

Friday:
Sharon Stone is
in trouble again
in 'Basic Instinct 2.'

LIFE

TheIntelligencer



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FYI

Poorly Predicted

"Hospitals will go out of business because everybody will be well. Sick people will be gone." — Gin Chow's First Annual Almanac, 1932

Point of Origin

A bride began standing to the groom's left at a wedding so that his sword hand would be free. Apparently, Anglo-Saxon brides were often kidnapped before a wedding and brawls were common, which also explains why the best man stands with the groom — to help him defend the bride.

TV Tonight

"WILL & GRACE"

Channel 10 at 8

Guest-star alert: Pop diva Britney Spears pays a visit, as the show adds to its long list of famous drop-ins.

Spears plays an intense right-winger who becomes a co-host of Jack's local cable show after the program is taken over by a corporate conglomerate. Something tells us we're in for a great big catfight.



Britney Spears

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Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock

Role Play

Halle Berry turned down the role of Annie and Stephen Baldwin turned down the role of Jack in the 1994 blockbuster "Speed." The film catapulted Sandra Bullock to a major film actress, and greatly improved upon Keanu Reeves' box-office appeal.

Big Splash

The swimming pool at the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, Fla., is the largest in the continental United States. It covers a half acre and holds 600,000 gallons of water.



Gian Luiso/The Intelligencer

Hope and Healing

"It's a very powerful place," says Susan Piper, of the nursing homes where she brings her music. "The walls are broken down when somebody's sick in bed. There's none of this small-talk baloney that you have in everyday life. They're not defending themselves anymore. They're just who they are and they share that with me. That's kind of amazing, and I get from them what sometimes you don't get from people. It's real intimacy."

Christian singer-songwriter Susan Piper found both when she opened herself to a relationship with God. Now, she's using her music to inspire others to do the same.

The pressure to be perfect can be a haunting expectation. Subtly expressed, dropped in a carefully chosen word there, a pointed reaction here, it can become embedded in a psyche, woven so securely into the fabric of a life that it becomes the very force that drives it.

For Susan Piper, it was a burden that proved her undoing, not once, but time and again as she tried, quite painfully, and very often futilely, to both escape and live up to the hopes of those around her.

The Christian singer-songwriter eventually found her perfection in the most unlikely place — a church with a concept of God that had, until she was ready to grasp it, been completely foreign to her.

The 48-year-old Piper, with two marriages and divorces behind her — her first at 18 — had already done much to heal her life when she began attending the Gloucester County Community Church in Washington Township, N.J. She was living in neighboring Atco at the time, a folk-pop

IF YOU GO

Who: Susan Piper
Where: St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 919 Tennis Ave., Maple Glen
When: 7:30 p.m. Friday
Admission: free-will offering
Information: (215) 646-4092; www.saintmattsec.org; www.susanpiper.com

singer with two albums to her credit, and a daytime job as a music therapist who traveled to nursing homes.

"I had prayed all my life, but I didn't believe I had to be saved," she says. "Nobody would save me. I had always heard even when I went to church sporadically that Jesus died for my sins. What that meant to me was that I was even guiltier than ever before."

If there were anything she'd viewed as her salvation, it was music, where she found some relief from her burdensome childhood, growing up near Cleveland, Ohio, the younger sister to two brothers.

"My parents were very unhappy together. My

mother was terribly unhappy, and I was to be the answer to all of the things she didn't get in life. I was the only girl, and she had always wanted a girl," says Piper, who moved to Glenside last fall. "So guess who was going to be the one to fix everything?"

But looking to avoid being the Band-Aid for someone else's heartbreak, Piper retreated to music.

"When I was a teenager and I started to write songs and picked up the guitar, I was hiding in my bedroom," she says. "Writing songs was a release to me. And listening to music was an escape to me."

But for a hurting and impressionable young girl, the lyrics of the pop songs she favored had an insidious effect.

"I believed what those pop songs said — the messages that romance would save you, that sort of thing," says Piper, who performs Friday at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Maple Glen. "I had a wonderful imagination and I always imagined that somehow I would become famous and that also would save me."

Stardom didn't exactly come, but a certain popularity did. By 14, Piper was singing in the local bars, having her drinks spiked and striking up relationships with older men.

See **PIPER**, Page **D 2**

SOUND STAGE

Naila Francis



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Piper (continued from page D1)

"I was looking for love. I know that's very corny, but it's true," says Piper. "That was at the bottom of everything. That's why I wanted to perform. I wanted to be loved and that's how I could feel love."

At 18, she left Ohio to sing with a band in Cape May, N.J., got married that summer, and never returned home. While she would eventually build a modest career as a singer-songwriter — she performed with artists such as Livingston Taylor and Susan Werner and was a Kerrville New Folk winner at the prestigious Texas festival in 1995 — it was a job as an activities director for a nursing home in Willow Grove that eventually began a shift in perspective. Piper had not grown up with any kind of religious or spiritual foundation, but landing that job after another move, this time to Huntingdon Valley, was the beginning of her awareness of God's hand in her life.

"God caught me that job and I never should have had it because I didn't have an education," says Piper. "But the elderly people became my family. They showed me love and showed me that it actually felt good to focus on somebody else other than me. A lot of healing started to happen there."

Eventually, she began visiting residents at nursing homes throughout the area, bringing her music and an ear to bend. But her relationship with God was still a fearful one, based on a childhood belief that God could

not possibly love her, given her many imperfections. Then when she returned to New Jersey, attending the Gloucester County church, she had a revelation.

"God doesn't see our sin. He sees His perfect son. The day I was saved, it was like this tiny little spark of understanding," says Piper. "The earth didn't stop. I wasn't struck by lightning. I didn't speak in another language. I just felt this little burden lift up off of me and it was the burden of perfection that went all the way back to my childhood."

Her life was bound to change. Though she was still working with the independent label where she'd recorded her previous albums, when she began writing about her faith, she was let go. But for Piper, her new songs were and are as much about life's journey and the experiences of love and loss as her old.

With her three albums, "God Songs," "God Is" and last year's "I'll Be the Me God Wants Me to Be," a children's album, she points to God as healer and comforter, friend and guide, finding evidence of His compassion and beauty in places as unexpected as the grocery store and as miniscule as a dragonfly's wings. Peopled with characters from the Bible, her songs, without moralizing or sermonizing, speak to the power of transformation, beautiful melodies anchored by her supple guitar playing and her warm, emotive voice making each one seem deeply personal and yet universal.

"Before I was a Christian, I used to hear these people singing about God all the time, and I would wonder, 'Can't they think about something else? Can't they write about something else?' There are other things in world you can sing about," says Piper. "But the beginning of writing about God was like dipping my toe in the water and falling in and realizing I will never get to the bottom."

Without the backing of a label, she has learned to trust that in having finally found her purpose, the money and support will always come — and so far, it has.

"I have at times thanked God for my former life because I know that it allows me to share and speak to people in a way that I could never have if I'd had a rosier time of it," says Piper. "Even though my adult life was a mess because of my own bad choices, I think God chooses to use all of my mistakes to inform the way that I can write."

"If you get a chance to tell somebody your story and show them face to face that God is real and He's done something to you, that speaks of hope. And I think everybody wants hope, don't they?" ■

Sound Stage appears every Thursday. Naila Francis can be reached at (215) 345-3149 or nfrancis@phillyburbs.com.