

## Natalie MacMaster: Capturing And Interpreting The Cape Breton Sound

Meet Natalie MacMaster: wife, mother and virtuoso Cape Breton fiddler.

You know her more as the latter than the former; an electrifying performer whose passionate proficiency on the beloved four-string amplifies the traditional East Coast sound for contemporary times.

It's a signature sound that has resonated with world audiences through 10 albums, multiple gold sales figures and 27 years; numerous Juno and East Coast Music Awards; two honorary degrees (from Niagara University, NY, and Trent University) and an honorary doctorate (St. Thomas University); the Order Of Canada – and a reputation as one of Canada's most captivating performers.

She also has the respect and admiration of the crème de la crème of top-notch musicians: master violinist Mark O'Connor, whose camp MacMaster frequents as a guest instructor; legendary cellist Yo-Yo Ma – who recently invited her to prominently participate as a guest performer on his 2008 holiday-themed album *Songs Of Joy & Peace*; banjo prodigy Béla Fleck; fellow fiddling marvel Alison Krauss; spiritually electrifying superstar guitarist Carlos Santana – the list goes on.

But to Natalie MacMaster, her beloved family now shapes and informs her musicianship as much as the jigs, reels, air, waltzes, strathspeys, marches and traditional folk that feed her spiritual soul.

“Not so much the sound as the delivery,” states MacMaster, who married handsome fiddle phenomenon Donnell Leahy of Leahy in 2002.

“I am a Mom now. I am a wife. Those things are my priorities in life, and I think people get a sense of that – of that part of who I am – through my show.

“But my music itself hasn't changed.”

If anything, family has reinvigorated Natalie MacMaster's commitment to the stage and her audience.

“I like being on stage even more,” she enthuses. “When I appear onstage, that's my departure from Momhood – and I transform into Natalie MacMaster: the entertainer, the fiddler, the performer.

“I relish that now more.”

As do her audiences, who are left clapping, hollering and screaming for more as MacMaster and her band wow them with stylistic diversity as reflected in such top-selling CDs as the Grammy-nominated *My Roots Are Showing*, *Blueprint* and *Yours Truly*.

The applause only increases in excitement when MacMaster incorporates step dancing into her performance.

“I was 16 when I started focusing on the step dancing, and it was kind of a joke at the time,” she recalls. “I was with a bunch of other young musicians and we all played and we all danced. It was a joke at the beginning, but then I began pulling it out of the hat so to speak when I needed to perk up the crowd, and it always did the trick.

“As the years went on, people came to expect it, so I still do a little of that – even when I'm pregnant.”

But it's her majesty with the bow and her intricate technique in making the fiddle sing and championing the Cape Breton tradition that floors her admirers for over 100 shows per year.

“I guess culture and tradition never go out of style,” MacMaster explains. “For my crowds, they've been there for so many years – they just keep building and hanging on.

“I think they've seen me go from a very youthful new sound into a maturity and a confidence through the years.

“I also think they receive whatever it is that I give, not through me trying, but only through the nature of music itself. I always get the sense from them that they deeply understand the unspoken essence of what I do.

“That’s probably a combination of the Cape Breton tradition and a combination of personality and time.”

And she’s not simply sticking to her roots.

“I am a very musical person,” MacMaster declares. “I love music, and I don’t just love Cape Breton fiddling, although it’s my favourite: I love jazz and pop rock and country.

“I grew up listening to Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Def Leppard, AC/DC, Anne Murray -- if I hear something really great, like Bonnie Raitt’s *Luck Of The Draw* and ‘Good Man, Good Woman,’ I want to be a part of it.

“That love spawned a few tunes like ‘Catharsis’ I recorded on *No Boundaries* – my first rock piece – and ‘Flamenco Fling’ on *In My Hands*.

“I heard flamenco guitar playing and I thought it was awesome, and thought I could put a fiddle tune over flamenco rhythms.

“I guess I’ve never felt that because I’m from Cape Breton, that’s all I can do. I’ve always felt like I can play music however I want to play it, although everything is rooted in the tradition of Cape Breton fiddling.”

Born June 13, 1972 to her parents Alex and Minnie MacMaster in Troy, Inverness County, Nova Scotia, Natalie MacMaster’s impressive musical lineage includes a cadre of amazing fiddlers, including her uncle, fiddle prodigy Buddy MacMaster (with whom Natalie recorded the 2005 gem *Traditional Music From Cape Breton Island*); her cousin Andrea Beaton and the late, great Canadian folk icon John Allan Cameron.

