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You Gotta be Strong

Terri Hendrix and the Art of the Spiritual Kind

By Richard Skanse

“To grow a garden,
You’ve gotta have patience
You need to work in it every day
Mother Nature will give you
the most resistance
But you can turn it into
something anyway ...”
—TERRI HENDRIX, “Acre of Land”

“Welcome to the Cavern Club!”

If you’re a stickler for details, Lloyd Maines is off by about 46 years and an ocean and change. But judging from the cheers his quip gets from the fans in attendance at Terri Hendrix’s Aug. 31 CD release show for *The Spiritual Kind*, everyone within earshot of her guitarist is on the exact same page. Crammed elbow-to-elbow in a tight space way too small for comfort, or even for ordering a drink without passing money to strangers pressed up against the bar, but right on the same page ... and mighty happy to be there, too.

Twenty minutes ago, everyone in here — “here” being the bar of the Nutty Brown Café just outside of Austin — was seated comfortably at big tables under the shady oaks of the Nutty Brown’s spacious patio while opening act Tracie Lynn finished her set on a stage big enough for a small marching band. Hendrix, the main event, was in high spirits, mingling with fans and their children and thanking them for coming out. There’d been showers forecast, but the weather turned out to be ideal and the crowd was filling out nicely, with 200 tickets already sold. It was gearing up, she thought at the time, “to be a gangbuster of a night.”

And then, right on cue to rain on her parade, things changed. Seemingly from out of nowhere, the clouds rolled in like a thick, black, cheer-smothering blanket of gloom. The Nutty Brown manager hopped onstage to announce that the show was being moved indoors to the bar, and within moments, the patio was a ghost town of half-finished chicken-fried steak dinners abandoned in a mad dash for standing-room-only space inside.

Not everyone made it. Some folks settled for better-than-nothing spots in the adjoining dining room; others accepted defeat (and refunds) and went home. But there’s still between 100 and 150 people crammed into the

long, narrow bar, and it feels like the inside of a clown car: hot and cramped, but with smiling faces all around. Indeed, rather than frustration, the collective mood in the room is giddy, charged with a mix of excitement and how-can-they-possibly-pull-this-off amusement as Hendrix, Maines, drummer Paul Percy and bassist Glenn Fukunaga squeeze through the crowd — instruments passed overhead — and position themselves on a tiny stage already dominated by a big-screen TV. The sound engineer, frantically setting up his own gear, tests the speakers with an inspired blast of pre-Hendrix Hendrix — “Purple Haze” — and the smiles get even bigger. Normally, the house mix before a Terri Hendrix concert leans more in the direction of her contemporary-folk peers like Slaid Cleaves and Eliza Gilkyson. But this is already gearing up to be anything but a typical Terri show, and it seems only fitting to let a little Jimi take over ... though it’s a good thing the soundman doesn’t cue up “Fire.”

“Scuze me while I kiss the sky!” blares Jimi over the PA. “Excuse me, pardon me,” says a man pushing a woman in a wheelchair through the crowd and up to the front of the stage. With no room to spare, she plants her plaster-casted foot right next to Hendrix’s monitor, inches from her setlist. Hendrix, tuning her guitar, gives the woman a warm grin. Then she squats down, playfully signs her name on the cast in Sharpie, and leans forward to give the woman a hug.

From that moment, before the band even plays a note for what’s surely one of the more wildly enthused crowds assembled in recent memory for a “folk” concert, it’s a given: Nothing about this night has gone quite like Hendrix planned it when she booked the gig months in advance, but it’s all going to turn out exactly like she hoped it would. It just feels right; not like a CD release celebration so much as a celebration, period. Put to song, the whole evening would sound a lot like The Spiritual Kind’s opening tune, “Life’s a Song.”

“Lately I’ve been countin’ up all my days
good and bad

I found that joy has more than doubled
all the trouble I’ve had

From now on I’m not gonna worry
about what might be

I know I’m part of something
a whole lot bigger than me.”

“Life’s a Song” was written by John Hadley and Sean Locke, not Hendrix, but like many of her originals, most notably “Wallet,” from 1998’s *Wilory Farm*, and “Acre of Land” and the title track from *The Spiritual Kind*, it conveys in a few lines of verse the essence, color and melodic key of her soul and art. It also reflects the connection Hendrix has with her audience, not only tonight, but every time she steps on — or off — the stage, and the spirit of her first ever “official” music video, for the new album’s “If I Had a Daughter.” Edited by Maines’ wife, Tina, and posted to YouTube in early September, the clip is a simple but moving slide show of mother/ daughter photos submitted to Hendrix by her fans. Blink and you’ll miss the one photo of Hendrix herself in the mix — included, one suspects, only because the fans whose pictures were used would have been disappointed if she wasn’t in there with them.

