

# Diedrich Weiss heals himself and others with his music

by Euan Kerr



March 17, 2010, St. Paul, Minn. — Twin Citian Diedrich Weiss began playing music relatively late. He was in his 20s, and had checked himself into the hospital after having suffered months of suicidal feelings. Then one day his older brother Garth turned up and handed him a guitar.

"I don't know why he brought it to me. I really don't," Weiss says. "He's always had that big brotherly intuitive sense of how he could help me out. But I hung with it one afternoon and I realized that I could pick out the tune of "Scarborough Fair" on one string, on the high E string. Very, very simple, but the fact that I could do that with my ear, it was this moment where something new had completely opened up for me."

That was some years ago, and Weiss has continued to struggle through mental illness since. Now he's released his first CD "Public Songs for Private Use." He says it's helped him heal, and he hopes it will help others too.

As a boy Diedrich Weiss won accolades as a singer. In 4th grade he took the top prize in a citywide poetry contest in Bloomington. but he didn't talk about it much.

"I was a member of a state championship hockey team in 1987 at Bloomington Kennedy," he says. "And again I lived in this very sports-centric community and that's who I was, and that was my identity, and I had this other secret life."

Diedrich Weiss speaks quietly and deliberately,

carefully considering his words. His story makes for tough listening.

He developed bigger problems than shielding his artistic interests from his teammates. He has bipolar disorder, which can send him off into manic phases that last for days. He struggled to complete even simple tasks. At the time, he recognized something was wrong, and went to get help. It was what he calls the dark ages.



"I was mis-diagnosed as having depression, given medication, this was pre-Prozac, and the medication given was actually lethal. You could take a whole bottle and kill yourself, and that's exactly what happened for me a year later, although I didn't die."

He was in a coma for 48 hours, and when he came round he was back in the same situation. In fact the medication seemed to be making his symptoms worse.

"And I drifted into this world that I think is common for some people, where you give up on psychiatry, you give up on therapy, and you go into the world of self-medication, and in this amazing juggling act of 'how do I keep myself right and function?' It's actually heroic," he says. "And very dangerous, because one thing I slipped into was heroin use."

Diedrich Weiss saw he had a problem and got into treatment. He's been sober for 15 years. He also

had a startling conversation with his father's partner. She told him he reminded her of her son who was bi-polar. She sat him down and said he needed to seek medical help. He did. His physician agreed and prescribed new medication.

"And an absolutely crucial, crucial moment in my life," he says. "Within a week I started to see my thoughts to stop racing. It didn't take care of everything, but there was just this buffer that was happening there. And fortunately I didn't experience any side effects. So that was a piece. A big big piece."

For the first time in years he found he could complete projects. He'd played other people's music, but now he began writing songs, songs he says that were for him. "And that is when the healing aspect of it started to begin."

He now has completed some 40 songs. Eleven are on "Public Songs for Private Use."

There are songs about life, and love and his family. He'll perform some of them at a gig this coming Friday at the Bryant Lake Bowl in Minneapolis. Weiss says one song captures it all.

"The song is 'Wounds to scars.' And that's what it is for me to heal, to transform, to recover: wounds moving into scars," he says. "The scars we will have forever, and I actually feel they are my greatest achievements in my life, my scars emotionally, because I have managed to have them go from wounds to scars. This song opens people up into their own acknowledgement of their greatest successes on the inside. And I believe that people want other people to know what they have gone through, what they have suffered through and what they have achieved."

Diedrich Weiss believes this to such an extent that in addition to playing the usual gigs in clubs around town, he has for the last three years played in one of the mental health units at Fairview Southdale Hospital in the Twin Cities. He talks about his own challenges usually to groups of five to 10 patients.

"And I start playing my songs," he says. "One comment I had recently was this woman said. 'Is that song about me or you?' That's a common experience people have, and conversations start opening up for people and I play some pretty hard hitting songs, explicit songs, about suicide, drug abuse, about being mentally ill."

"He's a very brave soul to be up front and talk about it, and be open about it. It's his way of educating others," says Pamela Mills.

Mills is Manager of Volunteer services at Fairview Southdale. She says the patients who attend relate to Diedrich's performances.

"Many of them make comments about, you know, 'It's really nice to see I can be going through a tough time and I could come out on a positive end, and here's somebody that's been here and knows what it's like,' and is a great example and is a role model for them," Mills says.

For his part Diedrich Weiss says it can get intense for him too. He says makes connections in that room which are unlike any he makes in more conventional venues.

"There are times when I am in the middle of a song and I am so aware of myself making a difference for somebody that it's hard to continue. I'm getting choked up, tears are welling up in my eyes. My throat is shaking. I don't want to exaggerate the power of what I am creating, but I also don't want to diminish the fact that in this context and what I have done and how hard I have worked, has been all about creating the opportunity for what happens in that moment. And that is what I am all about as an artist. And I get to experience that, and that is awesome."

When asked what his hopes are for "Public Songs for Private Use," Diedrich Weiss pauses, and then says he'll have to give that some thought. He's just pleased, after years of struggling with his condition to have the project done.

<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/03/17/weiss/>