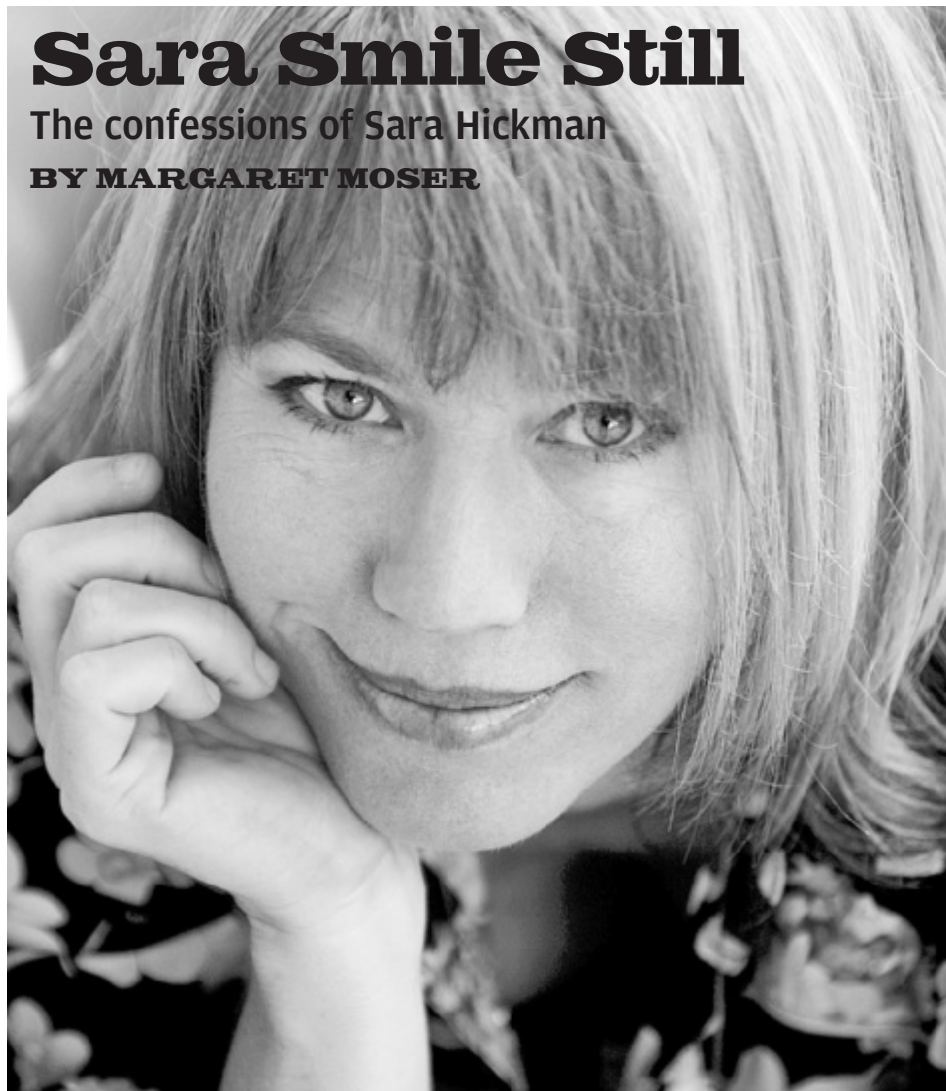


# Sara Smile Still

The confessions of Sara Hickman

BY MARGARET MOSER



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Who can turn the world on with a smile? Besides Mary Tyler Moore, try Sara Hickman.

Since bursting onto the scene of 1980s Texas singer-songwriters with peers Edie Brickell, Michelle Shocked, and Kris McKay, Hickman, 47, has sparkled blond as the Austin poster girl for sugar and spice and everything nice. She's nonthreateningly attractive, intelligent, and genuinely nice. Committed, responsible, outspoken. Artist, mother, wife: She excels in all areas – going on tour, going to church, going on social crusades when it so moves her. She'll get naked for a charity calendar, then turn around as the state musician of Texas.

Hickman's career counts decades of hands-on hard work with a payoff of a loyal fan base, which once rallied to bail her music out of record label jail and is now catered to via the usual social networks – Facebook, YouTube, etc. The singer went from being a VH1 darling to a songwriter of longevity and style.

Family comes first, though. That's the way it was when it was just Hickman and daughter Lily, and it's that way now with her, Lily, husband Lance Schriner, and their daughter, Iolana. The heart of the household is their dining table, and the house quite literally revolves around it, with rooms spoking in every direction.

At the moment, Hickman's sitting at the table with a box of tissues she grabbed from the

kitchen counter. Her eyes are brimming with tears, and the white wad in her hand dabs one side then the other. She blows her nose, setting the soggy tissue next to the box, and reaches for another Kleenex with a quiet *wssst*.

That's as corny a way for a writer to set a scene as exists, and yet not only is it happening, Hickman refuses to apologize for the waterworks. Crying is a badge of honor she wrote about thus in the CD booklet accompanying the limited edition of her new album: "After birthing two babies, I've come to recognize that tears are a damn miracle, and they sure can be healing to release. ... Mostly though, I've learned tears are ok and deserve a helluva lot more credit and respect."