“I don’t have fans,” explains Hendrix. “I have friends, and they’re lifelong listeners of what I do. After 15 years of doing this, there’s three generations of people coming to see me now, and that’s who I owe my allegiance to. When I did this record, I wanted to give them something that would bring them joy.”

It’s a goal Hendrix has strived for throughout her career, and a big reason why, 20 years after her first open-mic appearances and 11 since she founded her own record label, she is now, at 39, one of the most successful completely independent artists in Texas, if not America. Simply put, Terri Hendrix creates the kind of music that makes you feel good, conceived and delivered with utter sincerity.

Those who subscribe to the late Townes Van Zandt’s edict that there are “only two kinds of music — the blues and zippity-do-dah,” might well be inclined to lump Hendrix into the latter category. But they’d be way off the mark, as those who really know the woman and/or her music can readily attest. Listen to any one of her records on a level other than cursory, and you’ll find as much sorrow, pain and even fury — personal, political or both — as joy for joy’s sake. Make no mistake, Hendrix knows from the blues. But in life and in song, she’s never been willing to embrace them for the sake of self-indulgence or critical credibility. Instead, Hendrix sees the blues as a means to a better end. “Hit the road until the road hits you back,” she sings in one of her most popular songs, “Goodtimes Van,” “and when it does, cry ’til you laugh.”

“I’m sick of the dark being so championed — like you gotta stay there and eat worms to be a legit artist,” she says, expounding on a topic she recently wrote about in one of her monthly “Goatnotes” newsletters — the same

intimate forum through which she first told her fans that she had epilepsy. “‘It’s either blues or zippity-do-dah?’ No. There is a hell of a lot in the middle, too. And true courage is facing the light.”

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The Spiritual Kind is Hendrix’s ninth album in 11 years. By any measure other than, perhaps, Willie Nelson’s, that’s a pretty prolific track record. But if you’ve never heard of her, it’s not necessarily because you’ve been living under a rock or in a pop-culture vacuum for the last decade. Nor does it mean that Hendrix’s entire fan base — which extends well outside of Texas — could fit into a room the size of the Nutty Brown Café’s bar. It just means that Hendrix has survived and thrived in the music business for so long not by casting as wide a net as possible into the mainstream, but by cultivating a loyal, organically grown, grassroots following, one fan at a time.

“I played a place recently — Great Barrington, Mass., — where there were 11 people in the audience,” she says. “And I wasn’t disheartened by that because I don’t even have press or radio in that market. The place we played at seats 80, and 11 people came out, and I felt fired up! Because my job is to take that 11 people, and the next time I come in, they need to bring a buddy, and then I’ll have 22. And in three years, I’ll sell out. Maybe that’s a crazy way to look at it, but I’ve been self-employed now for 15 years, and it’s all been that way. It starts with making 11 people happy.”

Of course, that approach will likely never fill her house with gold or platinum records. In fact, having never even registered with SoundScan — the measuring stick by which most mainstream artists, or at least their labels, gauge success and worth these days — Hendrix can’t even venture to guess how many CDs she’s sold in the last decade. But she does a brisk enough business selling her catalog on her Web site to pay her mortgage, and she can count on her car payment being covered every month by the iTunes downloads of a single track, “Nerves” (from her 2005 children’s album, *Celebrate the Difference*). Moreover, going back to her 2000 album *Places in Between*, if not all the way back to her 1998 sophomore outing, *Wilory Farm*, all of her recording and marketing expenses are usually covered by pre-orders alone. All of that, compounded with a busy year-round tour schedule, keeps her well above the make-or-break line for an independent artist.

Factor in the complete artistic freedom to make any kind of music her heart desires — and complete ownership of her master recordings — and Hendrix is successful on a level that would make many artists, including some with major-label deals, downright envious. Her motto, based on a philosophy she picked up from her late friend, mentor and guitar teacher Marion Williamson, is “own your own universe.” She does, and it’s paid her back in spades.

“Lloyd was looking at my Web site the other day, and he had me go to the discography section,” Hendrix says. “And he said, ‘Look at all those records ... who else that you know owns their masters on everything they’ve ever done?’ I started tearing up! I’m so proud and happy because the music industry is going to be radically different five years from now — it’s never going to be the same. And I am so prepared to ride the wave because hey, I do own it all. There’s nobody that I have to negotiate with. I have this catalog, and no matter what happens ... it’s my retirement. It’s my future. And it’s all because I didn’t sign with a major label.”

Or, for that matter, a third-party independent — the route taken by many roots, Americana or folk artists who may have followings and artistic aims comparable to Hendrix’s but not the willingness, gumption or, perhaps, insanity to fret with the million devilish details involved in running your own label. Those are the things, Hendrix says, “that get your hands dirty. And they are what builds character or what will break you in two. But I can honestly, truthfully say that I don’t regret it.”

