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IN ARTS

BETWEEN ROCK AND A SMART PLACE

Nancy Mroczek, PhD

An uninhibited performer with a deadpan manner and a cult following

BY MIKE MILIARD

IT'S A THURSDAY night at O'Brien's in Allston. A small television above the bar shows sports. Another TV in a corner across the room shows promises of Keno windfall. On the wall, Elvis Presley shakes hands with a bemused Richard Nixon. The lighting is diffuse and sickly green; with a smoking ban weeks away, a substantial gray-yellow haze wafts wall-to-wall, half obfuscating a dingy stage that recedes into a corner, cloaked in shadow. On it prowls a heavy-metal band called Primordial Dwarf, whose singer howls with guttural relish into a microphone held like a poleax. Meanwhile, two dozen or so people loll around the place,

tilting back Budweiser longnecks and pulling lazily on Winston Lights.

As the grinding din sputters into its death throes, a woman wearing a heavy anorak walks through the club's front door and makes her way gingerly but deliberately through the sparse crowd, as if pushing against the music's oppressive volume. She's pretty, on the still-uphill side of middle age, with raven-dark hair and delicate features. With her decent demeanor

and plain-Jane jacket, she seems a little out of place in this murky dive. When she meets a kid with glasses and a thick ponytail, gently touching his elbow as she speaks into his lowered ear, she looks like a mother on a moral mission to retrieve her errant son from this den of deafening diablerie.

BUT NANCY Mroczek, PhD is not an overprotective parent. And the young man with whom she's speaking is not her son at all — he's her bass player. Nancy Mroczek, PhD is in a band. Usually her band is called Nancy Mroczek PhD, but sometimes it's called Nancy S Mroczek PhD, and

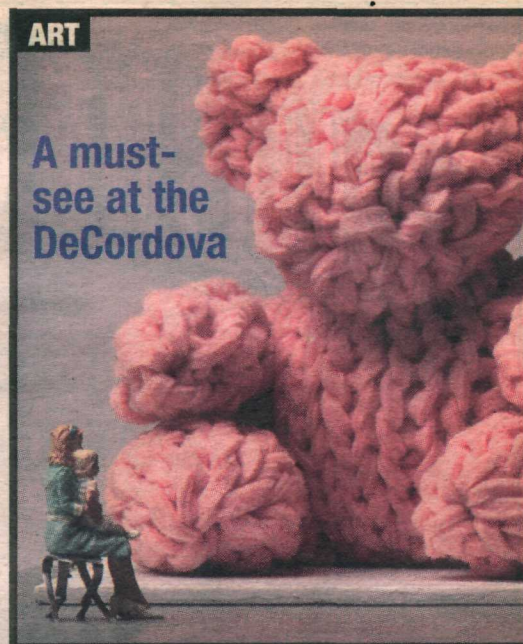
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The meaning of life

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ART

A must-see at the DeCordova



A TOUGH QUESTION

Redefining liberalism

Progressive Democrats want to take back America. But they'll have to take back their party first.

BY RICHARD BYRNE

WASHINGTON, DC — The Omni Shoreham Hotel is tucked neatly into one of the leafier parts of the nation's capital, right on the border of Rock Creek Park near the Woodley Park Metro stop and the National Zoo. After a wet spring, it's brimming with lush verdancy. The shaded green setting was a fitting locale, perhaps, for the three-day "Take Back America" conference, put together by Campaign for America's Future — a Washington, DC-based progressive organization and think tank committed to forging a progressive political agenda.

More than a thousand activists attended the three-day confab, where they soaked up hours of virulent attacks on the Bush agenda and sized up all but two of the nine announced Democratic presidential candidates. In 2000, sufficient numbers of these activists and their kind were so turned off by the muddy centrism of Al Gore and Joe Lieberman that they stayed home or pulled the lever for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader.

