

Milligan's 'Choices' Offers Warm Message

By Joe Nickell of the *Missoulian*, Western Montana Weekend, Section E pages 1-2
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Mardi Milligan might be the most out-of-the-box business consultant in America. That's because the Missoula woman specializes in giving corporate seminars on improving customer service – seminars in which she sings and plays guitar.

As schticks go, it's certainly one that raises eyebrows. But judging from the success of her business – punningly called Fine Tuning Solutions – it's clear that behind the schtick there's an important message. Past clients include plenty of local and regional heavyweights, including D.A. Davidson, Lambros Real Estate, Blackfoot Communications and First Security Bank.

What does music have to do with customer service? Well, it mostly just has to do with Mardi Milligan's divergent interests. A couple of decades ago, Milligan was making her way as a musician when she decided it was time for a life change. She was living in San Diego at the time, and a number of events converged to propel her back to her former home in Montana.

"I had a series of huge wakeup calls which motivated me to come back, go to school and get my Masters of Business Administration degree," explains Milligan. "Since then, I've just tried to integrate music into everything I've done."

There was a time when Milligan was better known around Montana for her music than for her business consulting. Before she moved to San Diego, she was a regular fixture at the Heidelberg, where she and a group known as the Munich Three performed and led spirited sing-alongs that were popular with University of Montana students. She was also a member of Smile, a six-piece touring band based out of Kalispell.

It's been 21 years since Mardi Milligan last performed a purely musical concert. She's continued to play and write music, and even runs a company called Special Moments Music, which offers personalized songs for special occasions.

But after running into two former peers – Nina Russell and Jean Wrobel – at a Missoula Children's production a while back, Milligan realized that she missed the opportunity to play the music that means the most to her on a personal level. "I decided it was time to step back up and do some music," say Milligan.

Milligan culled through the 140 songs she has written, and ended up recording fourteen of them for a new CD. That album, titled "Choices," demonstrates Milligan's penchant for upbeat country songs and sentimental ballads. They're the kind of songs that eschew the jaded, often cynical sentiments of modern pop music in favor of comforting, positive messages. Take, for example, her ode to her father, titled "Your Love for Me:"

"Your love for me is a lot like God's love, it's always there no matter what I do / Your love for me is a lot like God's love, it's always there to help and see me through / I remember when I was small, the whole world then seemed so tall, you used to hold me in your lap and read / Your arms were around me, your love did surround me, the lessons that you taught me were your seed."

"My intention was to just create some nice music that is pleasant and sticks to the simple stuff," explains Milligan. "I've always liked a variety of music, but I think a lot of the older listeners today don't have a place to go. I like the oldies, but I think there's a big hole out there somewhere."

Despite – or perhaps because of – her intimate knowledge of the business world, Milligan isn't aiming toward a full rejuvenation of her music career. She just wants to play some concerts, share her music, hopefully touch some souls.

"It's not like I want to set the world on fire; I just think it'll be fun," she says.

Make a "Choice" — Mardi Milligan will celebrate the release of her CD, "Choices," and the re-release of her 1979 album, "Mardi Milligan – Old, New, Borrowed 'n Blue, Milligan Stew" (now entitled "Looking Back"), with a performance at the Crystal Theater on Saturday. The show starts at 8 p.m.; tickets are \$8 in advance (available from Rockin' Rudy's) or \$10 at the door.