Having run her label, Wilory Records (originally Tycoon Cowgirl), since 1996, Hendrix has earned a reputation as somewhat of a savvy businesswoman. That notion always cracks her up, if only because she insists she still can’t balance a checkbook; ever since grade school, any kind of math has stymied her. “I’m not good at business,” she explains, “I’m just not stupid. And not being stupid has made all the difference.”

Tending to what she calls “the part that’s not art” is a full-time job in itself, even with helpers. But despite the myriad distractions to her muse, Hendrix has managed to amass a catalog of uncompromising beauty, warmth, wit and heart. Her albums are rooted in the folk tradition but tend to wander freely all over the stylistic map — though never in a way that feels disingenuous or out of her ambitious but confident artistic reach. Both melodically and lyrically, her songs range from playful (“From Another Planet,” “Wind Me Up”) to intense (“I Found the Lions,” “Judgment Day”) to reflective (“One Way,” “Things Change,” “Hole in My Pocket”) to direct and heartfelt (“The Ring,” “If I Had a Daughter”). And when inclined to get political (“Sister’s Apartment,” “Monopoly,” “Jim Thorpe’s Blues”), she excels at getting her message across with a beguiling, almost mischievous razzle-dazzle flair for subversion.

Not that everyone gets it. Critic Jim Caliguri, who reviewed *The Spiritual Kind* for the *Austin Chronicle*, brushed it off with the snide caveat that “Kerrverts worldwide will likely embrace Hendrix’s squeaky clean vision once again, but those who appreciate a duskier brand of folk are advised to look elsewhere.” Perhaps to Hendrix’s 2004 album *The Art of Removing Wallpaper*, which he had dogged for lacking the “sense of humor” promised by the title, opining that “... a little levity might just be the spark Terri Hendrix needs.”

Then again, those who do seem to appreciate — or at least understand — where Hendrix is coming from tend to express it with vigor. Michael Corcoran of the *Austin American-Statesman* once swore in print that if Hendrix didn’t sell a million records in five years, he’d hang up his music journalism guns; she hasn’t (yet), and neither has he — but it was a noble gesture. And even John Conquest — the notoriously opinionated publisher of 3rd Coast Music, who managed to incite Alejandro Escovedo into writing a song called “John Conquest, You’ve Got Enough Dandruff on Your Collar to Bread a Veal Cutlet” — routinely shows an unabashed respect for Hendrix’s music that undercuts his reputation as a roots-purist crank.

Go ahead and label Gene Shay a fan, too. Shay isn’t a music critic, but as co-founder of the storied Philadelphia Folk Festival and a disc jockey famed for his interviews in the ’60s with legends like Joni Mitchell and Mississippi John Hurt, he’s been around the folk block enough times to know something special when he hears it. In February 1998, he was making his rounds through the late-night “guerrilla” artist showcases overrunning several hotel floors at the ninth annual International Folk Alliance Conference in Memphis, Tenn., and happened upon a room where Hendrix was playing. He was snared.

“Her songs were so direct, so simple and refreshing, it just knocked me out,” Shay recalls. “I was just enchanted by her. She would stand up at the front of this hotel room, and there were 15 or 20 people there, and she would sing a lyric and her eyes would move all over the room to everybody else’s eyes. It was almost like she was throwing a lasso out and pulling us all in.”

After Hendrix finished, Shay introduced himself and asked where she was headed next. She had another informal showcase to get to on another floor, and then another one after that. Shay caught every one. “I was busy following her around all night,” he chuckles. Hendrix didn’t have a clue who Shay was at the time, but he told her he had his own radio show on WXPB-FM in Philly, and walked away with a copy of her just-completed *Wilory Farm*. Ten years later, Philadelphia is one of Hendrix’s strongest markets — and Shay’s enthusiasm hasn’t waned a bit. “Out of all the women singer-songwriters of today, Terri’s in my top three,” he says. “And I don’t even know who the other two are because they keep changing.”

Closer to home, Rod Kennedy — the 77-year-old founder of the Kerrville Folk Festival — had a memorable first Hendrix encounter, too, at a house concert in Austin 10 years ago. “The very first time I heard her, I was having a heart attack and didn’t even know it,” he laughs. He drove himself to the hospital the next day and was admitted into intensive care. But he never held any of that against Hendrix. “I’ve booked her every year since 1999. Anything that was important in my life musically, I’ve included her, because she just has a genuineness that comes across that is joyful. And the person behind all those songs and those smiles is just an incredible human being.”