America has had a good look at what such antagonism helped to build — a right-wing governing class in Washington, DC, led by President George W. Bush. The bashing administered to the Bush White House over the conference's three days was mind-numbing. The event's panels (which included offerings

DON'T QUOTE ME



MIKE MERZEN

Speculation swirls around Globe editor Marty Baron

See **LIBERALS**, page 27



MROCK OUT!

NANCY MROCZEK, PHD: BETWEEN ROCK AND A SMART PLACE

PHOTOS BY PAUL TAGGART

DR. NANCY, continued from cover

for a very short time it was called Dr. Nancy and the Plugheaded Monkeys.

And yes, Nancy Mroczek, PhD really is a PhD. She's a licensed psychologist. She has a doctorate from the University of Minnesota. She specializes in behavior, behavior medicine, and neuropsychology. She also hosts a weekly TV show, *Toward a Quality of Life*, on Boston Neighborhood Network's channel 23, where she holds forth on everything from the Back Bay and Bill Clinton to bad karma. She moonlights as a commodities trader and is registered as a certified trading adviser with the Commodity Futures Trading Commission. Sometimes she's a filmmaker.

She also rocks. That's not something that psychologists-cum-commodities-traders who are "in the fifth decade of life" often do. But as Mroczek sheds her bulky coat to reveal a sleek black jacket and a pair of yellow form-fitting pseudo-suede pants, it's clear she means to prove it.

On stage, her bands warm up. There's the bass player, Daniel Karz-Wagman, 20, his thumb thumping out percolating funk lines. Drummer Joe Caputo, 24, does some fills. James Curl, 21, bends over his guitar, chopping fuzzy power chords and fingering spidery, scratchy riffs. All three are students at Berklee College of Music.

"It's gonna be short and sweet tonight," Mroczek says as the band kicks hard into her song "Rock This Joint," a pogo-ing rave-up that recalls the bracing melodic clangor of early-'80s Los Angeles punkers X. In fact, she sounds a lot like that band's frontwoman, Exene Cervenka, as she sings:

*spread your wings
you can do a million things
take it slow
let it roll
what's ahead you want to see
past is past
not for now
live in possibility*

The audience looks immediately intrigued by the sight of this sharp-dressed lady barking out the staccato syllables of a punchy pop-punk anthem about the potential for realizing unrealized potential. Just a moment ago they were being manhandled by a mediocre metal band. But this! This is something... different.

A gaggle of girls sits with eyes glued and mouths agape. A blonde hangs alone with a beer at the bar, shaking her hair as she loses herself in a frenetic, seated dance. Others in the audience stand and sway stiffly to the savage beat. The Nancy Mroczek PhD band is kicking up a hell of a racket, loud and fast and catchy as a cold.

And Nancy Mroczek, PhD the singer is getting right down to it. As she warbles, she gyrates and wiggles. Then she marches in place and makes a little salute-type motion from her

right?" she shoots back.

"Who's that sexy woman?" someone screams.

"I love you!" howls another.

But there's one in every crowd.

"Hey!" shouts some wag. "The vice-principal is on stage!"

APPARENTLY, SOME folks have a hard time appreciating the idea of a middle-aged professional psychologist cutting loose with some righteous noise in a smoky dive bar. But that kind of limited and constricting outlook on life is precisely the sort of thing Nancy Mroczek, PhD, in her professional capacity, could help remedy.

Because, as the name of her TV show suggests, the thrust of Mroczek's psychology work deals with helping patients tackle the

there have been periods when I've done a lot of that. I've also done a lot of behavior medicine for people that have medical conditions and need to learn certain things about how to live, but also investigate things about themselves that contribute to the problems that they're having."

Knowing her background, then, an affirming song about self-actualization like "Rock This Joint" might make that much more sense. But when asked where her singing intersects with her psychology, she responds without a beat.

"It doesn't," she says. "No. No, it doesn't. Persons who are in the field generally wouldn't be doing this kind of music. They might be sitting at Boston Symphony. I just don't mix the two. And that's been unfortunate. That's really unfortunate."

