

getting

to

know

# Maria Celia Arias



Her music has that hauntingly beautiful quality to it: vulnerable but strong, like someone who has been scathed by life's struggles and chosen to survive. Rather than turning bitter and hostile, Tara MacLean has used those experiences to power her along, writing songs which showcase the themes of child abuse, loss, self-affirmation and hope—all areas in which she has been challenged. With a gift for writing lyrics and music that are both meaningful and evocative, MacLean hopes to reach an audience of listeners who can benefit from her lessons in life. At the young age of 23, she's already rich in life experiences, as evidenced in her debut album, *Silence*, and upcoming EP, *If You See Me*, on Nettwerk Records.

by pat kramer



orn on Prince Edward Island on the northeast coast of Canada, MacLean is the eldest of four children raised by a mother who sought a career as an actress and a musician father whose life on the road frequently kept him away from the family. Her father, Marty Reno, a talented and hard-working songwriter/guitarist, is best known for his recording work with Canadian recording star Gene McClellen, whose songs "Snowbird" and "Put Your Hand in the Hand" won him acclaim in the 70s.

With the influence of music around her as far back as she can remember, MacLean recalls how her father would sit on the edge of her bed when she was going to sleep, making up songs about what they had done that day. "We'd break into a song walking around the house; it was like living in a musical."

Despite the pleasant memories and fun they shared, MacLean couldn't help but notice the effect her dad's musical career had on the family. Though he was a talented country and gospel songwriter, Reno's career never quite paid the bills. Says MacLean of the strong negative impression she acquired of the life of a musician, "I always saw music as something that was nice; I really loved it, but I thought, 'I could never do it for a living; I want something stable, I want something different for my children.'"

She also remembers many nights left alone with her brother and sisters while Reno was away and her aspiring

actress mother, Sharlene MacLean, was rehearsing or performing in the Maritimes' local theater. "I remember thinking, 'Why can't they be lawyers or something? At least they'd come home every night and there would be food on the table.'"

The final straw came after Reno, a member of the Pentecostal Church, began taking the family with him to preach. Of that time, she says there are few fond memories. "It was a strange time; we were always staying in different people's houses." Though her mom tried to adapt to life in the church, which meant she had to give up acting, the marriage finally broke up when MacLean was about eight years old.

Over the next couple of years, her mother slipped into alcoholism. When their house burnt down and they lost all their possessions, MacLean, then 13, went to live with her father and his new wife in Nova Scotia. However, she and his new wife did not get along and she had another support system wrenched away when she learned that Reno was not her real father. So on her 14th birthday, MacLean was given a bus ticket and told to go back to Prince Edward Island, that she was no longer welcome in their home. At this time, MacLean began discovering music's ability to get her through her turmoil and pain. she started playing guitar and writing her own songs.

After living with her grandmother for a short time, MacLean became intrigued with the idea of meeting her birth-father, Dan Costain, who earned his living as a dancer, singer and actor. To her surprise, Costain welcomed his new role as father, inviting MacLean to





new song she had written called "Let Her Feel The Rain" while a friend accompanied her on guitar. When the ferry docked, two women approached her, complimenting her on her song and asking if she had any others. The two turned out to be executives from Nettwerk Records, whose artist roster includes Sarah McLachlan, Barenaked Ladies, The Devlins, Mystery Machine and Ginger.

MacLean went on to record "Let Her Feel The Rain" for Nettwerk's benefit compilation, *Lit From Within*. Later on, a recording and publishing deal ensued in April 1995 and one year later, her debut album, *Silence*, was released. Recorded in San Francisco at Brilliant Studios with producer Norm Kerner (American Music Club, Sky Cries Mary), *Silence* prominently featured "Let Her Feel The Rain," along with many other original compositions.

her US tour alone, not bad for a brand-new artist in her first year. On the road for just over nine months, MacLean's performances have included opening slots for Ashley MacIsaac, Barenaked Ladies, Paula Cole, Ron Sexsmith and Tom Cochrane, as well as eight dates on the "Lilith Fair" tour.

"Lilith Fair," alone, has propelled her career, introducing her to legions of new fans and helping to establish her legitimacy with many contemporary, female artists with whom she shared the spotlight. Of that experience, MacLean humbly states, "It felt like I was part of a wonderful experience and I made some definite friendships."

"Lilith Fair" also spawned numerous instant comparisons to the event's founder, fellow Canadian and labelmate Sarah McLachlan. However, despite their common geography and acoustic ambiance, MacLean says, "Anyone who has really listened to my music and listened to hers would know that we're nothing alike. Sure, we're both acoustic songwriters, but we write about very different things and express them differently." She adds, "She's a really nice lady; I have a great deal of respect for her, but we don't go about the world in the same fashion."