And then there’s Lloyd Maines. When Maines and his wife moved to Austin from Lubbock in 1998, the renowned pedal steel guitarist (Joe Ely Band, Maines Brothers) and producer (Terry Allen) had already retired from the road and figured he’d stay that way. He was happy to leave the touring life to his daughter, Natalie, who was just starting to take flight with the Dixie Chicks, while he’d stay put and make an easy living picking up local gigs with pals Ely, Jerry Jeff Walker and Robert Earl Keen, and producing records for the booming Pat Green brigade. But there was something about Terri — whom he’d started working with the year before his move — that ultimately made him alter his plans. He became her business partner, and after producing *Wilory Farm* and playing a few shows with her, became a born-again folkie. (“Since I started playing with her, I’ve actually become a lot better guitar and Dobro player,” he insists.) Next thing Maines knew, he was back on the road again; for the last decade, he and Hendrix have averaged at least 150 shows a year — some in Texas with Percy and Fukunaga as a band but mostly as a duo touring around the country.

“People have asked me, ‘Why Terri?’ and I tell them, ‘I’m attracted to truth,’” Maines says. “From the very first demo that I heard of her in 1996, I could tell that she had lived those songs. She has an extremely deep soul, but it’s a very bright soul, and when you see her onstage, that’s her. That’s another reason I’ve hung out with her all these years — because she’s positive energy.”

But as pivotal as industry figures Shay, Kennedy and Maines — along with early-adopter club owners/managers like Clifford Antone, Chuck Lamb of the Austin Outhouse and Griff Luneberg of the Cactus Cafe — have been to Hendrix’s career, many of her most valuable supporters have come from the civilian ranks. Like 58-year-old Cathy

Frederickson, arguably her biggest fan and closest friend. After seeing her perform one night at Landa Station in New Braunfels, Frederickson took Hendrix in as a roommate, loaned her the money to record her first album, 1996's *Two Dollar Shoes*, and was paid back in full with a handsome bonus: a song, "Cathy's Corner," named after her on the debut (plus a shout-out on the title track of *The Spiritual Kind* 11 years later).

San Marcos Fire Department employee Jana Green, now 52, enlisted for volunteer duty the very first time she saw Hendrix play at a hotel bar in New Braunfels 13 years ago. Hendrix credits Green with starting her mailing list, essentially seeding the international grassroots fan base that put her on the map. Green's successor was Anne Currie, who interviewed Hendrix for a college project in 2002 and was offered a job on the spot. She ended up creating "Big Mac," Hendrix's current database. When Currie moved to New York three years later for a nanny job, she landed an internship with Sony Music; she thought it was ludicrous that it took two entire floors of cubicle worker-bees to handle a Ludacris release.

The list goes on: Vickie Lucero, Hendrix's first publicist and longtime career strategist; Lori Lopez, the new Jana/Anne; Melissa Webb, her (what else?) Web guru. All of them talk at length about their own positive Hendrix experiences, hitting a wall only when asked to list, just for the sake of balance, her notable faults. About the most damning is Maines' admission (affirmed by Hendrix herself) that she has a lousy sense of direction.

"Oh, and when she taps her foot during a song, whether it's with the band or as a duo, it's not with the time of the song," he offers over dinner before a band show at McGonigel's Mucky Duck in Houston. "I mean, it's definitely in time with some song, but not the one that we're playing."

Pearcy and Fukunaga, the A-list Austin rhythm section that's backed up Hendrix and Maines for the last 10 years, seem to have somehow missed this.

"I'm glad," laughs Percy, "that I don't watch her foot!"

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You would never know from looking at her on this late Sunday afternoon in early August that Hendrix has been up for nearly 48 hours straight. Casually dressed in a tunic blouse, jeans and flip-flops, she radiates a natural beauty from the top of her blonde head to her red-painted toenails. Her look fits her warm, friendly spirit to a T — though the whole package belies the fact that she should be comatose right now.

"Today starts pretty much with last night," she says when asked to describe her day. "I played in Cheyenne, Wyo. — it was a concert at this fantastic facility called the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens. I played there, and then after the show I went back to my hotel and I batched Internet orders from the e-commerce store on my Web site; the orders have to be batched as quick as possible because if they're left on the server, you're susceptible to prey. So I worked till 3 in the morning, which is when Lloyd knocked on my door and we got in the car and drove two hours to Denver. Then we got on a plane, landed in Austin and I went home to try to get a grip on the household situation, which is way out of control."

Home for Hendrix is a rambling ranch house that sits on 1.7 acres at the bottom of a hill on the southern fringe of San Marcos, halfway between Austin and her native San Antonio. She shares it with three beloved mutts — Caroline, Buddy and diabetic Jesse, who has developed the handy habit of reminding her twice a day when it's time for his insulin shot.

Her house wasn't much to look at when she bought it in early 2003; it was covered floor to ceiling — ceiling fan, to be exact — in wallpaper so tacky she ended up naming her 2004 album *The Art of Removing Wallpaper*. Four years of hard work later, the wallpaper's long gone and the house is a work of art that reflects Hendrix's personality every bit as much as her music — a vividly painted, three-dimensional tapestry of stuccoed walls, tiled floors and spiritual-hippie flourishes like the word "Peace" handwritten on a kitchen wall. She calls it "the house that Jack built," after "Lil' Jack Slade" — a song that began its life as a spry little doodle she'd play during sound checks and ended up a Grammy-winning instrumental on the Dixie Chicks' multi-platinum *Home* album.

