

A multi-faceted musical persona

Local songstress Melissa McClelland releases eclectic third album

By Kerry Doole

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2006 is shaping up to be quite the milestone year for young Toronto songstress Melissa McClelland. She is about to release a superb third album, *Thumbelina's One Night Stand*, and is in the middle of organizing her wedding to her key creative collaborator, Luke Doucet. As if that's not enough on their plate, the couple is also planning to relocate to Nashville by year's end, Melissa revealed during her recent Tandem interview.

That move is as much for climatic as career reasons (McClelland can't abide our winters), but, thankfully, they both plan to remain active within a Canadian music scene enriched by their presence. Currently, Doucet is the better known name here, as an ace guitarist for the likes of Sarah McLachlan and Oh Susanna, a skilled producer (NQ Arbuckle, Danny Michel) and a recording artist whose latest album, *Broken* (and other rogue states), earned him a Juno nomination.

With any justice, McClelland's profile will increase substantially with *Thumbelina's One Night Stand*. It's a rich and rewarding work that showcases Melissa's pure voice and a poetic songwriting style. It is also very diverse stylistically, ranging from rootsy tracks like "Passenger 24," "Come Home Suzi" and "Taxi Ride", to sophisticated strings-drenched chamber-pop ("Price To Pay") and the Feist-like "Iroquois St. Factory," right through to a bluesy cut featuring Sarah McLachlan ("Go Down Matthew").

Even when pressed, Melissa is unable to come up with a simple definition of her sound conceding, with a chuckle, that "the writing style is all over the map. With this record I thought, 'I really want to make this a cohesive piece of work, stylistically.' That was my goal, and it is completely not! I just don't like writing the same song over and over again. I can't do it. I only get inspired to write when I feel it is something new or different or is challenging me in some different way. In the end, it is my voice that ties it all together, and we tried to keep a lot of the instrumentation consistent."

Backing musicians on *Thumbelina's One Night Stand*, an album recorded at Blue Rodeo's Toronto studio, The Woodshed, include drummer Paul Brennan (Odds), bassist/keyboardist Rick May (Mae Moore), and Blue Rodeo pianist Bob Packwood, while producer Doucet adds characteristically fluent guitar. The guest vocals of McLachlan, Greg Keelor and Jason Rutledge on different tracks further heightens the record's refreshing diversity.

Melissa admits she was warned against mixing her personal and professional life by using Doucet as producer. "People were worried about having us work together, with the label saying 'that's a bad idea' and that whenever they had experience of couples working together it was a disaster. But we did it and we just keep realizing how good we are together professionally. We had only one argument, and it was five minutes before the end of the last session. I think that was just end of record emotional upheaval."

Luke had also manned the console for McClelland's second album, 2004's *Stranded In Suburbia*, but Melissa took a more active role this time out. "I was a lot more involved here, and more outspoken on what I did or didn't want. I am becoming comfortable and confident in the studio now, whereas with the last one I was still trying to figure out how it all works."

The dynamic duo also play guitar in each other's touring bands, wherever possible. Melissa joined Luke for his recent dates in England and Italy, and loved that experience. "I'd only really toured through North America before, and that made me want to go beyond the borders here and do some more exploring around the world. Playing at home, you are not always as well-received as when you leave and you're viewed as a mysterious foreigner coming and playing new music. People tend to react differently, I find. People are very respectful and quiet in Europe. The rooms would be packed and they'd sit there with their beer and listen to every word. You could hear a pin drop in the bars and that doesn't always happen here."

Even though she was ill for most of their visit to Italy, Melissa says "I really fell in love with the place. I can't wait to go back and explore it for real this time!"

Thumbelina's One Night Stand will be released on Orange/Universal on May 23 Melissa McClelland performs at The Music Gallery on May 23.