The simple fact is that Mroczek has a need to write and perform music. For 25 years, she's been penning tunes about the state of the world and of the people who inhabit it. But for most of that time, they were only so many sheets of paper.

"Songs were coming into my head and feeling like being expressed," she says, "but then I stopped. Because there were so many, and I wasn't actualizing them. So what was the point?"

That all changed in 1998, when Mroczek decided to take the proverbial bull by the horns. She lived and worked blocks away from one of the best music schools in the country. Why not take advantage of its talent pool?

"I knew some people at Berklee and one thing led to another," she recalls. "Sometimes I put up ads, and sometimes I knew people, and it just became one hook-up after another."

Five years on, she estimates more than a dozen guys have passed through the ranks.

Karz-Wagman, the linchpin of the band's current line-up, confesses to having felt some trepidation when he responded to a flier on a Berklee bulletin board and heard the voice on the other end of the line.

"At first I kind of didn't really understand," he says in a languid drawl. "I called up the

**'THERE'S NOTHING
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forehead. She strikes a contrapposto stance and wobbles back and forth. She leans dramatically to listen to her band, a hand cupped to her ear. She dances in circles reminiscent of a narcotized tribal chieftain's rain dance. She hops up and down frenetically. She does something resembling the chicken dance. Then she indulges in a little gentle head-banging.

"ROCK AND ROLL!" someone shouts as the song ends abruptly.

"Yeah, every now and then you gotta rock,

"problems of everyday living." Her Web site (mroczek.8k.com) advertises her expertise in leading patients along the path of self-discovery, and helping them make changes based on "incorporating behavioral, existential, dynamic, and non-directive (non-judgmental) ways of proceeding."

She's covered a lot of ground over a 27-year career. "I've done research, I've even had published research," Mroczek says. "I'm also a specialist in neuropsychological testing, and

number and I was like, wait ... that sounded like an older lady. And she's like, 'Yeah, I got this group.' And I was like, oh, well, maybe she coordinates some people or something. And she was like 'I'm the singer.' And I was like, *whuuut?*!"

His misgivings soon proved unfounded. "She starts playing me these recordings and stuff, and it was like, just so *different*, y'know? It was just like a total ... rock ... spectacle."

"It was pretty crazy," concurs Curl, who pulls double duty in a punk band called Lost on Main St. "I didn't know what to expect at first. I was kind of weirded out. But she's very approachable, and she made us all feel really comfortable. I didn't feel like I was just there as a studio musician when I started playing."

"She's not from a musical background, which makes being in her band a good experience for me," says Caputo. "She conveys her ideas about the music in a different way. She doesn't have standard musical knowledge. She tries to get across her ideas in ... movements and descriptive words."

"She's more concerned with the lyrics and not as concerned with the melody, which I really like," adds Curl. "I like her lyrics a lot. A lot of people don't really concentrate much on lyrics anymore."

More than her wild abandon or her loopy and magnetic stage presence or the virtuosity of her band, those lyrics are central to the Nancy Mroczek PhD experience. Occasionally she'll cut loose with a nonsense song like "Hoochie Koochie" or a straight-ahead riff-rocker like "Baby You Love Me," but by and large the songs Mroczek sings are about sociopolitical issues she's always held close to her heart: animal cruelty, environmental depredation, man's inhumanity to man, the depredations of corporations.

"The thing I care about most is animals in laboratories," Mroczek says. "Secondly, I care about the environment. It literally breaks ... my ... heart. When [Exxon] Valdez happened, that broke me, I think. And everything's just been worse from there. But I care more about the animals. Because they have no part in the destruction. I love them, and I hate to see it happen to them."

Those last words speak volumes. As Mroczek expounds on her music, her profession, and her world-view, what soon comes into focus is a person imbued with empathy. She's earnest, she's passionate, she has a strong sense of justice, but she's not judgmental. And when Mroczek wants to express herself, she does.