It's a lovely place, but not, she insists, on this day; between her busy summer tour schedule and a month spent working around the clock to package and ship nearly 4,000 pre-ordered copies of *The Spiritual Kind*, she says her house has gone too long without a proper tidying up to be presentable. So we meet for our interview in Dripping Springs, at a secluded studio called the Zone, where *The Spiritual Kind* was mixed, mastered and partially recorded. "I've grown quite fond of this place," she explains — though I suspect she's really here for the Hendrix convention. Maines is inside with engineer Pat Manskee, recording a track with Eleven Hundred Springs fiddle player Jordan Hendrix (no relation) and swapping old road-warrior stories with keyboard player Steve Hendricks — under a psychedelic poster of Jimi Hendrix on the control-room wall. After an exchange of secret Hendrix handshakes and a

quick round of “any relation to’s,” Terri leaves the boys to their studio toys and steps outside for a good long sit-and-chat about the road less traveled. Thousands and thousands of miles of it.

“We have traveled more this year than we ever have before,” she says. “It’s gotten to the point where sometimes I’ll get home and I won’t even unpack. We used to be real weekend warriors, where we’d fly out on a Thursday and fly back on a Sunday. But now it’s starting to happen where we might be out 11 or 12 days in a row, and I’m looking at the schedule for next year, where things are getting sewn together to be gone a month. And I’m not so sure about those type of things, because it’s hard on the wear and tear of the body, and sometimes it’s hard to make it worth it, logistically and financially, to be gone that long. It’s nice to be wanted and it’s nice to be booked, but it has to make sense.”

This is not the grouching of a lazy musician unprepared for the rigors of success, but rather the street-smart, practical logic of an artist who has followed her instincts throughout her entire career. And busted her butt every inch of the way.

“I got my training on the Riverwalk, where you don’t turn down a gig,” she says. “It doesn’t matter what it is — you play. And I’m glad I got that training, because it’s very different from, say, the Austin scene, where you might have five bands in one night, and each plays for 30 minutes. In San Antonio, you’re going to have one gig for four hours. And that’s your day gig. Then at night, you might go play another gig for four hours. And hey, you might go to Gruene and play an afternoon set, too. So I come from this background where you don’t turn down work. But I’ve now reached a point where maybe it’s wiser to turn down a few things, and try to think more cream-of-the-crop and less field.”

The work ethic that served Hendrix so well during those early years on the San Antonio and Texas Hill Country scene — and that continues to fuel her career — predated even her very first gig. It’s a family thing.

“My parents, they both worked very hard,” she says, “and they instilled in us a do-it-yourself work ethic. It’s almost like I was primed from birth to be self-employed, because we all are. My brother works for himself in the auto business, and my dad runs Eagle Autos in Cibolo, selling diesel trucks. My sister owns her own company, too; she helps people that are truly injured get their workman’s comp. And my mother is a triple threat in the dachshund field — she’s a breeder/owner/handler.”

Before he got into the diesel business, her father — named, of all things, Jim — was a military man. After serving in the Korean war and doing two tours of duty in Vietnam, he was stationed for 3 1/2 years in Panama. The family — wife Marie and children Johnny, Tammi and Terri — went with him. Terri was only 4, and her sister just two years older, but both look back on Panama as the happiest years of their childhood. “It was a wonderful time,” reflects Terri. “I just remember the beautiful countryside and lots of fishing and swimming.”

Actually, Tammi remembers her kid sister not being much of a participant in the family’s water activities. “She never really wanted to get in the sun or do any of that stuff — she would get up in the hull of the boat and play with her dolls,” Tammi says. “But one day out of the blue, on her birthday, she throws a line in and the next thing you knew, she was pulling out this bass, and my God, it was the biggest fish we had ever seen in the canal after fishing there for almost four years. My parents have a picture of it somewhere, where she’s holding that fish over her head with a big smile, just as proud as could be.

“But then she wouldn’t let us save it, so we had to put it back in the water,” Tammi laughs. “There was no way she was going to let us eat it.”

It was at that same age that Terri picked up her first guitar. Or rather, her sister’s guitar. “I got it on my birthday, Dec. 20, and by the 25th, Terri and my dad were sitting on the bed and he was teaching her to strum it,” Tammi says. “Then they got to singing, and boy, that was it. From the moment she picked up that guitar, I knew right away that she was going to be a musician. And I think my dad did, too.”

Terri came to that realization herself the first time she saw Dolly Parton on TV. “She was the first one I mimicked,” Hendrix says. “I just loved her face — I thought she was an angel. She sang like an angel, and I couldn’t believe she wrote her own songs. I thought, ‘Wow, she does it all. And she plays guitar? Holy cow!’ I was smitten.”

