

Catherine MacLellan



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It is Catherine MacLellan's voice that strikes you first. Pure and haunting, it caresses softly, insinuating itself into your heart, and just won't let go. Then, the subtle strengths of her deeply confessional, powerfully poetic songs emerge, revealing hidden layers with every listen. It is this combination that makes *Church Bell Blues*, MacLellan's sophomore album, a bona fide roots music gem. The disc was released independently on the East Coast last year, but Catherine's recent signing to True North Records will bring it much wider exposure. "It's great that this one is being given more life," says the P.E.I.-raised, now Halifax-based songstress. "I really respect Bernie [Finkelstein] and all the artists he's signed, so I feel very lucky."

MacLellan's immense vocal and songwriting talents are no secret to music lovers in the Maritimes. Her potential was first displayed in the group The New Drifts and then on her 2004 solo debut *Dark Dream Midnight*, but *Church Bell Blues* ups the ante considerably. It is a sparse and intimate record, one that gently fuses folk and country strains with graceful ease. The disc is clearly focused on Catherine's compelling voice and expressive acoustic guitar, and both are neatly framed by the empathetic production of longtime collaborator James Phillips. "He's a guy I pretty much started playing music with when I started trying to do this for a living, back in 2000," Catherine recalls. "We were musical partners in The New Drifts, and James helped on my first solo album. I think it is really important to be close to the people you're working with, and this is definitely a team effort." This dynamic duo arranged the songs together, with Phillips adding fluent electric guitar and background vocals.

The track "The Long Way Home" typifies their musical kinship, via vocal harmonies and the lovely interplay of electric and acoustic guitar. "I love the sound of the two instruments together, and James is such an amazing player," says Catherine. On *Church Bell Blues*, the pair were, in her phrase, going for "a living room kind of feel," a mission neatly accomplished here. Such a sonic setting allows the potent poeticism of MacLellan's lyrics to breathe and bloom. The opener, "Dreams Dissolve," tells of "a long year of trying to stay afloat," and it sets the tone for an album infused with a mood of wintry melancholy, but devoid of self-pity. These are songs written during a period of personal turmoil, as Catherine candidly acknowledges. "With this album I was just finding a way to communicate my sadness and my feelings that I couldn't necessarily express directly to people. I wrote most of the songs in the winter or the fall, when everything is dying and really quiet. It definitely represents that mood." The title tune sports a jaunty melody while addressing her anxiety over getting married with customary eloquence. "I'd just found out I was pregnant [with daughter Isabel] and I had all these thoughts; 'Are we doing the right thing, are we headed down the right path?' So I guess it seemed to be the whole theme of the album, or the theme of my life at that time.

"The best songwriters are able to give their introspection and soul-searching a universal resonance, a gift MacLellan displays here. "I definitely write about my personal experience, and I find people seem to respond by relating it to their own personal situations. That way, the songs are not necessarily just about me, and that's what you aim for," she observes astutely. This is a characteristic of the work of many of the singer/songwriters Catherine cites as influences and inspirations, artists such as Joni Mitchell, Nanci Griffith, Townes Van Zandt, and her East Coast peer, Julie Doiron.

A young Catherine MacLellan did not have to look far for inspiration and insight into the creative process. She's the daughter of Canadian music legend, singer/songwriter Gene MacLellan, the writer of such huge international '70s hit songs as "Snowbird" (the Anne Murray classic) and "Put Your Hand In The Hand" (Ocean). He died when Catherine had just entered her teens, but his influence was profound. "I grew up watching him write songs in the living room with pen and paper or with a guitar on his lap. That was what I thought you were supposed to do, and eventually I started doing it. Before I could even play guitar, I wrote these awful songs about stupid things and I'd sing melodies." Gene helped wean his daughter away from an early infatuation with bad '80s pop. "He'd buy me tapes of the Beatles, Eric Clapton, and The Band, going 'you have to listen to this.' I'm glad he did. I am really proud to be his daughter and to be able to follow a little in his footsteps. He was a fantastic songwriter and that's really cool." Catherine closes *Church Bell Blues* with a loving and deeply moving tribute to her father, "Long Time," a song of which Gene would be mighty proud.

After high school and a year in Australia, Catherine moved to Toronto, and began following her muse, playing open mic nights in folk

clubs. On relocating back to Prince Edward Island, the passion gradually became a vocation. "That was facilitated by a folk club that had started up at the same time. There was a whole crew of people my age or a little bit older, and we all wanted to share what we'd written. That's where I met James and other people I've played with, so I just started doing it, working part time jobs and playing gigs." Through The New Drifts and then old-time country group Saddle River (also with Phillips), Catherine honed her skills as a performer. With the release of *Dark Dream Midnight*, she ventured into the Quebec and Ontario markets, to a very positive response.

She has certainly been embraced by the Atlantic Canadian audience, as shown by the two 2005 PEI Music Awards for *Dark Dream Midnight* and the four 2006 Awards for *Church Bell Blues*, as well as, multiple East Coast Music award nominations in 2006 and 2007 for those same albums. MacLellan is highly supportive of her regional peers. "There's a community of singer/songwriters here all running in the same circles, and it's nice to feel we're colleagues and friends." In turn, she has earned the deep respect of her fellow songsmiths. In *Church Bell Blues*, Catherine has delivered a record worthy of fervent devotion.

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