

# She beats the blues, with strings attached

By Tom Durkin  
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"Grand mal seizures are not socially acceptable," Paula McDonald of Roseville said wryly. "It's real embarrassing to wake up on campus with your dress up over your head."

The 34-year-old McDonald has come a long way from grand mal seizures (a major convulsion with loss of consciousness) and mortifying embarrassments in high school. "I've got it down pat," she said. "I know just how far to push my body."

A combination of medication and self-monitoring has allowed McDonald to get on with the business of living her life. "First I'm Paula, second I'm a musician . . . down around 20 I have epilepsy."

McDonald admits, however, that she owes her accomplishment as a musician to her physical condition. When she was 12 — about the time she realized she was different from the other kids — her dad gave her an old Sears Silvertone guitar.

"I think I had a tendency to crawl into my guitar," she said slowly. "I practiced hard for about a month. And then it wasn't practice after that." Her face brightened. "It was fun."

What emerged from an unhappy, lonely adolescent is a first-class guitarist, a robust cafe singer, a budding songwriter, a tough-but-effective teacher, a caring mother, a stronger woman and a quick-witted wisecracker with an honest sense of humor.

Not only did her guitar (now a Martin) give her solace, but McDonald credits music with helping her overcome her disability. Noting that her petit mal seizures (minor convulsions, usually at night) are often caused by tension, she said, "I can't help but think the music relieves a lot of stress. It's very therapeutic."

She concedes, however, that the long, hard, late hours of a musician's life are rougher on her than most other players.

But that's no deterrent, only a reality to be coped with.

That's the attitude McDonald conveys to her students at the Roseville Adult Activity Center. Although her students are retarded, McDonald is never condescending:

"If you want to get technical, I am one of them. I am a DD (developmentally disabled person)," she said, letting just a hint of bitterness leak out. She says she resents labels intensely. "I am not the disease."

If anything, McDonald is tougher and more demanding with her adult students than the average instructor at the Association for Retarded Citizens' learning center at 700 Douglas Blvd. "I challenge them to the max," she said proudly. "I'm just real hard to ignore, and I won't take no for an answer."

While her teaching duties include life skills and very basic science, McDonald's forte, not surprisingly, is music. "This whole class is built on building con-



Karen Coe/Neighbors

## Paula McDonald plays a few chords for her music students.

fidence and self-esteem. Success in music carries over into the rest of their lives," she said.

Interviewed during her regular music class, McDonald used the occasion for an open discussion of epilepsy and retardation. Two of her students are epileptic.

Asked how he felt about his epilepsy, Eddie Montoya of Roseville responded, "I walk and talk just like everybody else. I feel just like they do."

"Why can't we just accept people for people?" McDonald asked her students. "Let's get past the labels," she suggested.

"You're all right, Paula," student Bonnie Peters reassured her. "Don't let anybody put you down."

No chance of that. McDonald is on her way up. Although she's played cafes, weddings and hot tub parties in the foothills for years in her spare time, she is looking to move into music as her primary occupation.

"My next step is on the road. I want to share my music with everybody," she said. "But not for free," she said with a rueful smile.

McDonald is investigating the possibility of obtaining a grant from the California Arts Council to con-

duct performance workshops at centers for developmentally disabled people throughout the state.

Ultimately, however, her goals are those of any serious musician: "I want to be rich and famous."

She plans to produce her first album on tape cassette by the end of this year. It will contain some of her own originals, like the heart-rending "Ethiopia," as well as some little-known classics like Judy Henskey's "Blues Chase Up a Rabbit." While McDonald's voice rings out with power and assurance, it is her impressive mastery of jazz-blues guitar that elevates her beyond the average player.

Although she has composed many songs, McDonald has never written one about epilepsy. "It hurts," she said simply.

Then she broke into a raucous, impromptu boogie accompanied by her students on tambourine:

"Well, first you lay down on the floor,  
Bounce around and moan some more.  
Throw your medicine out the door,  
It's the epileptic break dance!"

She shrugged and flashed a winsome grin. "Hell, epilepsy doesn't rhyme with anything."