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## CULTURE & EVENTS

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### EVENTS

## The Jazz Singer

For Valerie Tichacek, the gig's the thing—she can take or leave the fame

Valerie Tichacek doesn't want to live the hard-knock life of a musician.

Like most artists, she knows the recipe for "making it big": Move to New York (or, in her case, New Orleans) with lofty goals and empty pockets, survive on ramen noodles and take 10.5 rejections for every good review. But this self-proclaimed "local girl" has lived in St. Louis all her life, and she plans to stay.

"Being in my midforties, I'm a little old to be pursuing fame and fortune," Tichacek says, laughing. "I have a lot of friends in New Orleans or New York City who tell me their tales of woe, like how they get one gig every four months."

Despite her indifference to celebrity status, Tichacek is making a name for herself. After all, jazz is in her blood: She's a third-generation musician, and both parents and all four grandparents were in the industry. At 5, she was learning to play the piano; she added flute and saxophone in her teens.

"I had big dreams of becoming a band director one day," Tichacek says.

After two years in college at Central Missouri State and four years at the Kansas City Conservatory of Music, Tichacek came home, got a "real" job as a travel agent and gave up on the idea of a career in music.

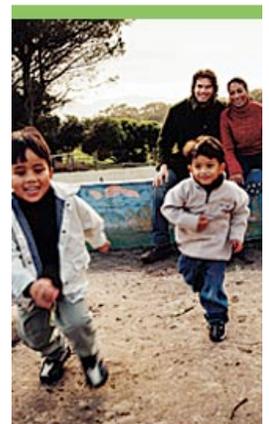
"I didn't think I was good enough, and I wasn't into jazz yet," she explains. But 15 years later—as she began to wonder whether she had made the right decision—her friends coerced her to sing at a karaoke bar. Whether it was the standing ovation or the adrenaline rush of performing in front of a live audience, she was hooked. She immediately organized a big band, the Original Knights of Swing.

"It's when you feel most alive," she says of performing. "When you're up on the stage with the guys that you make the best music with."

One of those guys is Paul Davis, a guitarist who worked with Tichacek on both of her albums. After nine years, they've reached the point where they don't even need an arrangement to play together.

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"We're not afraid to try things," Davis says. "A song might be written in 4/4 time and we'll do it in 3, or we'll take a piece traditionally played as swing and make it Brazilian."

Davis tends to speak of Tichacek as if she's another instrumentalist in the group, which isn't far from the truth. At Webster, she learned big-band arranging so she could write her own parts, because music for a 20-piece band with vocals is sparse.

The Original Knights of Swing's new album, already recorded and shooting for a release sometime in the fall, features not only the voice but also the mixing talents of Tichacek.

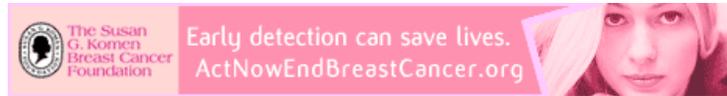
"It's a labor of love," she says.

The album mixes traditional swing tunes with Latin and Cuban pieces from the mid-1950s.

Tichacek, who also sings in Spanish, has a particular affinity for Latin, Cuban and Brazilian music—one of her next projects is to start a Brazilian group. But she sticks mainly to the classics when it comes to musicians who have influenced her vocal style.

"Ella Fitzgerald," Tichacek says. "Every girl jazz singer has to pay homage to her first. Without her, we wouldn't have anything." —*Kristyn Schiavone*

*For gig listings and more information on the Original Knights of Swing's new CD, visit [www.valeriejazz.com](http://www.valeriejazz.com).*



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