But it's also true that her profession and her passion can make for some surprising juxtapositions. Just look at the home page of her Web site. There's a photograph of Mroczek the psychologist, smiling demurely, dressed in professional-looking suit, standing before an ivy-covered wall. Then click on the navigation bar that reads "Live Performances." There's a photo of Mroczek the singer, in thrall to the demon power of rock and roll, stripped down to a white tank top, on all fours and screaming blue bloody murder into a microphone.

Still, she seems genuinely taken aback when it's suggested that the type of music she plays might be at odds with what many people, just to look at her, might expect. "Oh no, it's me," she insists. "If anything, Berklee people will be more into funk and jazz. I've had some drummers whose arms ached because they weren't used to that style, even though they practiced all the time. No, it's always been my expression, definitely."

"I've always been into music," she continues. "Especially rock music and certain types of soul music. Certain songs of the Sex Pistols grabbed me. Nirvana grabbed me. Current rock music grabs me too. The Kid Rock song, with Sheryl Crow? I really like that song. My band won't play it, 'cause they don't like Kid Rock. But I've done a Backstreet Boys cover: 'I Want It That Way.' That song grabbed me big-time." She makes a little grabbing motion at her heart. "I mean, I'm a sucker for a song. One time I did 'Ain't Talkin' About Love' by Van Halen. And then I segued into 'I Want To Know What Love Is,' and the crowd just went out of their minds!"

She spouts off an encyclopedic array of influences. Roy Orbison. Aretha Franklin. The Stones. Lou Reed. Patti Smith. The Smiths. Wardell Gray. John Coltrane. Neil Young.

Thompson Twins. Talk Talk.

Though she's been known to sing a jazz standard or two, these days, when Mroczek struts on stage — at T.T. the Bear's Place or at the Linwood Grille, Upstairs at the Middle East or at O'Brien's or the Abbey Lounge, where she'll be this Friday — she knows only one word.

"Rock. Rock. Definitely rock. Because that's how I feel. I've had some jazz gigs, singing jazz standards. And that's pure enjoyment. But when you do rock, it's like trying to get through to people. Not to convince them, but just to get through."

Mroczek sees rock and roll as an easily apprehended language with which to communicate her feelings about human beings and the things we do to ourselves, to each other, to animals, and to the earth. She sings her songs simply because she feels compelled to. But if audiences walk away enlightened, all the better.

Take an impassioned cri de coeur like "Planet Earth," in which she sings about "radiation ... across our nation ... for corporation" before coaxing the band into a lull, then goading it on to a frenetic crescendo, and screaming, "What about earth? You're ours! All ours! No destruction!" as if the very survival of the globe depends on it. As another song uncoils into a discordant pile, she riffs reflexively: "Let the animals go! How could you do that to anything that lives? How dare you do that?!"

"Nancy's lyrical style is pretty direct," says Karz-Wagman. "I think it's cool that she's singing about political issues and stuff that she's

of Mroczek admirers out there, trading her videotapes (for sale on her Web site) like samizdat, spreading the gospel via VHS.

Lisa McColgan, who performs with the Boston Rock Opera and drums in the band Scrapple, puts it most eloquently. In 2000, in an online diary (lisamcc.diaryland.com) that she still keeps, she confessed to "rapidly becoming [a] devoted disciple of Dr. Nancy."

"[She] kicks major ass," McColgan wrote. "Depending on how you look at it, [she's] either one crazy dame or the Prophet of Our Times. I confess that I once belonged to the former school of thought ... [but] I cannot quite pinpoint the exact moment that I started to genuinely admire Dr. Nancy. I do know that the admiration stems primarily from what I view as her remarkable sincerity. Anything is brilliant if it's sincere, in my book. There is nothing forced or staged or pretentious about Dr. Nancy. She radiates this sincerity, and people respond to it."

FRANKLY, I THINK more like their generation," says Mroczek. "Where I'm coming from philosophically, and the way I really feel inside, I always feel more like the younger people do than I do my own age group. I'm not a bourgeois kind of person. There's a part of me that likes to go to chill to some good jazz music in a nice lounge, with people who are achieved. But basically, at heart, where I'm coming from always seems to be the current thing coming up, the Zeitgeist."