But this is Sara Hickman, Miss Sunshine, the one who Has It All – the self-sustaining careerist with two model children *and* a husband who loves her unconditionally. She supports PETA, Amnesty International, SPCA, Mothers' Milk Bank, House the Homeless, Romanian orphans, literacy, and the Hill Country Youth Ranch, all with the Sara Hickman Children's Fund. Her life should be a slo-mo montage of frolicking puppies and adorable kittens amid pastel balloons and rosy-cheeked children dancing in circles about her as she sits on a rainbow cloud healing the infirm. What's a golden girl like her got to cry about?

Try her latest album, *Absence of Blame*.

## Blown Away

The house looks quite different from the last time Sara Hickman opened its doors to the *Chronicle* nearly a decade ago (see "Sara Smile," May 11, 2001). Back then, she was entering a different life stage that played out in her music.

"When *Motherlode* came out in 2006, it was two CDs, and one CD was kind of happy and upbeat, and the other was the darker side where I talked about things like my insomnia. The critics and fans responded, so I didn't feel like I had to be quite the Carol Burnett I've always been, that I could start letting Sara out more to play. I felt like I'd been hidden behind this complexity because I didn't want to let anyone down, didn't want to make anyone feel bad because I like lifting people up."

*Absence of Blame*, by contrast, is deliberately conceived without regard to Hickman's stock-in-trade of uplifting music. While her music has always been revealing, it hasn't been overtly confessional. It's grown light-years from the waifish *Equal Scary People*, bloomed in such releases as *Spiritual Appliances*, and even music she's made for babies (*Newborn*, *Toddler*, *Big Kid*) and with teens (Super Pal Universe). On *Absence of Blame*, even a sweet, Sara-worthy song such as "I'm So Glad (You Came Along)" has steely underpinnings. Then there's "Blown Away."

"That's my best friend Kathy shooting herself on the phone while talking to her sister because she was raped by her boss," reveals Hickman. "I want to talk about it the way I was blown away, because the other side of suicide is those left behind. And it's not just Kathy; it's my friend Carol and my friend Victor and Amy Farris and so many friends who committed suicide. Why can't I sing a song that's about not just how much I miss them but about the anger: 'Why would you do this?'"

"I'm making a documentary and was driving through Eden, Texas. I was like, 'Shouldn't there be snakes and naked people and beauty here?' Instead, it was a funky little town, and it made me mad, so I decided to write a Neil Young-esque song where I say: 'Eve had six children, and Adam was drunk. He led them deeper into debt, wiped each kiss with a punch. 'Til the violence escalated even further one day. Adam shot Eve in the face.'"

"Those are the most brutal lyrics I've ever written. I can see people reacting when I sing it, but that's reality. And I think it's important for a woman to sing it."

"After witnessing the Virginia Tech murders, I started wondering, 'How was it that the Amish community was able to go to the family of the man who viciously murdered their little innocent girls and comfort that family because they knew they were suffering too?' And yet it seems like no one was going to comfort that Korean family, calling them on the phone."

Wondering led Hickman to write "The One," a first-take, a cappella drone sung like an Irish lament and included in the limited edition of *Absence of Blame* but not the commercial release. Singing it for the first time, Hickman broke down in the final verses but

decided not to re-record the vocals and left the crying in.

"It's about [Virginia Tech shooter Seung-hui] Cho's mother. Because I'm a mom and I can't imagine getting that phone call: 'Hey, I'm calling to let you know 32 people have been killed by your son! And your son is dead! Thank God he killed himself!' And then the phone not ringing anymore except the press and people who are angry."

"And you can't even see your son because he blew himself away. You can't hold his hand or ask why. It's not the Pietà, so you can't hold him in your arms. No way to express that."

*Wshhht.*

## Sara & Ginger

"We were in Sunday school talking about the story where they bring the adulteress to Jesus and he says, 'Those of you without a sin cast the first stone.' They leave, and Jesus is with the woman, and he just says, 'Go and sin no more.' No big lecture, no making her feel bad, just make better choices. And Lance [Schriner] goes, 'Well, the only person who could have thrown a stone that day was Jesus.'"

"Half the class was laughing, but the fundamentalist half wasn't, and it struck me about people we've elevated to perfection, like Jesus or Buddha or Mother Teresa. The rest of us have to deal with sin and blame, so I started thinking, 'What if we had no blame?'"

"So I made *Absence of Blame*, an album about blame and sorrow and redemption and love."

This time, it was Hickman's lifelong blame and personal sorrow and joyful redemption and innocent love put asunder by a song, "Juliet and Juliet" tells the unembellished story of love between two girls, forced apart by parental command. While in high school in Houston during the late 1970s, Hickman's first love was local musician Ginger Doss (see "Letter to Juliet," p.57), a senior equally smitten with Hickman, a junior.

Hickman's mother, an artist forced to leave her creativity behind for a 9 to 5 job after divorce, figured out the two were "not just friends but girlfriends" and demanded they break up. Dutifully, Hickman obeyed, springing Doss from class on a ruse and heading for the safety of a car. The two left campus and parked nearby, where Hickman wept as she delivered the decree to an equally wrecked Doss. They held each other and kissed.

"I thought I heard children laughing, but they had gone in and told a parent, who called the police," says Hickman. "As we were comforting one another, there was a knock on Ginger's door. It was a cop asking her to step out of the vehicle. Then there was one outside my door, and they took us to different sides of the car."

"I could see Ginger was upset, but I was so naive I didn't know why I was in trouble. He said I was engaging in illicit behavior or something like that. I said I didn't think it was illicit behavior to kiss someone or have an emotional moment or whatever my smartass