

Pop Talk: MacMaster mixes traditional sounds with rock, jazz and Latin

by Nick Rogers

Natalie MacMaster never feels her baby kick back while she's busy dancing and fiddling onstage. But the kid is certain to have a killer sense of rhythm once the Celtic musician gives birth in June.

Energetic stomping and hopping is as integral to MacMaster's Cape Breton fiddling style as the musical performance itself. With child, she modifies her movement a bit.

"I hop less and focus more on the rhythms with the feet," says MacMaster, 34, who also had to dial down her dancing when carrying daughter Mary Frances in 2005. "I'm still doing all the dancing I normally do, just with a little different focus. Being mindful of my heart rate is the only difference."

Quickened pulses are a natural byproduct of MacMaster's music, which places respectful Celtic-traditional sounds within diverse arrangements that lean toward rock, jazz or Latin.

NATALIE MACMASTER - Energetic dancing is as integral to Natalie MacMaster's fiddling style as the musical performance itself. She's been credited for taking Celtic music to new heights. CNS Photo courtesy of Margaret Malandrucolo.

An electric eruption strikes mid-song on "Volcanic Jig," the kickoff track on her 2006 studio album, "Yours Truly." It also contains step dancing that sounds like clacking castanets ("David's Jig"), a hint of Aaron Copland's rustic, orchestral Americana (the finale of "Flea as a Bird") and gentle balladry ("Farewell to Peter," a tribute to the late Canadian newsman Peter Jennings).

Fiddling came second nature to MacMaster - she's the niece of fellow Cape Breton musician Buddy MacMaster and cousin of fiddlers Ashley MacIsaac and Andrew Beaton. Her singular body of work came from a regular rotation of non-Celtic tunes during childhood.

"I listened to everything from Ozzy Osbourne to Anne Murray," MacMaster says of growing up in Troy, a rural town in the province of Nova Scotia. "That comes out in all that I do, I'm sure."

MacMaster started on fiddle at age 9 and made her performance debut at a Nova Scotia square dance. Yet, while the Cape Breton tradition fostered talent, it didn't necessarily beckon as a career.

"When I was young and playing fiddle, no one in Cape Breton made a career out of it. They all had other jobs that they relied on," MacMaster says. "So I thought, at best, I'd be doing this on the side of a day job. I never imagined it as a career. It wasn't in the realm of possibility at the time."

In 1989, at 16, MacMaster self-produced "Four on the Floor," initially released on cassette. Two more self-made albums followed, and by the time she was 21, she says she knew music was all she'd ever do. (At one point, her grueling tour schedule reportedly required her to turn down a role as a featured musician in "The Lord of the Dance.") She released her Rounder Records debut in 1997 and went on to share stages with the Chieftains, Faith Hill, Carlos Santana and Alison Krauss.

"My Roots Are Showing," a 2000 album, was nominated for a Grammy. In 2006, MacMaster became one of the youngest to receive Canada's highest civilian honor, membership in the Order of Canada.

"Yours Truly" earned MacMaster her latest Canadian East Coast Music Award. The record also is nominated for a Juno - Canada's Grammy equivalent, which MacMaster has won before.

It marked the first time MacMaster produced with her husband, Donnell Leahy, of Irish group Leahy. It's also the first to mainly feature original songs.

"There was no inspiration or reason why I did that, other than that I didn't want it to be a traditional record, and that music I'd been writing for 10 years had built up and circulated into my own live repertoire," MacMaster says.

It does, however, include a duet with Michael McDonald on "Danny Boy" - a traditional tear-jerker that some, MacMaster included, might say has worn out its welcome. "Personally sick" of the song, MacMaster met blue-eyed soul singer McDonald during the taping of a PBS special.

When producers wanted them to perform something together, McDonald suggested "Danny Boy." On the record, he sings his vocals in an atypical three-four-waltz time signature and changes up the chord progressions - alterations MacMaster says gives the song "a brand-new life."

"I'm a huge fan of (McDonald's), and if he suggests anything, it's the right answer," MacMaster says. "Apparently his father sang it to him, so it wasn't 'Danny Boy' for the sake of 'Danny Boy.'"

An untitled tune of MacMaster's that stuck with her was a "sweet, sad" ditty she drew up one day with her guitar player. She says she spent more time mulling a title for the song than any other she'd written.

It was the first song she thought of after getting a call from Kayce Freed, Peter Jennings' widow, to perform at his memorial. MacMaster struck up a friendship with the ABC news anchor after he personally asked her to perform during a New Year's Eve special several years ago.

"The first thing that came to my mind was 'That's going to be Peter's tune,' and I called it 'Farewell to Peter.' That was exactly the title it should have," she says.

Apart from bringing up her new baby, MacMaster will have plenty to keep her busy this year.

A concert DVD is due out, along with another PBS special and book ("Natalie MacMaster's Cape Breton Air," with photographs by Eric Roth). And she's eager to mix classical music with Cape Breton's sound, so that might be next on her diverse docket.

"This is music I've known since I was born," MacMaster says. "It's just ingrained in my fiber. When I hear traditional Cape Breton fiddling, there's no music in the world that affects me like it does. It feels like I'm home no matter where I'm at."

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