The artists who have influenced her include Bob Dylan and Bonnie Raitt, who MacLean attributes to helping her through many years of hard times. She gushes when recounting how she almost met Raitt, after opening for Ron Sexsmith at Los Angeles' Troubadour. "I was speechless; I didn't even try to talk to her. I just walked by," she says with relief, highlighting the discomfort she still feels about her newfound celebrity.

In marked contrast, she has no problem performing to the live audiences who are now flocking to her shows. On that, MacLean notes, "The last year has been quite surprising—the reaction we've gotten to the live shows. When I made the record, I hadn't really sung live a lot. I had done a few shows with Marty [Reno] when I was young, but nothing much beyond that." In order to keep her shows fresh, MacLean tries to learn a new story or a new way of delivering a song for every show. Recognizing her versatility, Nettwerk decided to put out the new EP, *If You See Me*, giving a few of her previously released songs a new lease on life.

The EP features two remixed or re-recorded songs from *Silence*: "That's Me," is a newly recorded

version of the song with fresh vocals, guitar tracks and drums, while "Evidence" is a remixed version. There's also a heartrending live performance of "Evidence" from "Lilith Fair" and a live version of "If Only," from her appearance on WBCN/Boston. Capping off the remixed and live songs is the new "Call To Nothing," which MacLean and guitarist/boyfriend Bill Bell recorded at a friend's home studio.

With the release of her new five-song EP, MacLean will soon be embarking on a national club tour. She'll perform as a duo with Bell, keeping it simple and acoustic. Of the upcoming tour she states, "People like us to open for them because we're very low maintenance: we can hop on the bus with them, we don't take up a lot of space, we only need one hotel room and we're quite jolly most of the time."

Since choosing a career in music two years ago, MacLean says her music has changed from what it once was. "I'm really happy. I'm in a marvelous relationship, it's very stable. And I feel that I've healed a lot inside.

"With *Silence*," she says, "I feel that I really went there to dig myself out of this horrible dark place and [in doing so] found the beauty in the pain. Now, I find my writing is more uplifting."

Similarly, her comfort level with the process has increased and she's started taking risks. "When I went in to make my first record," she remembers, "I didn't really trust my producer. I would have been happy if it was just me and my guitar. I always thought that I wanted to be rootsy, but I'm finding that samples and drum loops are amazing to write to, too."

After all of life's trials and tribulations, Tara MacLean is finally discovering the joy that life has to offer, which seems all the more rewarding after waiting years for things to turn around. When she writes about her experiences now, she does so in a way that would make her preacher step-father proud. Clearly, things are looking good for this artist whose heart is a significant part of her music. ☺

**Tara Kramer is a Los Angeles freelancer writer who contributes to many newspapers and magazines. This piece on Tara MacLean is her first for totallyadult**

**Look for MacLean's new tour to begin November 5 at the Musicland Convention in New York. In addition to headlining shows in the East, she'll be sharing the bill with Dar Williams in the Midwest. From December 5-19, MacLean heads for the West Coast for more club dates.**

join he and his wife at their home in Vancouver, British Columbia. That road started out rocky as MacLean acted out her anger by doing a lot of destructive things, including stealing from Costain and his wife. However, this led to what she now looks at as perhaps her most memorable lesson in life. "My dad said to me, 'The whole point of life is to make something beautiful out of pain because life is very painful.' When I was hurting, I would sit and play my guitar, and make it beautiful as I tried to understand things."

Reflecting on that lesson, she adds, "Dan saved my life. He taught me stability and how to be fair and be strong. He told me, 'You have a choice. You can let everything that happened to you be your excuse for giving up and for being nothing, or you can use it and make it a fabulous thing. You have potential. Don't throw it away just because you're angry. Look above that.'" That's when, MacLean says, she made a decision to use her music and songs to teach others, to help others heal from whatever pain they might be suffering. That choice led to her seeing music as helpful, rather than hurtful. And while she had no plans to pursue music as a career, when it fell into her lap, she couldn't turn her back on it.

Years later, now at age 20, after having spent two weeks in jail for participating in an environmental protest rally, MacLean was riding home on the Vancouver Island ferry. To pass the time, she was singing a

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Since its release, *Silence* has created a buzz with its single "Evidence," which got frequent radio exposure above the border as well as Canada's MuchMusic doing the same for the accompanying video. Because of this success, the label decided to release *Silence* in the US. Nettwerk Records National Promotion Director Marc Alghini reports 20,000 CDs have sold off the