

Hawkins certainly a pro at prose

Writing, performing now second nature

By Laura Watt

Special to The Denver Post

The stage is bare except for a small table and an overstuffed chair, both wrapped in white fabric, a lamp, a pitcher of water and a glass, and a smaller glass holding some kind of liqueur.

The star of the evening walks out to a recording of "Life Could Be a Dream, Sh-Boom Sh-Boom," sits down at the table and proceeds to read from a white spiral-bound notebook.

She is clearly an older woman, but how old? Hard to tell. The spotlights pick up her spectacular cheekbones and play over her



Bobbie Louise Hawkins is performing again for the first time in years with 'Life As We Know It.' There are plans to bring the show to Denver.

Courtesy Bobbie Louise Hawkins

spray of dark, curly hair.

The voice is rich, cultured, made for the stage. Every consonant is cut like a diamond, each syllable rising and falling for

the utmost effect. It's prose, but it sounds like poetry.

The audience is laughing.

"Do you think Bush knows he's being bombarded by neutrinos?"

This is Bobbie Louise Hawkins, in front of a paying audience again for the first time in years, offering up her own special brand of philosophy in "Life As We Know It." The one-woman show ran four performances recently at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, and there are plans to bring it to Denver.

Hawkins, who teaches writing at The Naropa Institute and has written 15 books, is a veteran of the Bohemian and hippie movements, beatnik poetry and leftist politics — but the most accurate description of who she is might just be: keen observer of the human condition.

"I want a little truth in advertising," she

Please see **BOBBIE** on 7L

tells her audience. "I want them to have to say when the people being used in ads are actors. When a politician is on television, pretending to be knowledgeable, I want them to be required to put a line at the bottom of the screen that says, 'This speech was *not written* by this man.'"

It's all delivered with a sparkle in her eye and a world-weary shrug, as if she knows only too well that humans — herself included — will keep making dumb mistakes and getting tangled up in life's paradoxes.

"I have two grinders for coffee beans. To make the coffee I have two electric drips, a French press, an old-time percolator and an espresso machine. Meanwhile, I drink tea."

Hawkins was persuaded to come out and perform a new monologue by Junior Burke, a Boulder-based writer-director and former Naropa student who first saw her seven years ago, when she got up and read at a tribute to Allen Ginsberg.

"Ginsberg was there himself, and all these heavy hitters came: (Lawrence) Ferlinghetti and Ken Kesey and (Gregory) Corso and Philip Glass," Burke recalled. "I wasn't familiar with her work, and she performed one of her short stories, and I was completely knocked out by it. Not only by the writing but her performance."

Years later, after he came to know her, Burke urged her to come out of the classroom setting before a wider audience.

"One night Bobbie was telling stories, and the next day I called her and said, 'You were hilarious, that was just great. You really ought to think about putting these onstage.'"

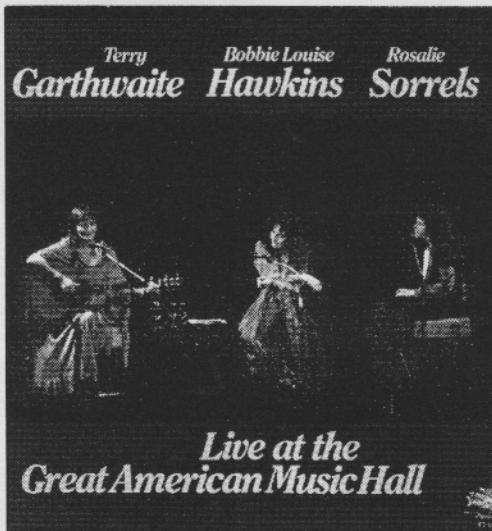
"Every Friday afternoon he'd come over, and I'd just start rapping," Hawkins said over tea (Earl Grey, hot) at her Victorian cottage in Boulder.

The pair worked this way for months, culling out the weak parts, developing the best.

"It started as a series of routines," Hawkins said, "but then we started interweaving things, so it wouldn't sound like a bit into a bit into a bit. I'd always done characters, but he was insistent — he thought just the talking was unique."

Along its convoluted 1½-hour journey, "Life As We Know It" hits upon — among other topics — the theory of evolution, woman as temptress, Sharon Stone's husband getting bit by a Komodo dragon, life on other planets, cloning, cryogenics and Global Positioning Systems: "I'm waiting for the improved model that will not only tell me I'm in the kitchen, but why I'm there."

For someone who has moved (and shaken) in many interesting circles,



Bobbie Louise Hawkins is a veteran of the Bohemian and hippie movements. A live performance from 1981 was sold as an album. Hawkins' photo, above, was taken the same year.

Hawkins did not come from cosmopolitan beginnings. Her father was a fry cook in West Texas and her mother only 15 when she married him. Bobbie was an only child. The family moved a lot.

When she was 10, her father split for good. Her mother took jobs as a waitress. To entertain herself, little Bobbie read everything she could get her hands on, including her mother's collection of Gothic horror and pulp magazines. Although her schooling always was being interrupted, Bobbie was filling her head with all kinds of ideas.

Mother and daughter ended up in Albuquerque, where Hawkins finished school early, at 16, and went on to the University of New Mexico.

By then, she had already left the straight-and-narrow for a far more circuitous route.

She had joined an actor's repertory company and dropped her Texas twang in favor of a mid-Atlantic accent. (She has lived off and on in London most of her life and still says "dew" for "due," and "wahsn't" for "wasn't.")

She had become active in Albuquerque's NAACP and in Henry Wallace's People's United Party, which had communist affiliations.

"At 16, I was thinking of myself as a person achieving an intellectual position. One thing I've always been is gutsy. I've always been willing to go over the falls."

She studied art at college, dreaming of a career as a painter.

"The art I created was awful — but that didn't really matter."

At 19, she married an architect who told her she had to get out of Albuquerque. He took her to Africa. Then they went to British Honduras, where the first of her four daughters was born. After that came Tokyo and another daughter. After that came a divorce.

Back to the safety of Albuquerque.

Hawkins was working as a midnight-to-6 a.m. DJ at a radio station when she met the man who would

change her life.

Robert Creeley was (and is) a poet, novelist and teacher.

"He was wonderful, and I immediately fell in love with him," she recalled. "He moved in with me."

Their relationship would span the globe, last 18 years and produce two children. They never married.

With her daughters in school, Hawkins kept a conservative dress and matching jacket in her closet — "my PTA drag" — to pull out whenever a parent-teacher conference was required.

By the mid-70s, Hawkins stopped painting and began writing. Her first book, "16 Poems," was published in 1974. After that came more poetry, a novel and a collection of short stories.

Along the way, Hawkins had made friends with singer-songwriters Rosalie Sorrels and Terry Garthwaite. The three women hit the road in the late '70s for a series of shows that resulted in an album, "Live at the Great American Music Hall," recorded in San Francisco in 1980. Wearing wild Gypsy threads, Hawkins sat in the middle and offered her insights between songs.

"Living in a mundane world is intolerable," she said.

Meanwhile, she and Creeley had moved to Bolinas, an artist's colony outside San Francisco. A few years later, they parted. Hawkins divided her time between teaching in California and living in London until 1987, when friend Anne Waldman offered her a teaching position at Naropa. Bored with Bolinas, ready for a change, Hawkins jumped to Colorado.

Her next project, after "Life As We Know It," might be "An Evening With Ruth Draper," where Hawkins would play the long-ago queen of one-woman theater.

For now, she has that role all to herself.

"A memory insists on itself," she says in performance. "They know where we live, and they deliver themselves like a letter."