

## Harmonic Convergence

Mixing Music and Medicine

By Susannah Felts

As anyone attending the annual Best Medicine Show can attest, UAB medical students are a creatively gifted lot. Several possess well-honed musical chops and have continued to perform and record after they have enrolled.

Here, four of the many singers and musicians at the School of Medicine describe how they harmonize their intensive training with the joy of making sweet sounds.

### The Jazz Singer

The word “prodigy” is no hyperbole for third-year student **Susan May Wiltrakis**: At eight years old, she acted in professional theater in Chicago; at 11, she recorded her first jazz album. A reviewer for the *Chicago Sun-Times* described her singing voice as that of “an older, larger woman, a woman who maybe smokes a little, and likes a couple drinks before bed and has had her heart broken a few times”—a description that Wiltrakis says is “not inaccurate.”

Then, at 12, Wiltrakis got the ultimate break: an appearance on *Oprah*. Not surprisingly, that spawned many more opportunities and assured that her teenage years would be anything but average. While performing at venues nationwide, Wiltrakis completed high school coursework online through Northwestern and Stanford universities; by age 15 she was ready to apply to college. Not all schools were keen on the idea of a freshman that young, but Valparaiso welcomed her. Wiltrakis graduated at 19 and came straight to UAB, where she’s now considering a residency in internal medicine or pediatrics.

These days, Wiltrakis, who goes by “Susan May” on stage, doesn’t perform much aside from appearances at medical school events, but music still offers her respite during long hours of studying. Her passion for music and medicine spring from the same goal, she explains. “As a performer, I’ve always liked that I could help people forget their troubles. But with medicine, I feel more directly able to help people, and that’s something I’ve always wanted to do.”

Wiltrakis also sees her jazz training as useful in a hospital setting, where “people have to work in unison to have a good outcome—everyone has their part to play.” She notes that her comfort with improvisation and spontaneity on stage might contribute to effective doctor-patient communication.

Has she ever serenaded a patient? “Not yet, though people say I need to,” Wiltrakis says. “But I’m not sure how receptive people will be to their doctor breaking into song.” Lullabies could come in handy in pediatrics, she reflects. “Or I can use it as a threat!” she says, laughing. On a serious note, though, Wiltrakis sees the value of music therapy in the healing process. “That is definitely a door I want to keep open for research in the future.”



Susan May Wiltrakis

### Lights, Camera, Outreach

Medical students used their talents to entertain a full house—and raise more than \$13,000 for Equal Access Birmingham (EAB), the student-run initiative providing primary care to underserved patients in the community. The 2013 Best Medicine Show, held on March 1 at the Alabama Theatre and hosted by the Student Senate, included 26 performances, from live music and dance to video skits. The funds raised will create an endowment for EAB that ensures its financial sustainability. Watch a selection of videos from this year’s show through *UAB Medicine’s iPad app*.



The 2013 Best Medicine Show featured student talent—and raised \$13,000 for primary care outreach. Photos by David Kim

