

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## Musical treasure in the Oakland hills

By Ginny Prior  
The Montclarion

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The three guitars resting on her living room couch tell the story. "These are the girls" says Oakland hills singer/songwriter Caren Armstrong -- each instrument poised to be played by an artist who can make the strings sing.

Mention the name to any local guitarist and you'll find Armstrong has a big following. The free-spirited redhead with hair the color of warm cherry wood teaches as many as 25 lessons a week in her cozy hills apartment and is a regular in acoustic clubs around the Bay. But her monthly songwriter's showcase may well be her signature event.

Much like the legendary Bluebird Café in Nashville, Armstrong has brought her own long-running songwriter's showcase to a funky little performance venue in Oakland's Glenview District. She invites fellow songwriters to sit in the "round" and share music and stories with the audience.

During the holidays she brought in Steve Seskin, a Bay Area songwriter with seven No. 1 hits including "Grown Men Don't Cry," recorded by Tim McGraw, and "Don't Laugh at Me," recorded by Mark Wills (and Peter, Paul and Mary). This month she's featuring Oaklander Tony Marcus (known for his jazz guitar and vocals) and David Maloney (a prolific performer and writer with 18 albums to his credit).

Armstrong, herself, has written scores of songs. "Four records," she recounts, "that's 50 songs there,

and if you add all the stinkers I've written, probably hundreds," she says with an easy, almost

country-like manner. Some songs take time and a whole lot of crafting and some come like lightning strikes. But realistically, she says, songs are "10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration. Sometimes God writes and I'm holding the pencil, and sometimes it's all sweat and tears." Armstrong got her first guitar when she was 10. "I just opened the box and started figuring out chords," she recalls. By the age of 13, she was teaching at a local guitar shop in Manhattan Beach. "Vince Gill taught in the booth next to me. I'd go knocking on doors and say can you teach me this blues riff "... and guys like Gill would say, 'yeah, here we go.'"

Because she grew up near Los Angeles, she was exposed to a lot of big talent and started performing in front of an audience at a relatively young age. "I was lucky to be really naive and didn't know I should be scared to get up in front of people and sing."

Today, Armstrong still travels the circuit playing for audiences big and small across America. Over the past several months she's been to the East Coast and back, to New Mexico and across Southern California.

"I travel three or four days," she says, "then teach midweek -- 25 guitar lessons or so. Three separate calendars keep track of her appointments and gigs. "It can be anything from a winery to a coffee house," she says of her venues. And it's sometimes in the middle of nowhere, like her concert at the historic Buckhorn Saloon and Opera House, a bar on a mountaintop in Pinos Altos, N.M.

"My life is not boring," she says with a Cheshire grin. Sounds like the makings of a good song.

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This month's Celebrating Songwriters features Caren Armstrong, Tony Marcus and David Maloney at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at 1318 Glenfield Ave. (two doors off Park Boulevard in the East Bay Dance Center). Tickets are \$15. For more information see [www.celebratingsongwriters.com](http://www.celebratingsongwriters.com).

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