

Mary Mack comedy

Comedian plays area venues on Midwestern tour

Saturday's stop: Melvin's in Spicer

By Carl Quam
Staff Writer

Could the Sunfish Capital of the World be another Lake Wobegon?

Comedian Mary Mack, who grew up in northern Wisconsin, captures small-town life and Midwestern oddities much like Garrison Keillor in her one-woman, mandolin-playing comedy routine.

But it's her childlike voice and seemingly wide-eyed innocence that draws people into her act.

Mack, whose real name is Mikelle Budge, is touring the Midwest this month and will be at Melvin's on the Lake Saturday in Spicer. She performed in Morris and Montevideo last weekend.

Mack has been doing a comedy act for about a year and a half, performing in large cities like Los Angeles and smaller venues in the Midwest and South.

Although she sings and plays mandolin in her act, she's actually a clarinetist but mandolin works better with her show, she insists.

"It's really hard to sing with a clarinet in your mouth," she explained in her soft, cheery voice before her show Saturday night at Java River Cafe in Montevideo.

Her act is a mixture of story telling and songs about topics like her hometown, her family and road kill. She jokes that the Sunfish Capital (which is near her hometown and actually only the Sunfish Capital of the United States, she admits) is quite proud of the life-size

Why Mary Mack?

Mary Mack came up with her stage name on the spot.

While in Nashville, her roommate signed her up for an open mic night, but when they arrived they realized it was Black poetry night.

The poets were dressed in traditional African clothing and used traditional African names. Mack decided to make up a name as well.

She introduced her self as Mary Mack because her students had been singing the children's song "Mary Mack."

The performance was a bit awkward. She joked that she came to Nashville to be the house clarinetist for NASCAR. But the audience took her seriously.

She said she kept the name because it's easy to remember and keeps her more anonymous.

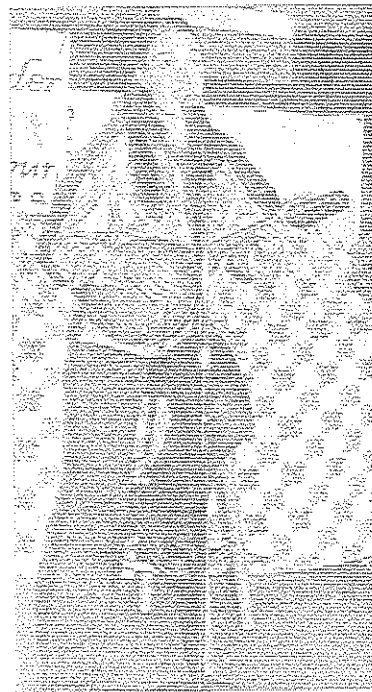
"There's a lot of weirdos out there," Mack said.

— Carl Quam

She tells her audience the Sunfish Capital was the first in the county to get a spotlight, but it's manually operated by a carnival worker named Frank, who doesn't really like traveling.

Mack changes her routine depending on where she's performing. At bars and comedy clubs, her stories and songs are shorter and she's allowed more freedom to curse and use dark humor.

At a cafe setting, she's able to put on a longer show. It's toned down a bit, but she does manage to cover AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long" without seem-



Tribune photo by Ron Jensen
Accompanying herself on mandolin, comedian Mary Mack performs one of her quirky comic compositions Saturday night during her performance at Montevideo's Java River Cafe.

Boston. Those comedians, however, weren't exactly appropriate for the family-oriented shows at Java River, he said.

After hearing about Mack, he thought she would work at the cafe.

"She's an honest, good-natured Midwesterner with a good sense of humor," he said.

Mack took the stage Saturday in an orange, loose-fitting button down shirt and dark-colored cargo pants. Mack's slight frame, large brown eyes and wide smile betray her 34 years.

And then there's her voice. It's soft and high-pitched. And she elongates her o's as well — if not better — than any Midwesterner.

Her childlike voice works well during her sing-a-longs, making even songs about her mother's colon seem like innocent elementary school songs. And that makes the audience roar with laughter.

Janet Reis, who attended Saturday's show, said Mack's voice pulls her into the act. Reis' friend Dorothy Anderson agreed.

"She can say things that wouldn't be funny and it's funny," Anderson said.

Mack said her voice has helped her routine. Even in bars where there are more distractions, people look when she starts speaking.

"I'm confusing," she said. "They kind of think there's a kid on the stage."

The voice has been a detriment in getting shows, however. Booking agents think she's a child when she calls them. Mack said she's been lucky to have other comedians vouch for her to get her stage time.

Comedy wasn't always Mack's goal. She played clarinet in several bands growing up and continued to do so at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.

Continued on back →

