

Kessler ministers with her heartfelt music

By CHRIS KOCHER
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The first hint that Jody Kessler isn't your average musician is her business card.

One side reads "Jody Kessler, Singer/Songwriter" and has a photo of her with her guitar; the other says "Rev. Jody Kessler, Interfaith Minister — A Ministry of Song and Spirit" and shows her in purple-and-white religious robes ornamented with symbols from various faiths.

Listeners to Kessler's music shouldn't be surprised. Through four CDs, the Ithaca-based performer has penned heartfelt songs stressing simplicity, spirituality and an interconnectedness that's often lost in modern-day life.

"Whether it be destiny or chance / I find myself pulled into the dance / with the many twists and turns of circumstance / I just open to the mystery," she sings on *These Things I Can't Explain*, from her latest CD, *Bare Bones*.

It's that kind of transcendence Kessler wants her songs to have, rather than writing only about her personal relationships and feelings.

"I feel in my songwriting that I'm moving in the direction of writing things that have more of a general appeal,

more than just my own stuff," she said.

Much of Kessler's work shows a strong streak of social consciousness: *The Ballad of Chris and Pat* finds a same-sex couple looking to get married; a woman walks across the country to preach about non-violence in *Peace Pilgrim*; and *Big Boxes* takes on the "ticky-tacky" sameness of retailers like Wal-Mart and Office Max.

And some of it is just good old-fashioned storytelling: *Fly With the Wind* is based on the true story of an injured eagle and one man's quest to help it fly again; *Who Woulda Think It?* tells of a polar-opposite couple who share a common heart; two people meet for a new chance at love at a Ithaca landmark in *The Moosewood Cafe*.

Kessler's CDs have rich arrangements beyond just her and her guitar, and she gives much of the credit to her producer, Rich DePaolo.

"I like to do something in the studio that uses technology to create songs that feel larger than life," she said.

The ministry isn't a path Kessler foresaw growing up in a secular Jewish household in New York, but she fell in love with music at an early age. She remembers her family listening to 1960s folk music such as Peter, Paul & Mary and the Kingston Trio, as well



Photo provided

Jody Kessler the singer/songwriter from Ithaca is also the Rev. Jody Kessler.

as show tunes.

Kessler grudgingly began learning guitar at age 9, after her mother vetoed other options.

"I said I wanted to play the violin — she covered her ears and said, 'Oh no you're not!'" Kessler said. Because her family lived in an apartment, drums and piano also were ruled out.

As she grew older, she wanted to study music full-time, but a Cornell University summer course taken while still in high school left her

discouraged — she received only a D in music theory. She now sees that the teacher was trying to cover too much too fast.

So Kessler ended up a psychology major and went into teaching, still doing music on the side, until one day in 1995 she decided she had to quit her day job and pursue her dream.

"I didn't really get the courage to do (music) full time until I was 38 years old," she said.

As Kessler sought her niche

If You Go

WHO: Jody Kessler

WHEN: 9 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Cyber Cafe West,
176 Main St., Binghamton

TICKETS: \$4

MORE INFORMATION:
www.jodykessler.com

as a performer, progressive churches became favorite venues, and ministers touched by her spiritual songs began asking her to lead services and retreats. Eventually she felt called to take classes at the New Seminary in New York, and she was ordained last year as an interfaith minister.

"The philosophy of the school is that all religions have something positive to offer," she said. "We can extract jewels of wisdom from each of them, learning to find the commonalities and respect the differences."

These days, while she knows how to reach broader audiences at coffeehouses such as the Cyber Cafe, the majority of Kessler's work is performed at churches and spiritual centers.

It's a journey that makes her quite pleased: "All the things I've learned in the past have come together in the music ministry I do now."

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