

Erica Wheeler is an award-winning songwriter and experienced workshop facilitator. She has four critically acclaimed CDs to her credit and has been featured on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." Erica writes songs that are full of sharply detailed portraits of the American landscape and the lives lived there. Erica was a keynote speaker at the 2007 NAI National Workshop in Wichita, Kansas.

Are you more of a storyteller who plays music or a musician who tells stories?

I'm a poet who sings.

The title of your keynote speech at the NAI National Workshop is "The Soulful Landscape." What is the soulful landscape?

It is about the connection that we have to the landscape. I use *soulful* instead of *sacred* or *spiritual* because those words have such loaded connotations. My belief is that everyone has a relationship with his or her surroundings, and that places have an effect on us. I've taught in all kinds of different settings, and even people in urban settings who might not be in nature have stories of connection. It may be their grandmother's garden, a special park, or a sunset that is their sense of nature. It may be a historic building that defines their sense of place. We need to start with who and where we are when we think about connection to places.

Interpretation is about creating connections, and much of what you do deals with connections.

In the workshops I teach, I find that no matter what people think of themselves as a writer, when they start describing a place that they have a connection to, they become very detailed, wonderful writers. The tactile details of memories of places really are wonderful. Knowing your points of connection strengthens your sense of identity, that sense that you belong someplace.

profile



Erica Wheeler

Singer/Songwriter

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You address sense of place in your music and speaking engagements. In an increasingly generic society, what are the elements of place that differentiate one community from another?

That is what getting in touch with a sense of place is really about. There are elements of every place that are unique. That is why I feel so compelled to do this work. I feel that there is a level of us being anesthetized to sense of place, and some

of it is because places that have meaning for people have been bulldozed over and become strip malls or whatever, and that brings a sense of grief. It is easier to stay disconnected because we don't want to deal with that sense of loss. But if you can look for what you like about a place and make that bigger in your mind, there is a better chance of those unique places being saved.

Another universal concept you address is community. What roles do storytelling and music play in building community?

It's about finding a point where we all connect. In a country that is experiencing great divisiveness, finding what we have in common is so important. Because I'm an entertainer, I can bring this work and my ideas into lots of different environments, whereas, some of my friends and colleagues in the environmental arena may end up preaching more to the already converted. There is a song on my new CD about driving to the Adirondacks and feeling that expansive feeling and watching the sunset and the stars come out. I think that no matter what your political or spiritual beliefs are, if you can come on that ride with me, emotionally, you can connect. I hope that all kinds of people can connect to a story like that in some way.

What is the connection between environmental stewardship and the creative arts?

We have a responsibility for the stories that we create as a culture, so I want to create stories of connection rather than disconnection. There is a song I wrote about this lake that's near my house and how I go there because of the quiet and the silence. On the other hand, my neighbors go there because you can snowmobile and make a lot of noise. We all love that place in different ways and I feel that because I love the quiet, that I need to make that louder. It's about tipping the scale a little bit. That's where I feel like telling our stories adds to our culture—giving what we

see and feel voice helps to tip that scale. It seems more effective to me to talk about what you love more than what you're against.

The place-based arts that resonate with me are a little different from nature writing. Often, I find that when people do nature writing, it is very descriptive of what they see and philosophical in a general sense. But what interests me as a poet and songwriter is how people interact with what they're seeing, how it makes them feel inside—what it means to them to be there.

You said on your website, "People used to come up to me after shows and tell me how similar their relationship troubles are to mine, but now they tell me about a piece of land they are trying to save." How has the response to the change of subject matter in your music affected your growth as an artist?

My writing has always had a strong sense of place. When I was younger, the dominant theme in my life was relationships and the search for love, which I think is the case for most people in their 20s and 30s. I went back to places that I really cared about and saw them becoming rapidly developed. I felt like I needed to address that more directly. So on my new CD, all the songs ended up being about people and their relationships to different places and different perspectives. When I introduce the songs, I talk about how much the land matters to me. So that's why people have approached me with their questions. Now that I have sponsorship from the Trust for Public Land, it gives me even more leeway to step out of my role as an entertainer and into my role as an educator for a moment. I try to do that in a way that isn't heavy or serious. It's fun and passionate. And, of course, I'll always write straight-up love songs, but place is dominant in my songs. The kind of writing I most enjoy is when writers use place as a character in addition to the

people in the story, so I enjoy doing that in my songs.

Another universal concept that you address is beauty. When you look at a place, what is it that makes it so beautiful that you want to write about it?

I think that there is integrity in beautiful things. Sometimes I use the word beauty in what I understand to be a Native American way, which may not be something that superficially attractive, but it's something that has depth and integrity. I think that a building in New York City that has a lot of intricate carvings and all of that is a pinnacle of human architecture, and is as beautiful as anything in the natural world. What I find less beautiful is the economical, homogenized approach to development. We know intuitively what places, man-made or natural, feel good to us.

Unfortunately, developing land or managing land in a way that feels good to us isn't always the top priority. That's another point about what the "soulful landscape" means. It means using our awareness to take inventory of a place to help define what matters most to us about it.

What do you mean when you say inventory?

When I come around the curb and look at a place, I'm looking at the shape of the land, the smell, the light, and the vibrancy of everything. That is what my eye is inventorying. When I come to a new town, especially a small town, I'm thinking, "Why is this here? Where is the railroad? What's the industry here? Why does this street face this way?" It's how I approach things, with a certain type of awareness. My partner does a lot of animal tracking and I've gone on some tracking trips. It's just a new way of experiencing the world for me. I've learned to see more and more things that become a part of my inventory, like twigs that have been eaten off a tree branch by an animal and that sort of thing. I think it's about finding a point of engagement for most people.

What are other universal concepts that you address in your music and storytelling that you think are important?

The most important universal theme for me is an awareness of the ongoing processes of the natural world that go on every moment of every day without any assistance from us. That's what gives me strength in my life. When I think about ecosystems and natural progressions, I find metaphors that help me make more sense of my life. I went to school to study the environment and animal behavior because I love learning about the natural world. The more I learn about it, the more it inspires my spirituality. It's so amazing! I love to learn the science and then find the metaphors. That means something to me—that's soulful.

I have friends who work for the National Park Service and they say that there is a lot of talk about relevance of the parks. I toy with the question of, *Do we bring people to the nature or do we bring nature to people?* I feel like if somebody doesn't have a way of dialoguing with the place they are in, it doesn't have as much meaning. I relate that back to when I took an art class back in college called "Ways of Seeing" after the John Berger book. Before that, honestly, I would look at a painting and I would say, "I like that, I would put it on my wall" or, "I don't like that." That was as far as my interpretation went. When I learned more about how to dialogue with a painting, I enjoyed art museums on a whole different level. So I feel like approaching the world through the creative arts is a great point of entry for some people. A song or a painting can reach some people and help them define and understand a place more quickly and in a more accessible way than a scientific or historical presentation full of facts and figures. Again, I love all that nature and history stuff. I adore it. It's what I read whenever I can. I just process it in a different way. I find imagery in the learning, which sparks ideas and metaphors. That's what gives my life depth and meaning. ■