As early as the second grade, she was writing songs — most of which she kept to herself — and singing along to her favorite records, which, her sister laments with a laugh, she didn’t keep to herself (“I would get really sick of ‘You Light Up My Life,’ by Debby Boone, because she would sing it over and over ... I mean, sometimes it would go on for hours.”). By the time Hendrix attended MacArthur High School in San Antonio, when she wasn’t running with the track team, campaigning for student council, working at Dairy Queen and K-Mart or flunking geometry (“I was taking honors English and history, and fundamentals of math,” she says), she was excelling in choir, singing show tunes and opera. It was the latter that earned her a classical music scholarship to Hardin-Simmons University

in Abilene. She lasted two years before burning out on the rigid music theory track and transferring to Southwest Texas State (now Texas State) in San Marcos to study sports recreation. That didn't take, either.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do, because I didn't really have a passion in my soul for anything at the time," she recalls. "I just kept thinking, 'I don't want to work for anybody. I want to work for myself.'"

But she still had to pay rent (and before dropping out of school just shy of graduation, tuition), so she took a job waiting tables at a restaurant called Peppers. One day, she got to talking to another waitress about singing, and an eavesdropping busboy invited her to a weekly open-mic night he frequented at a club in town. The busboy was Todd Snider. The club was Kent Finlay's Cheatham Street Warehouse. And just like the first time Hendrix picked up her sister's guitar ... boy, that was it.

"I was scared," she admits of her first tentative step into Finlay's Wednesday night songwriters circle, which at the time ('87-'88) regularly featured not only Snider but Bruce Robison, James McMurtry and Hal Ketchum. Hendrix, the youngest of the group at 19, went in armed only with a cheap Ovation Applause guitar she barely knew how to tune and a handful of original songs she barely remembers — except for "The Sister's Song," a heartfelt tribute to Tammi that eventually made it on to her 1996 debut and remains one of her most-requested songs at every show. The Cheatham Street circle was also where she first met Hill Country tunesmiths and longtime friends like Ickenberg and Al Barlow, yielding three more of her live "greatest hits": the Parisian gender-bender farce "Le Mazet" and scat-vocal showcase "Take Me Places," both Ickenberg covers, and the crowd-pleasing set-closer "Wind Me Up," a co-write with Barlow.

It was around that same time that Hendrix met Marion Williamson, a philanthropist, organic farmer and accomplished musician in her own right, who gave Hendrix guitar lessons and invaluable life guidance. She also gave her a place to stay on her Martindale property, Wilory Farm, in exchange for farm chores (hence the name of Hendrix's label and second album, and her label's goat mascot, Peggy Lee).

Encouraged by Williamson, Hendrix soon began testing her material at other open mics and solo restaurant and bar gigs in the area. The comfortable stage presence she has today was still very much a work in progress, but her songs, voice and especially her guitar playing developed at a considerably faster clip.

"She was a shy, bashful kid, kind of retiring," recalls San Antonio Express-News music writer and KSYM-FM disc jockey Jim Beal, Hendrix's earliest supporter in the press. "But she had the kind of voice that just cut through the clutter. And her original songs at the time — she had something that the other people at the open mics didn't. There was a definite spark there, and even through the stagefright and the shyness, you could tell she had that drive she still has today."

Unbeknownst to anyone but a few extremely close confidantes, most notably Williamson, there was something else Hendrix had back then that she still has today. A secret she wrestled with throughout her 20s but managed to bury for the first seven years of her recording career and professional relationship with Maines — until the night of Oct. 18, 2003, when her epilepsy came roaring back into the light and demanded a reckoning.

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With hindsight, Hendrix realizes now that she had plenty of warning signs. These days, she can spot an impending attack from miles away — giving her enough time to brace for the worst or even stare the threat dead in the eye and make it wilt away by sheer force of will.

But four years ago, Hendrix was caught with her guard down.

She woke up that day feeling rotten, plagued by a splitting headache that tested her endurance not only through her early afternoon performance at the Shiner Bocktoberfest but on through her second performance of the day, a house concert in Friendswood, outside of Houston. Her head hurt so badly, people blurred before her eyes. And when folks in the audience took pictures, she felt acutely aware of every flash in a way that had never really bothered her before. But the biggest clue of all should have been the smell.

"Do you smell that?" she asked Maines. "Yeah," Maines frowned, catching a whiff of what turned out to be a dead rodent under the Friendswood stage. But Hendrix smelled something more, an odor of sulfur that followed her from Shiner to Friendswood and all the way back to their Red Roof Inn in Houston.

Surely, by then, she knew what was coming. The smell was in fact an "aura" familiar to epileptics as one of the telltale warning signs of an impending seizure. She had to have recognized it, as clearly as the name of a poison friend or old, bad lover flashing on a caller ID. But she refused to give it the credence of acknowledgement, and convinced herself she just needed something to soothe her stomach. She called Maines and asked if he could bring her some crackers and a Sprite from the vending machine.

