

“Snowbird”: A Conversation with P.E.I.’s Catherine MacLellan

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Figure 1: Catherine MacLellan (photo by Patrick Nicols)

In January 2012, I sat down with Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.) singer-songwriter Catherine MacLellan to talk about her music and life as a singer-songwriter in Canada. Born and raised in Summerside, P.E.I., MacLellan (b. 1981) has become a prominent figure in Canada’s folk music scene. She has toured with Bruce Cockburn in the U.S., Steve Forbert in the U.K., and performed throughout North America and Europe. She has even shared the stage with Gordon Lightfoot and Gord Downie. With this momentum and numerous accolades over the past few years, it came as little surprise when MacLellan was honoured with this year’s East Coast Music Award for “Folk Recording of the Year” for her critically acclaimed fourth album, *Silhouette*; this album also earned her E.C.M.A. nominations for solo recording of the year and album of the year and five Music P.E.I. Awards earlier this year. And it is obvious why. *Silhouette* captures the quiet elegance, introspection, and delicately crafted lyrics that have become her signature.

This is MacLellan’s first album “that doesn’t have a song written about the loss of [her] father”,¹ legendary singer-songwriter Gene MacLellan (1939–1995), remembered for his songs from the 1970s like “Put your Hand in the Hand”, which was recorded by more than 100 artists, including Elvis Presley, Joan Baez, Bing Crosby (with Count Basie), and the To-

ronto rock group Ocean; “The Call”; and “Snowbird”, a song that launched Anne Murray’s career with her 1970 recording.² Although MacLellan does not refer directly to her father on *Silhouette*, one of the highlights of the album is a stripped-down, spine-tingling cover of Gene’s “Snowbird”, sung as a duet with Canadian icon Jim Cuddy (of Blue Rodeo). The album was produced by David Baxter and also features guest performances by Toronto songstress Jadea Kelly.

In the following excerpts from our interview, Catherine reflects on what inspires her songwriting, stage fright, digital music, and the folk music scene in Canada.

Interview Excerpts

MF: What inspires you to write a song?

CM: You know, it usually starts with a feeling, you know, something kind of intangible. Now that my daughter Isabelle is around, songwriting has changed for me quite a bit. Now it’s like cramped into little bits of time as opposed to, you know, whenever I feel like it. So, you know, if she’s in bed or if she’s at school then I can sit down with my guitar and just, you know, it might be like a particular feeling or a particular experience I’ve had that starts off a song.

Or it can just start with the way a chord sounds that reminds me of something that I'm feeling.

MF: Looking back on your music, how do you feel your more recent songs differ from earlier ones?

CM: I guess perhaps they're more directed at something in particular. I was a bit vague in my earlier songs and now I'm sometimes telling other people's stories, not just my own, and I try to find a good way to do that.

MF: Do you find yourself listening to people and stories in a different way?

CM: Yeah, I think so. I just find people really interesting and I was so scared of people for so long. I was terribly shy. I could barely leave my house. And so now that I'm kind of over that I realise, wow, isn't this great, people are wonderful! And, yeah, you know, I'll get a song out of some story but usually it's someone that's closer to me instead of a random stranger. But sometimes it's a newspaper story. One example is the song "Keep on Fighting" [on the album *Silhouette*], which was partly inspired by my brother-in-law going back to Afghanistan [with] the army. The rest of it was brought about by the endless stories on the news and in the papers about war and its effects on the people living through it, including child soldiers. The cruel atrocities of war brought me to tears on the day I wrote that song.

MF: How has motherhood influenced your song writing?

CM: Well, when Isabelle was really young, old enough to demand but not old enough to really walk yet, she was kind of stuck listening to me play music, so I had to figure out songs that she liked and it turned out she only liked Country & Western songs. So I actually wrote a few for Isabelle at that point. I have thought about doing a children's album, but I'm not sure how good I'd be at it. I've done a few performances for kids and it's been really fun but it's kind of more terrifying than playing for adults.

MF: How so?

CM: I don't know why it is, but I think it comes down to expectations. I think I know what adults expect from me. I know that if they expect something different then they're going to be ok if I don't give them exactly what they want. Adults have more ability to reason, whereas with kids it's just, "That was great" or, "It was boring". Yeah, I think they're just so honest too, kids.

MF: Your lyrics often seem really personal. Do you find it difficult to perform a new song? Or at some

point does it just detach from being such a personal thing to something that you can easily share?

CM: You know, I love hearing and performing them right from the get-go, usually because I'm pretty excited about having a new song, but there is a detachment from the original feeling eventually, after six months or a year of playing that song pretty steadily. It's not that it loses meaning, it's just distanced from the original experience... if it was something hard that I went through, I can sing from a different perspective.

