artist had to perform two songs in the competition, one to warm up and the second as their submission for judging. Horowitz, the fourth to perform out of the six, immediately captured the audience with skilled musicianship and a funny warm up song — a meta tune about songwriting.

“Line one, zap of lighting in the sky, catch the words as they go by, it’s easy,” Horowitz cheerfully sang to the crowd Sunday night. The audience chuckled at the quips and jokes she made about the songwriting process, including a common songwriting struggle of using a thesaurus or Googling words for rhymes.

Horowitz joked after her warm up that it seemed like the right song to sing at the venue. And with the ease of a seasoned performer, she quickly delved into “Step on the Gas,” a darker, more emotional piece.

“When you leave this town

Turn your world around

Roll your windows down

Step on the gas

Turn away your face

As you leave this place

Better things await

Step on the gas.

And don’t look back

Don’t look back

Or you will turn to stone”

– Lyrics from the winning song of the MSA 14th Annual Songwriting competition, written by Sue Horowitz

She explained at the beginning of the song that she has been teaching guitar for a while and specializes in teaching people with learning challenges. In her “former life,” she said, she was a speech therapist and a special education teacher. The inspiration of the song came from sitting with one of her students who was being bullied and having a hard time.

“Childhood is a short period of time, and then you get to leave and live your whole fabulous, beautiful life,” she said.

The song began with soft picking of a minor chord progression. Horowitz, who has a smooth, honey-like voice, sang earnest lyrics of finding a better life for oneself, utilizing driving as a metaphor. At the bridge, she switched from picking to strumming for the remainder of the song, filling the room with dramatic chord progressions.

Horowitz ended powerfully, reiterating the importance of moving on without looking back, less one turns to stone — a reference to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, where, in Abrahamic religions, a man named Lot flees the divine destruction of a wicked city. Despite being warned not to do so, Lot’s wife looks back while fleeing and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Horowitz said that she chose this particular song for the competition based on feedback she had gotten in the past. She said that people who have been in tough situations — either in a marriage, job or home life that forced them to pick up and leave for something better — were

touched personally by the song. Ultimately, she wants listeners to walk away from the song feeling something. In this song, she hopes the audience felt heard and validated.

“Music is a powerful way to connect and to feel. I think one of the interesting things about writing is I don’t ever want to write a song that doesn’t make anybody feel something,” Horowitz said. “When I go to a concert and I hear just somebody up there with a guitar standing up there, I want to feel something — joy, or I want to laugh, or I want to have some connection to that music. That’s what I try to do.”

Stream “Step on the Gas” on Sue Horowitz’s YouTube channel.

The entire competition performance can be viewed for a limited time on Cadenza’s Facebook page at Facebook.com/CadenzaFreeport.

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