By the time Maines got to her room, Hendrix was already in the violent throes of a convulsive grand mal seizure. Maines had no idea what was happening.

"I was scared to death," he says. "I thought she was choking or something because she was definitely in a bad way. So I did all the wrong things. I've since learned that you're not supposed to really touch or do anything to someone when they have a seizure, except maybe roll them on their side so they won't choke. But at the time I didn't know what the hell was going on, so I tried to sit her up, hold her down. ..."

His next impulse would have been to call 911 had Hendrix not come out of her seizure just in time to stop him.

"Don't call EMS!" she gasped. She didn't want him to call 911, she explains, because calling emergency is something an ex-boyfriend would do when she first started having seizures in the early '90s. She didn't want the expense of paying for EMS and most of all, the scarlet "E" for epilepsy on her medical record again. "I was uninsured at the time and trying to get my insurance back," she says, "and I was already in the high-risk pool and wanted to be clean so I could qualify." So she quickly brought Maines up to speed on her condition, assuring him that she was OK and just needed rest.

"I was so worried about her, there was no way I was going to go back to my room, so I just sat there watching her sleep," Maines says. Two hours later, she had another grand mal. This one was even worse — bad and long enough that, Hendrix admits, Maines probably should have called EMS, as seizures lasting longer than 10 minutes can lead to a coma or even death. Maines was sure she was a goner, and was ready to make the call right before she came to again. He packed their bags and Terri into the car and drove back to his own house in Austin, where Maines and his wife watched over Hendrix like hawks while she slept for 14 hours straight.

"It was just bad all the way around," shudders Hendrix. "It just royally kind of freaks me out when I think about how bad it was. And the worst thing was ... it took them by surprise. With epilepsy, you have to be honest with those you love."

Repentant — and determined to get her seizures under control so she and Maines could continue touring (and finish her seventh album, *The Art of Removing Wallpaper*) — Hendrix submitted herself to pretty much every anti-epileptic drug known to Western medicine, astronomical insurance premiums be damned. But the mounting side effects were crippling — physically, emotionally and creatively. She endured rashes, insomnia, debilitating depression and extreme weight loss, at one point dropping down to an alarming size 2.

Through it all, she maintained a brave, smiling face in front of her crowds. Or maybe she was just "making lips" — the Hendrix family term for the trait Terri says she and her father share of inadvertently smiling when trying to lie. But the lead track on *Wallpaper*, "Breakdown," seemed to reveal the whole story — even though the song was started long before her epilepsy's unwelcome comeback:

"I had a breakdown in a small town
And no one knew a thing
I went about each day
With my thoughts in the way
When I wanted to stop
I kept on moving ..."

She was worried about what the drugs were doing to her body and her emotional well-being, and beginning to seriously doubt if she could continue touring. Her performances were suffering, but with her healthcare expenses hitting \$1,000 a month, she couldn't afford to stop. She was at the end of her rope when rescue came from an old friend: Williamson.

Back in the early '90s, it was Williamson's enforcement of a strict organic lifestyle and diet — compounded with insight on alternative medicine — that helped Hendrix control her epilepsy and chase it into hiding for seven years. But after Williamson's death from cancer in 1997, Hendrix strayed off the health course; she maintained and thrived by everything related to music that her friend ever taught her, but forgot the most important lesson of all. Until she was at a dentist appointment, and heard the dentist tell his assistant to schedule an acupuncture session for him. "My back hurts — I need to see Dr. Marion," he said.

Hendrix, mouth agape and unable to talk, gasped, "Thuh-thur Arrian?"

"I almost fell out of my chair," she says. "Because this always happens to me. Marion, whenever I need her, I'll hear her name or see it on a sign. Dr. Marion. I immediately went to acupuncture. Didn't think twice."

She had already begun researching alternative and complementary approaches to fighting epilepsy, but had been on the fence. Harsh as the side effects were, she knew the consequences of not taking her medication could be worse. But after several acupuncture treatments (eventually switching to a different specialist, Karen Moore in

Wimberley, so she wouldn't have to drive all the way to Austin for her weekly appointments) and a drastic change in diet — cutting down on coffee, giving up wine and chomping down way more apples than she'd like ("I hate fruit," she grimaces) — she started to feel a change for the better.

Two years ago, she weaned herself from all the medication over the course of three months. She hasn't returned to it since, and now feels back to normal.