MF: Do you still get nervous before a performance, or does that go away?

CM: It doesn't go away entirely. It's this kind of nervous energy; it's not necessarily a bad thing. I get kind of more excited than I get scared. But every once in a while I'll get into a situation where my knees are shaking. [I think] "I don't know if I can do this."

MF: So, how do you calm your nerves?

CM: I don't, really. I might have designed [a coping strategy] without thinking. Just, generally, even in the scariest moments I just kind of force myself to go out there, and then once I'm out there it's usually not as scary as I thought it was going to be. Sometimes it's the small settings that are the scariest, like if you're doing a house concert and there are 40 people sitting right in front of you and you can see them all. It's more intimidating than sitting or playing on stage for 500 people that you can't make out any of their faces.

One of my best memories, but also the scariest—it was one of those moments like we were talking about where my knees shook through the whole performance and at the end of the day I couldn't believe I actually did it—was the time I played 3 songs in front of Gord Downie and Gordon Lightfoot at a Canadian Hall of Fame event. They were on stage and I had to sing one of Gordon Lightfoot's songs. I was like, "Really?" Of course I couldn't say no, but I knew it would be terrifying—and it was—but it was [also] pretty amazing. The stage was set up as a living room setting, and they were just sitting over there, talking about songwriting, and then I came on and had to sing my three songs, and they were looking at me.

MF: If you could have written any song to date, obviously other than your own, what it would be?

CM: You know, it sounds cheesy because it was my dad's song, but you know, if I could have written "Snowbird"... it's so good, and I've played it a million times and it still doesn't get old. The lyrics never lose their meaning. Off the top of my head that's what I can think of, but there's a thousand songs and

every time I hear them I think, damn, why didn't I write that song?

MF: Can you tell me about your newest album, *Silhouette*?

CM: It was actually recorded in Reg Ballagh's house—my drummer. He lives just about 10 minutes away from me. Actually, before I moved back to P.E.I., I recorded my last record, *Water in the Ground*, at his studio. It's this beautiful place—log cabin with woods all around it, and bunnies...and it's just really lovely and quiet. There's no distractions. I think that's what I like about it: no one has to run to the bank, no one has a meeting. Everyone is just there for the day. That's what I like about it, and we had such a good time the first time recording there that I wanted to try it again...It's a studio, but it's also his home. Basically there's the room with all the gear in it where the engineer sits, and it's basically set up like that all the time. His living room is where we do the recording. That kind of morphs from a living space to a recording space while we're there. It's also where we rehearse for any gigs we've got with the band. A multi-purpose room.

MF: You've lived in Australia, Toronto, and Halifax, and you moved back to P.E.I. fairly recently, in 2008. How have your songwriting and career been influenced by P.E.I.?

CM: Well, P.E.I. is pretty relaxed and it kind of suits me very much. I live in the country and have a really great community of people around me, and I can hide away if I want to and be inundated by community parties if I want to. It's just so peaceful here and it's so easy to get away—I can drive off the island [easily] and play pretty much anywhere from here. There's no reason for me to live somewhere that makes me unhappy, so it's definitely affected my songwriting [in a positive way]. All the gardening that I'm doing out here, and walking in the woods, that kind of rural life has definitely influenced my songs.

MF: Sounds idyllic! You've traveled extensively with your music, all over the world, and you've performed with some of Canada's best known singer-songwriters. In your experience, is there that distinguishes the Canadian song-writing tradition or Canadian songwriters from songwriters elsewhere? Is there something uniquely "Canadian"?

CM: I haven't quite figured it out. There are so many things that are similar [between] Canadian musician songwriters, especially in the folk world. It's such a big country and there are big sections that are more similar than others, but there is something that kind of connects us all, and I'm not sure why. I don't

know if it's the freezing cold winters...As a nation we all—except for Vancouver—have these crazy winters, and you can kind of see in the folk scene that there is a totally different approach to folk music on the west coast as there is on the east coast. And maybe that [has to do with] the winter. They don't get it as hard as we do [on the east coast], so they take this other approach to folk music.

MF: Different approaches?

CM: I don't know if I could explain it, but there's something ... maybe more traditional on the east coast than on the west. They take traditional music and then turn it into something else...[as opposed to] taking the roots of it and building on that. I think that's more what we do here. We take it, and we take it to another place, but you still know where it's coming from. Sometimes on the west coast—it's great too, it's just another take on it.

MF: What's the biggest challenge of being a songwriter or being a professional musician in Canada?

