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Liberating souls through song

BY FRANCOIS MARCHAND, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 2, 2010

STORY PHOTOS (1)



Producer Bobbi Style and singer Kristina Shelden work on a song of Shelden's in the studio at VAMS, the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. VAMS was founded in 1988 to provide an opportunity for people with disabilities to pursue their passion for making music.

Photograph by: Bill Keay , PNG

Kristina Shelden has always wanted to be Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*.

From the age of three, when she saw the classic animated Disney film populated by singing sea-dwellers and other assorted crustaceans, Shelden has been working on her dream, teaching herself how to sing, picking up the guitar in high school, filling notebooks with words and song ideas, with personal musings and melodies.

Now, she is putting the finishing touches on her debut single, *About You*, scouting radio opportunities and thinking about recording a full-length album.

But not so long ago, the dream had all but evaporated for the 25-year-old when she was involved in a motor vehicle accident that left her with a C4-C5 spinal cord injury.

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"I was technically a quadriplegic," Sheldon says. "I have nerve damage and my left hand doesn't work as well as it used to, so unfortunately my guitar-playing skills are kaput. All my muscles have been affected. My diaphragm was affected so I thought I wouldn't have enough strength to sing. I really thought I was done."

But Sheldon was far from done.

While staying at the GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre, where she made an almost miraculous physical recovery, Sheldon discovered the Vancouver Adapted Music Society (VAMS).

Suddenly, Sheldon saw her dream infused with life once again, and though she could not play her melodies on her own, she could now share her words with fellow musicians who would strum along for her.

Founded in 1988 by former Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan and his musical partner Dave Symington, VAMS is dedicated to helping people with disabilities from all over the Vancouver area pursue their passion for music, giving them a free space to create and find a release during difficult times.

"When their lives change so quickly, they have to start re-building, pick up the pieces," says Kirk Duncan, programs manager for the Sam Sullivan Disability Foundation, VAMS's parent organization.

Duncan adds that many disabled people are forced to live not only with physical challenges and limitations, but also financial constraints or a fixed income.

"If we can reduce some of the barriers they have, then we're doing a good job," he says.

Since its inception, VAMS has benefited from the support of a host of notable Vancouver musicians, including bluesman Jim Byrnes.

In November 2008, VAMS transformed its "jam room" in the administrative wing of the GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre into a state-of-the-art studio complete with all the latest equipment: computers, mixing boards, keyboards, drums, guitars, a vintage tube microphone and adapted gear enabling disabled individuals to create music.

At the same time, VAMS also released a compilation album, Strait Goods, that featured some of its artists.

"The goal was to create a facility that allows people to come in and use music as therapy or use music as a means to an end or just an end," Duncan says. "Kristina has a goal: she'd like to see her music recorded. Others' goals are not so lofty. It's fine by us. It's just a place to come and play or to hang out with other people."

The studio upgrade was completed at a cost of \$30,000, gathered through private donations. It was supervised by Bobbi Style, a British-born musician and producer who was a pop music sensation in England in the '80s and has been affected by cerebral palsy since birth, and technical adviser Steve McGovern.

Knowing the physical barriers disabled individuals face on a day-to-day

from The Vancouver Sun.

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basis, Style, who moves around using a power wheelchair, ensured the studio was fully accessible and equipped to give aspiring musicians with physical restrictions the same high-tech capabilities most modern recording studios offer.

The VAMS studio, which features full CD/DVD quality recording with a 5.1 surround-sound system for both audio and video projects, works on a fully automated system that can be operated without even touching the mouse, the keyboard or the screen.

Among the gizmos that control the system are a camera mouse, a joust, a sip-and-puff device that allows you to play virtual instruments, a magic flute and a MIDI joystick that can replace the keyboard.

"We thought of everything we could," Style says. "The computer won't write the music for you, but it will allow you to make the noises. You can tell it what to do.

"This is the fun room: you come in here, you make noise, and it's great," he adds. "I don't care what you do, it doesn't matter if you're good or bad, as long as you're having fun."

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the VAMS studio offers an escape from a sometimes painfully harsh reality.

"I've been disabled all my life, so I don't know any different," Style says. "But a lot of people here were fine one minute and then they're not any more, and getting adjusted to that is horrific.

"So to have something like this where they can just come in and do what they want and have a complete release from all that frustration gives them an opportunity to do something other than those parallel bars or dumbbells. At least you can come in here and explore what the world is like outside of your disability."

For many, the VAMS studio remains a way to pass the time and escape, if only for a while. The studio is open every Wednesday evening for a drop-in session, and individuals can also book their own private time slot to work with volunteers, learn an instrument or simply have some assistance.

But if, like Kristina Sheldon, your dream is to really make a career of it, you can call on Bobbi Style to push it to the next level.

"It means a lot for this to be available for me, especially being an artist pre-injury and thinking that I had lost this incredible passion and this love that I had," Sheldon says. "It was a huge help. It still allowed me to express myself. And since I can't sit down with my guitar any more, I've been able to come together with Bobbi and do even more than I could before."

"We both had fun, and that's one of the biggest things," Style says. "We got a good track out there, and now we're moving on to the next stuff."

Sheldon is hoping to pitch About You to local radio station The Shore 104.3, which has been a strong supporter of VAMS and has showed interest in her work.

"Music is so good for the soul, and that's what people need in recovery," she says. "People love this room, and the opportunity to record and hear yourself and do all these things is very therapeutic."

As Style cues the song on the computer and turns up the volume in the VAMS studio, Shelden can't help but smile and laugh.

She has become Ariel after all.

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