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Lunch with a 12-year-old jazz singer by Debra Pickett

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"The singing is just exactly as exciting as when I was little," says 12-year-old Susan May Wiltrakis, between bites of her turkey sandwich, no mayo. "But the theater," she continues, rolling her eyes to emphasize how, like, totally over it she is at the moment, "I did that for so long. Right now, I'm taking a break from it."

Wiltrakis, who is known professionally as Susan May, has been dancing since she was 3 and singing since she was 6. She's been acting at the Bailiwick Repertory Theater since she was 9. At 10, she became the youngest-ever member of the Chicago Cabaret Professionals.

At a certain point, she says, with a kind of world-weariness that would sound misplaced in almost any other 12-year-old, something had to give. And acting, though it got her raves from the critics and lots of attention from the local press, well, it just wasn't her passion.

"I was never sad when the show ended," Wiltrakis says with a shrug. So, now, she says, she's "finding a nice balance," taking on fewer projects. That means she's cutting an album at Southport Records and keeping up a busy schedule of jazz club appearances.

She's also taken the ACT for the first time and started shopping in the grown-up sections of her favorite stores: the Gap and Old Navy. It's hard to tell which thing has her most excited. Performing, she says, "is just kind of normal." She can't remember not doing it.

"With my friends, I don't really talk about it too much," says Wiltrakis, who lives with her parents in St. John, Ind., and heads to Chicago about two days a week for performances and recording sessions.

Wiltrakis is home-schooled and says, "school goes year-round because I work all year-round."

There's something jarring, at first, about hearing Wiltrakis refer to her

singing as work. There's a certain convention around "young performers," as they're called now--"child stars" having acquired a negative connotation--that seems to require them to talk about what they do as if it's play, as if they're unaware of the money changing hands. Wiltrakis doesn't go for that. Though she doesn't "get too involved in that" money stuff, which is handled by her parents, she knows it's there.

She has a checking account, "fun money for shopping," she says. Though she spends many of her evenings in some of Chicago's most sophisticated spots--she's a regular at Pops for Champagne and Andy's--Wiltrakis says one of her favorite places to hang out is the Southlake Mall, about a half-hour from home. That might be because she's still almost a decade away from having the champagne.

Wiltrakis' singing voice, with its unbelievable 3-1/2 octave range, seems to come from somewhere outside her. It is the voice of an older, larger woman, a woman who maybe smokes a little, and likes a couple of drinks before bed and has had her heart broken a few times. Wiltrakis doesn't take formal lessons and rarely needs more than a couple of takes to get a song recording-quality perfect.

It's almost disturbing to listen to her belt out sultry jazz numbers, and when I ask her where it comes from, this passion and sadness that underlie many of her performances, she's almost at a loss to explain it.

"I guess it's like acting," she says. "Like each song, you're playing a character."

Sitting at a sidewalk table at Ann Sather, just across the street from the Southport Records studio, Wiltrakis looks like pretty much any other "tween" girl, trying on adult mannerisms--like carrying her purse on one shoulder, rather than across her chest, and crossing the street against the light--but still lapsing back, charmingly, into childhood--like when she wrinkles her nose at the thought of any condiments polluting her dry sandwich. Working hasn't taken away her childhood, but it has certainly changed its character. "People always think I'm older," she says, referring to the jazz aficionados who have become her most loyal fans.

In addition to the cool clothes she buys herself at the mall, she's also got a wardrobe of elegant pantsuits for her club performances.

She refers to great vocalists by their first names.

"Ella, I love," she says. "Judy, I respect her work."

She'd love to be older, she says. Like 16, so she could drive herself to her gigs.

Wiltrakis is already taking high school-level courses via software and e-mail and has her test scores tracked through a special program for gifted kids run by Northwestern University. The assignments are nothing to sneeze at; she's currently working on writing a 15-page, one-act play. She'd like to apply to college as soon as she can.

Meeting Wiltrakis, I wasn't surprised to find a young woman in a hurry to grow up. Young performers are often hyperarticulate, with a sheen of maturity--or at least a mastery of mature-sounding catchphrases. But, as I sat with her, I found myself in a chicken-and-egg sort of quandary about how to describe Wiltrakis' precociousness.

Does she seem more grown-up because she is an entertainer, or does she succeed as a performer because she is so intelligent and mature?

Maybe it's both. Or neither. She doesn't know, and she's not sure it matters. As we talk, Wiltrakis makes it clear that she's not interested in really being a grown-up--not yet and not for a long time--but she does enjoy learning their language.

She also seems to enjoy surprising them, messing around with their stereotypes.

No, she doesn't have a stage mom. Yes, she does have lots of friends her own age. And, though she plans to keep performing, Wiltrakis says she has other plans for her future. She's not interested in becoming a Charlotte Church-esque star.

"I'd like to pursue a career in medicine," she says, "maybe go to Northwestern."

The course work doesn't intimidate her--she loves math and science--and thinks she could find a niche that would help lots of people. She says maybe she'll be a reconstructive surgeon for kids with deformities.

"People seem to be very, very surprised to hear that," she says, rolling her

big brown eyes again. Adults can be so narrow-minded.

Wiltrakis takes her Pocket PC out of her grown-up purse, checking the afternoon's schedule. There's some mixing to do back at the studio--she'd love to learn how to use the board, while she's at it--and a dentist's appointment and plenty of homework, which will be peppered with Instant Messaging sessions with her girlfriends.

It's a more balanced life than she was leading when she was also doing theater work, but it's still pretty busy.

She doesn't know quite what to say about that. She seems to know that almost anything she comes up with will ring slightly hollow. If you want to see her as an over-scheduled child star, that's what she is. But that's not how she sees herself.

In her own mind, she is just Susan. Or Susan May. Or Susan Wiltrakis.