However, MacMaster forged her own sound, debuting her fiddling prowess at the age of nine-and-a-half years at a concert in Glendale, Cape Breton. She delivered her first album, *Four On The Floor*, at the age of 16.

“It’s been quite a journey, traveling through many different paths,” says MacMaster, who also holds a Bachelor of Education degree from Nova Scotia Teacher’s College.

“I remember the excitement of me just being able to take what was in your mind and put it out on an instrument, which, when you’re learning, isn’t so easy.

“So when it happens, there’s a great feeling of satisfaction and it keeps you wanting more.”

Her career hasn’t been without its challenges.

“I was incredibly shy on stage until I was in my early-to-mid 20s,” she explains.

“I went through a phase of nerves – where you got better and better and then there was more at stake almost for you, in that you really felt the personal pressure to be as good as you could be.

“It was at a point in time where people were expecting you to be good because you established some sort of familiarity with the crowd. It lasted for a year or so – where I was so nervous going on stage.

“Finally, I said to myself, I can’t continue like this. I’m driving myself crazy. I can’t perform to the best of my ability because these nerves are affecting my bow.

“So I put mind over matter, triumphed and transformed that negative nervous energy into positive nervous energy.

“It made me stronger rather than weaker.”

This strength and confidence has only manifested itself through the years, whether it’s through album such as the gold *Fit As A Fiddle* that marks her fueling tradition or exploring Texas and bluegrass swing, Gaelic singing on the gold *No Boundaries*; a touch of folk rock and new age during the gold *In My Hands*; a contrasting embrace of the modern and old roots on *Live*; or the upcoming new traditional-flavoured album she’ll record for release in the fall of 2009.

It has served Natalie MacMaster on stage, whether performing with The Chieftains, Paul Simon, Faith Hill, Luciano Pavarotti or in front of millions on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, the ABC 2002 New Year's Eve Special and *Good Morning America*.

It has thrilled audiences throughout Europe and North America, especially in her native Canada, enabling MacMaster to passionately perform and promote the universal language of her Cape Breton sound.

And at a youthful 36, her strength and confidence in performing the fiddle continues to drive her passion and hunger to explore her love of music even further – and satisfy her audiences, and herself, in the process.

Which is why Natalie MacMaster is so thankful for her gifted talent.

“I have a gratefulness and an appreciation,” says MacMaster. “I am grateful for the ability to play music to people, for the ability that I have to extract so much from a tune or a melody and the rich feeling I get from it.

“Music has given me another layer and dimension of feeling because it really broadens the soul and really broadens the heart, you know?”

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## **NATALIE MacMASTER MILESTONES AND ACCOLADES**

### **1991**

East Coast Music Award (ECMA) – *Road To The Isle*

### **1993**

ECMA Award – *Fit As A Fiddle*

### **1996**

Signed to Warner Music Canada

### **1997**

Canadian Country Music Awards (CCMA) – Fiddler of the Year

### **1998**

CCMA Award – Fiddler of the Year

### **1999**

Signed to Rounder Records (U.S.)

ECMA Award -- Female Artist of the Year

CCMA Award – Fiddler of the Year

Juno Award – Best Instrumental Recording – *My Roots Are Showing*

Gemini Award – Best Performance or Host in a Variety Program or Series for her duet with Jesse Cook at the 1999 Juno Awards

## **2000**

Juno Award -- Instrumental Album of the Year – *In My Hands*

ECMA Award – Female Artist of the Year

ECMA Award – Roots/Traditional Solo Artist of the Year

Canadian Country Music Award (CCMA) – Vocal/Instrumental Collaboration of the Year – “Get Me Through December” with Alison Krauss

2000 CCMA Music Citation – Fiddler

Grammy Nomination – Best Traditional Folk Recording – *My Roots Are Showing*

Music Industry Association of Nova Scotia (MIANS) Award – Entertainer of the Year

MIANS Award – Female Artist of the Year

## **2001**

ECMA SOCAN Songwriter of the Year Award for Gordie Sampson for “Get Me Through December”

CCMA Award – Roots Artist or Group of the Year

2001 CCMA Music Citation – Fiddler

ECMA Award – Instrumental Artist of the Year

CBC TV Special – *My Roots Are Showing* (repeated on PBS and Bravo in the U.S. in 2002)

Bravo TV Special – *Live At The Rehearsal Hall*

## **2002**

ECMA Award – Entertainer of the Year

CCMA Award – Country Music Program or Special of the Year – *My Roots Are Showing*

## **2003**

ECMA Award – Entertainer of the Year

## **2005**

ECMA Award – Female Artist of the Year

ECMA Award – Roots/Traditional Recording of the Year -- *Blueprint*

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