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Songwriters have a place to stand out

At the Songwriters Original Showcase in Ambler, artists perform everything from folk to jazz in an "unstripped, unplugged kind of way."

By NALA FRANCO
 Staff Writer

Rick Dentzen was tired of all the noise — the grinding of coffee beans and the whir of cappuccino machines clanking out their frothy blends, the chatter that cascaded from polite waiters and the raucous laughter that flowed as freely as the beers and \$2 drink specials. And he was tired of the requests — Van Morrison's "Diana and I," Robert

If you go

What: Songwriters Original Showcase
Where: Act II Playhouse, 44 E. 4th St., Ambler
When: 7 p.m. Sunday
Admission: \$10
Information: (913) 664-0900 or visit www.act2playhouse.com

"Diana and I," Robert "Diana" and the steady struts of Top 40 favorites issued at him from the stage. A singer and songwriter, the Ambler resident was sick of having his original lyrics fall on the ears of the few individuals in a crowded bar or coffeehouse who actually cared to listen.

your fans and the bar owner's going to make a profit off your fans. And that just propagates the mentality of looking down. People are trained to expect to hear the same things. For years, Dentzen wanted to offer artists the himself acoustic or open to performing. But it was not until he was driving back from a gig earlier this year with fellow singer-songwriter Debra Lee that inspiration struck.

A cabaret show at the Act II Playhouse was just wrapping up for the night and the performers were hating their equipment noise. Dentzen barged through the building's side entrance, overlooking the stage and the

show's co-founders, Alan and Steve Shammah, with the idea to host a concert series of stripped music at the intimate, 135-seat venue. "Of course, I thought he was a little crazy at first," Alan Shammah said, "but it seemed like a good opportunity for musicians to get exposure, and this seemed like a friendly place to do it."



Debra Lee and Rick Dentzen founded the Songwriters Original Showcase — or SOS, as it's commonly called — in the smoke-free Act II Playhouse in Ambler in February. Both will perform in this weekend's showcase.

playhouse in February. Five months later, the acoustic performances, featuring regional, local and national acts in five 20-minute sets a month, is doing exactly what Dentzen hoped it would.

Artists perform everything from folk to jazz in what he refers to as an "unstripped, unplugged-kind of way."

If the music can be played with an acoustic guitar or piano and the artists already have a commercial or available recording and Web site, then SOS hopes to give one more push to the launching of their careers.

The whole idea was to put together a venue dedicated to hearing original music," Dentzen said, "and to cultivate that mentality. People really want to hear new music. They're just not able to be captured by it." The show case is sponsored by the One Entertainment Inc., the Ambler-based recording studio and independent label started by Dentzen and Lansdale resident Stephen Schorn in 1991.

Both she and Dentzen will be **SONGWRITERS**, Page D 2

Songwriters

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 perform in this weekend's showcase, along with Doylestown musician and "drum-gum" inventor Vladoj — also known as Bernice Capodici, prolific Philadelphia songwriter and Ruffhouse/Columbia performing artist Ben Arnold, Charlottesville native Carol Lester and Philadelphia jazz piano virtuoso and composer Stephen DiJoseph.

Capodici, whose drum gum was the forerunner of many of the electronic drum and percussion devices used today and whose music fuses percussion beats with acoustic melodies for a new-age funk sound, has been performing with Dentzen since SOS's start.

His exploration of unusual sounds on customized instruments often is under-appreciated in the more rowdy bars where he has played, he said. "If you're in a nightclub, that's always hairy," he said, "because it's original music. Here, there's absolutely more

appreciation, which is really good because the stuff I do is really mood music in a sense." Peter Spencer, a New Hope songwriter and finger-picking guitarist who performed at SOS last month, likes the comfort of the Act II Playhouse.

Traveling to last month's show from an exhilarating festival in western Pennsylvania, he arrived to find he could relax on a sofa in a "real green room" for an hour before the show.

"The overall comfort level is so much higher for the performers," he said, "and for the audience, too. Plus, it's different from the usual saloon or coffee bar where the music is not the first item on the menu."

Lester, who now lives in Jersey City and recently released a CD, "Spill My Soul," to rave reviews, has been making a name for herself on the trendy New York City art house circuit with performances in venues such as the River End, Maccor's, Dark Star and the Triad Theater.



Rehearsing are Debra Lee and Rick Dentzen, both singers, songwriters and founders of the Songwriters Original Showcase. In addition to giving artists a place for their music to be heard, SOS hopes to build on Ambler's strong music tradition.

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The playhouse — which hosts routine cabaret shows between

its lineup of plays and musicals — sits across the street from the former Ambler Cabaret, once a popular national touring stop for bands, artists and top regional acts.

"We want this to put Amb on the map," said Lee, "and support what the theater is about, as well as original music. The creative spirit is alive here. We're just continuing it."

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