All the same, she's not blind to the fact that she's got a few years on her band members

performance, there were fewer than 20 people in the audience. To be sure, it was a Monday at midnight, and it was raining. Still, Jackson sees something else at work. "I really think she could stand to put out some more recordings," he says. "She doesn't really have any records out. That would really give people an excuse to come see her. Being in a band myself, I know you can only really ask people to come out and see you so many times on the current record."

That's something Mroczek wants to remedy. But it's hard to find the time to get record deals and do publicity, what with her being a professional psychologist and all. "I wish I had someone to manage it, who could say, 'Do this, do that, do this,'" she says. "I need an agent. I really want an agent. That's what I need."

Meanwhile, Karz-Wagman is trying to get the band noticed. "We had a recording session, and we're trying to get a lot more tracks done. Because she has so many songs."

He believes in what Mroczek is doing, and thinks others would too if only they could get past their preconceptions and see her music for what it is. "It's definitely phenomenal," he says. "I feel like it's a pretty marketable thing. We're a good band, and Nancy is doing this with no gimmicks, y'know?"

"I just wish more people were paying attention and coming to the shows and that I could make more songs and do more music and be even freer and more open in my expression," Mroczek says. "That's what I would like. I'd like to be doing this as a way of life. And I'm totally prepared. I'll never give up



TOTAL ... ROCK ... SPECTACLE: L-R: JAMES CURL, JOE CAPUTO, DANIEL KARZ-WAGMAN, DR. NANCY.

concerned about. She has these parts in the songs where we'll just stand there, just letting the notes ring, and she's just talking to people, y'-

know? She stresses about talking to the kids. She'll say [to the band], 'Don't be too loud here so the kids can hear me talkin'.'"

"I want 'em to have a good time. I want 'em to get roused. I want for them to get the spirit of what I have to say," Mroczek says. "I really am not into imposing my message on anybody. I really believe it, but all I want is that they'd consider it and let it in and toss it around and cause it to be some stimulus."

"She has something she wants to say, and she's not afraid to get up and say it," says Ben Taylor, an erstwhile Bostonian (late of the band Beat Down Sound) who played impromptu with Mroczek one night years ago when they shared a bill at the Middle East. "She definitely has musical skills. She has good ears. I've seen her play with a bunch of bands, and she just jumps into improv situations."

Taylor also avers that there's a community

and most of her audience. But, she says, "I don't think about the age thing. I'm very aware that it's thought about. But I don't think it should be thought about."

It's that kind of youthful tenacity, in part, that keeps her getting club gigs more or less every month in a town where it's notoriously hard to do so. Since 1998, Nancy Mroczek PhD fliers have been fluttering on bulletin boards all over clubland in Greater Boston on a regular basis.

Lately, though, attendance at Mroczek's gigs has been flagging. "I've booked her a lot over the past three years," says Middle East booker Chris Jackson, "and you never know who she's gonna play with or what she's gonna do. But the past couple gigs, no one really came. I think she's very intriguing, I just don't really know how to [reconcile] that with a paying public."

At Mroczek's last Middle East headlining

[psychology]. It'll always be me. But as far as not having clients in a given week or month? To just be touring or something? I could do that. I

could really do that. I'm trying to clear the decks so my life would be wide open for me to be able to do that."

Meanwhile, Nancy Mroczek, PhD will keep singing her songs.

"She's one like no other," says Joe Caputo. "Anyone who's interested in something they can't see anywhere else should be interested in seeing her."

And you can, for just a nominal cover charge.

Nancy Mroczek PhD perform at the Abbey Lounge, in Somerville, on June 13. Call (617) 441-9631, or visit mroczek.8k.com. Visit www.bostonphoenix.com/Bost_mp3 to hear MP3s of her songs. Toward a Quality of Life airs Wednesdays at 8 p.m. and Thursdays at 1 p.m. on BNN 23. Mike Miliard can be reached at mmiliard@phx.com.