

The sound of music

Teacher and songwriter Suzanne Michelle has an ear for music

By Jennifer McClellan
PROMOTIONS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When she was in college, if you had asked Suzanne Michell where she would be in 10 years, she would have had no idea. But she knew one thing for sure: wherever she was, she would still be playing music and singing.

Michell admits she has "never really done anything but play or teach music." There are a lot of people who say that is no way to make a living and that, unless you are a popular musician, there is not much money to be made. But for Michell and others like her, money is not the real issue.

"I used to think I only wanted to be a performer," she said. "But as I've matured I've realized how important it is to teach young people." She does not merely teach technical skills; she instills a true love of music in her students. "The first teacher is so important," she said, "and I want to make sure there is plenty of music well into the next century!"



Music teacher Suzanne Michell (left) holds a lesson with student Ann McKee. Michell plays piano, guitar and other instruments, and teaches students young and old, able and disabled. She attend-

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Michell is an accomplished musician in every sense of the word. She is a singer/songwriter, and she masterfully plays guitar, piano and a host of other instruments. She has performed at many clubs in Arkansas and surrounding states, as well as at the King Biscuit Blues Festival in Helena, the Memphis Blues Festival and RiverFest.

Michell also teaches voice, guitar and piano to a current roster of 27 students. She has been teaching guitar since 1970. Some of her students are as young as 6 and 7; some are older. Some are disabled. Her time spent with students adds up to more than 40 hours a week.

Teaching guitar has led Michell to many more experiences than simply giving weekly lessons. She has worked as an artist in residence at the Arkansas School for The Blind and has taught guitar for the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism. She also taught at the Life Long Learning Series of continuing education classes for adults at the

University of Arkansas at Little Rock. "Through teaching, I find my own strengths," she said.

Peter Read, a musician and founder of *Nightflying*, a local weekly entertainment newspaper, remembers the first time he saw Michell perform. "Some years ago, we were having a concert at the Little Rock Zoo,

and she was one of the performers," he said. "Upon meeting her before the show, I was immediately impressed with her as a person. When she performed, I was again impressed with her songwriting and musicianship. She was and is a very talented, original performer, and she is pleasant to know and work with. Suzanne is very true to the music."

Michell has a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She taught a music class there even before she graduated. Michell studied voice with Ann Chotard, founder and artistic director of Wildwood Park for the Performing Arts, and was a voice major at Henderson State College. She is a founding member of the Arkansas Songwriters Association, is currently active in the Little Rock Folk Club, and is also a member of the Music Teachers National Association.

She also has earned graduate credit hours in special education, which led her to teach music and songwriting at the School for the Blind. But her studies in special education aren't all that led her to that job: that is where Michell attended school. She is legally blind.

"Being visually impaired has definitely been a driving force. I'm not sure I would have had the patience to stick with

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Music teacher Suzanne Michell is legally blind. A large-text computer program enables her to read.

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A guitar is just one of the instruments that Michell plays. She is also a songwriter and is active in various local musicians' groups.

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music otherwise," Michell said.

"I was introduced to music at the School for the Blind in the late 1950s by a wonderful professor and player, Mr. Bob Steele," Michell said. "I wanted to be a drummer, but there were very few women playing drums in those days." When she was 11 or 12, she found a guitar in the garage of her family's home, and she became fascinated. A friend showed her a

few chords and she taught herself a song. "I walked into the kitchen one night and played the song for my parents. They had no idea I'd been playing," she said with a laugh. That move prompted her parents to ask her whether she wanted to take guitar lessons. Everything fell into place after that.

Her mother was always very supportive of her music. "My mother had a radio show in the '40s and '50s; she later produced commercials for KARK. She had a part in the movie *Crisis At*

Central High — she was very creative and that helped me a lot," Michell said.

Michell's influences include artists such as Joni Mitchell, James Taylor and Carole King, to name a few, though she said she's more interested in classical music now. That doesn't limit her range or her teaching, though. "Just a while ago, I was listening to and learning a Smashing Pumpkins song with one of my students," she said.

She still performs, though less frequently than she once did. She

now has a songwriting and performance partner, Fred Wilson. "One of the most rewarding things Fred and I do is travel to two nursing homes twice a month and perform for free," Michell said. "It feels good to do it — it feels right to do it." Michell's longtime student, Ann McKee, sometimes accompanies them to the nursing homes and plays along.

Ask her now what the future holds, and she confidently replies, "I have no idea what I'll be doing in 10 years, but I know I'll be playing or teaching music."