"I'm not the poster child for alternative medicine, because I think it has the potential to be as dangerous as Western medicine, as it's not regulated," she says. "And I can't say medicine is bad, because I've talked to a lot of people that have to take the medicine. But for me, for now, for my body, it was not achieving the results needed. "Basically, inside each of us, there is a doctor that wants to heal what's broken," she continues. "We just have to turn it on and let it go to work. I've raised my seizure threshold now to the point where I know how to prevent one. I know how to feel one coming on — I call it going 'inside the tornado' — and I can get out of it. It's hard to explain, but it's just a series of breathing exercises and mental awareness ... and it's the most grounding, beautiful thing."

"She's been amazing," enthuses acupuncturist Moore, who also has epilepsy. "I don't think I have any other clients who are so committed as Terri has been." She doesn't even mind being turned into a human pincushion, with at least 40 needles inserted from head to toe per treatment. "She calls them her miracle workers," Moore laughs. In her June 2005 Goatnotes newsletter, Hendrix finally felt confident enough to tell her fans about her condition. The outpouring of stories she's heard since then from fans who also have epilepsy or relatives suffering from it has verified for her that she made the right decision. "So many people have come out of the woodwork, I realize I just need to be upfront about it, because it's a deadly disease and there's a real lack of awareness out there. I think, 'Hey, what if I've saved a couple of lives?'"

* * *

Marion Williamson died in the spring of 1997, one month before Hendrix would meet Maines for the first time at South By Southwest. The loss hit Terri hard — especially because she had never known her friend was sick. Just as Hendrix would long try to do with her epilepsy, Williamson had managed to keep her cancer a secret.

"I remember the day after Marion died, Terri called me and I went over to visit with her," Jana Green says. "She lived in this little shack at the time, just a little wood frame house with no insulation and a hole in the shower floor. She was sitting on the back porch, and she had pretty much decided that she wasn't going to continue in the music business. She was so devastated by the death of her friend. And we sat there, and for a while tried to talk. Then she was quiet for a long time, and I remember she picked up a harmonica, which I had never heard her play before. And she said, 'You know, I think I should just learn how to play harmonica.'

"I think that was a turning point for her," Green says. "Where she'd hit bottom emotionally with her music, and then she just kind of got the strength to go back. She's a fighter."

Hendrix has incorporated harmonica into her music ever since. But it wasn't until she hit bottom again, in the aftermath of her October 2003 seizure, that she became truly obsessed with it. She wore out an instructional video, dived deep into her Sonny Terry records and drove her mutts at home (and, no doubt, Maines in the car) nuts. But it paid off. Though she admits she's far from mastering it, her harp solos are featured prominently throughout *The Spiritual Kind*, and her confidence becomes more apparent at every show. Her progress certainly wasn't lost on Ruthie Foster when the two old friends shared a double bill for the Rod Kennedy-produced Texas Music Sundown Concerts series in Plano.

"That sister's blowing!" laughs Foster, who recorded Hendrix's "Hole in My Pocket" on her own *Runaway Soul* album. "She's getting some serious sounds out of the harmonica now."

Hendrix even managed to impress folk legend David Bromberg, whom she later learned despises harp players. Maines, feeling mischievous, had figured he'd set her up for a fall. "Lloyd told me to bring my harmonicas to play with David Bromberg at this gig in Arizona," Hendrix says. "So I rehearsed really hard, and before the show I go up to David and say, 'I'm so excited about playing with you tonight — I can't wait to play harp!' And he looks at me and goes, 'Uh ... OK,' and walks off. Then his wife comes up and tells me, 'David doesn't like harmonica players, period. As a matter of fact, he doesn't think they should be allowed to live.' Lloyd's just cracking up, and David comes back and says, 'OK, get out your harmonica.' I go, 'No, no.' And he says, 'Are you scared?'"

"Then I got mad!" she laughs. "I'm like, 'No, I'm not scared.' I guess I passed the audition, because I played with him, and he said I was the 14th harmonica player that was allowed to live in the world."

It's experiences like that that light Hendrix's fire. It's why she's played with Maines for 10 years, even though players of his caliber — not to mention Percy and Fukunaga — don't come cheap. She pays the best and plays

with the best to stay on her toes and be the best musician she can be. Sometimes, she laughs, it's Maines who has to stay on his toes. "There are days when I get on that stage, and he has to keep up with me, because I'll really give him hell."

"Frankly," admits Maines, "when she's on her mark, anybody is going to have to step up a little taller just to accommodate where she's going."

But even at the top of her game, in music and in health, Hendrix will never forget the bigger picture — the one encapsulated so eloquently in "Life's a Song."

"I just feel now that my heart is in the right place," she says. "Recently a woman came up to me and said, 'My son was killed by a drunk driver. And when we came and saw you at the Armadillo Christmas Bazaar, it was the first time we could experience joy again.'

"That," Hendrix says emphatically, "is my purpose. My purpose is to have a positive message, to smile like Mickey Mantle and get on that field and play ball. And that's what I'm going to do, and I'm going to do it until I die. If you don't like it, then go to another show. And if you do like it, then come back and keep coming back because I'm not going to quit."