CM: I guess sometimes breaking into other markets seems like...playing music in the States, being a little Canadian girl playing music across the border definitely feels like you've got a lot of work ahead of you and you've got to start even beyond zero. Also just the amount of traveling we have to do to cover all of Canada. It's almost impossible. I think that's one of [the biggest challenges]...just the geographical challenge of being Canadian.

MF: What's the best thing about being a singer-songwriter in Canada?

CM: The flip-side is that even though [Canada is] so big we're not an over-populated country, so there are pockets of musicians in every part of the country that's I've gotten to know really well. So I've got, you know, my family of musicians in Toronto and throughout Ontario, in Montreal, in BC, Saskatchewan. And like, the Prairies is kind of this whole family...not to mention Atlantic Canada! We're so lucky to have such a warm relationship between musicians and I feel really supported by my colleagues, not like it's a competition. I don't have to fight against them.

MF: I read recently that in 2011 digital downloads outsold CDs and other physical media. But on the other hand, there's a report that more vinyl records sold in 2011 than any previous year on record, up something like 71%! As an artist and consumer, what do you think about those stats and how you experience and buy music yourself?

CM: It's kind of exciting, I think, because, for one thing, cassettes and CDs really suck. You know, I get CDs, I sell CDs, and I still love making the artwork

that goes along with CDs, but, really, at the end of the day, if I could buy vinyl and I'll buy vinyl. If I can't buy vinyl, unless I'm in the room seeing the artist, I will generally buy [the album] online—especially if you can get the artwork and the credits too. That's what's important to me: having the music and knowing what went on behind the scene. There's so much waste with CDs, you know, they get scratched so easily. Vinyl seems to me...such a warmer way to listen to music, and the artwork is so much bigger. It's really satisfying.

MF: Do you think that's why there was such an increase in vinyl?

CM: I think people like to have the art work; it's kind of perceived as cool if you're into design. But now you can buy vinyl and have the digital download card in the package with the vinyl, there's no reason not to buy vinyl, unless you don't have a record player.

MF: Do you think digital music will ever completely replace those older formats?

CM: I don't think so. It's the same as the book industry, although [the book industry] is probably going to have a harder time. People want something in their hands that's tangible and I don't think that we'll ever totally let that go. [It might become] a small portion of what happens but, at the end of the day, people still—at least a segment of people—still want that.

MF: As an insider in the East Coast music production realm, have you noticed any recent trends, maybe in new media?

CM: I guess with the internet and stuff there are so many more people putting content online, kind of like we're in this time of excessive content, there's so much...whether it's videos on YouTube or ways to download free songs or bootlegs. Everything is accessible. I can play a song once that I've never played before and suddenly it's on YouTube and people are ... you know, "I never heard the words to that song—where can I buy that song?" It's a really weird time, I think, where everything and everybody is just so accessible. I don't usually think about it [in concert], but later... If I was really upset about something I might ask them to take it down, but generally people want to put up the best version that they have of something. If I break a string or start coughing they're probably not going to put that up. Part of me says "yeah, go for it", let's all be totally accessible, let's just show them the honest truth of what everything is, and then part of me just wants to hide away in the country. I'm kind of figuring out how to do both. There have been some moments I definitely wouldn't want on Youtube!

MF: We're fresh into 2012, so what can we expect from Catherine MacLellan in the next year?

CM: I think that because Chris [Gauthier], my guitarist, and I have been playing so much as a duo, we'd like to explore that on a record, so...given the opportunity and seeing what my record label [True North Records] thinks of that, you know, I might like to present that. I really love what we're doing and would like to for the most part capture that on record.

MF: Do you have a secret shoebox full of songs or bits of songs that you've written?

CM: Yeah, I have endless amounts of songs! It's kind of crazy. Every time I've put out a record there's always been 10 songs that didn't make it. And the songs that didn't even make it to the table between records that are still there in my catalogue of demos and random sheets of paper. They're endless. And I feel that the songs that I'm writing currently are, well, at least I hope they're the best songs that I've written and I feel really strongly about them and I just can't wait to let people hear them.

Make sure to check out Catherine MacLellan's music and tour schedule at: www.catherinemaclellan.com.

To watch MacLellan's music video for "Stealin," visit:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=We1Y03X_9Ts.

Discography

Catherine MacLellan. 2011. *Silhouette*. True North Records. TND544.

_____. 2009. *Water in the Ground*. True North Records. TND528.

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_____. 2004. *Dark Dream Midnight*. Independent.

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Notes

¹Catherine MacLellan, Web blog, July 5, 2012. www.catherinemaclellan.com.

²Betty Nygaard King, "Gene MacLellan". The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada. www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/emc/gene-maclellan.