



Melissa McClelland learned what she didn't want from touring with Matt Good.

MAGIC MELISSA

LOCAL SINGER TURNS TRICK WITH ONE NIGHT STAND

By SARAH LISS

Melissa McClelland CD release at the Music Gallery (197 John), Tuesday (May 23), 7 pm. \$12. 416-204-1080.

Many emerging singer/songwriters have to purge their teenage demons before they can write their masterpiece.

Take Melissa McClelland. The intricate, fairly tame alt-pop ditties on her last album, *Stranded In Suburbia* (Orange), focused on her formative years in Burlington to create a pleasant, slightly unsettling glance back at teen angst. Her track *Roof-top* even won her a new Canadian tween fan base after it was featured on *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.

McClelland's follow-up, *Thumbelina's One-Night Stand* (Orange), is a staggering leap.

The sweet guitar-pop singer has morphed into a sophisticated song stylist who confidently negotiates jazz, country and gut-bucket blues. The writing has evolved from tentative stories of adolescent malaise into detailed narratives of drunks, drifters and doomed lovers on the streets of Toronto and beyond.

Part of the shift is due to geography. McClelland admits she's a sucker for writing about "personal landscapes" quite concretely, and *Thumbelina* is packed full of references to "creep-filled" College Street, wasted dudes on Queen, apartments that look out over the lake and "cold Canadian punk rock."

Toronto plays itself in technicolour emotions the same way Winnipeg is the main character on the *Weakerthans'* *Left And Leaving*.

But McClelland's imaginary geography exceeds the city limits; some of the finest writing on the album was inspired in transit.

"I wrote *Passenger 24* about a trip I took a couple of years back," she says of the swaggering, roots-raunch opening track. "I was miserable working a day job in Toronto and hating everything. So I quit and flew to California with my guitar strapped on my back and got on the Greyhound.

"The Greyhound is brutal in the States, and that was exactly what I was looking for. There were crazy men preaching, people shooting up – so much sensory overload. It left me with way more road stories."

Those would be road stories about girls "sweet as whiskey" left behind in Orange County and poor dudes sporting hand-drawn cross tattoos.

It's a whole different kind of travelogue than the kind McClelland's collected from a series of peculiar tours. Aside from performing as part of fiancé (and album producer) Luke Doucet's own band on a bunch of dates, McClelland's gone on tour with folks as seemingly opposite as Sarah McLachlan and Matthew Good.

The former tapped McClelland to sing backup during four shows of her *Afterglow* tour after the regular backing vocalist dropped out. McClelland was already hanging out with Doucet (who plays guitar in McLachlan's band), so the invite seemed like a no-brainer.

"I'd seen the show so many times that I already knew the songs, but it was fucking challenging," she groans. "I was hitting these high notes I never would've thought I'd be able to hit without someone kicking me really hard, basically singing opera, and then switching over to really low notes."

Judging from McClelland's vocals on *Thumbelina*, practising with McLachlan (who in turn provides backing vocals on the track *Go Down Matthew*) had an amazing effect on her range and control, though the cushy tour – nice hotels, a private chef and yoga instructors – spoiled her.

Touring with Matthew Good, on the other hand, had its rude awakening moments. Good asked McClelland to open for him on his recent acoustic tour of Canada.

"I really didn't know what to expect, since I wasn't familiar with his music before the tour," she confesses. "We played a pub in Lethbridge the first night, and it was just awful. I'd just flown up from South By Southwest in Austin and arrived in Alberta, not having slept, to torrents of snow. I felt like shit.

"So I drive to this bar and play for a bunch of drunk jocks. Not to stereotype," she quickly adds, "but that's what they were. I walked off and thought, 'Oh man, this is gonna be a long tour.'"

"We ended up playing a lot of theatres, though. I'd never played for such attentive audiences. Put a beer in someone's hand and you have to work way harder to win their attention. That tour made me realize I want to avoid the bar scene."

McClelland plays the relatively jock-free Music Gallery on Tuesday with a full band to launch *Thumbelina's One-Night Stand*.

"We have 20 different people coming on- and offstage, and I don't know how it's gonna be organized, but hell, it's gonna be fun." the end