

Natalie MacMaster: Cape Breton Girl

Through and through, let there be no doubt: expert Juno Award-winning fiddler Natalie MacMaster is a Cape Breton girl.

Lest there be any reservation concerning this declaration, you're invited to check out *Cape Breton Girl*, her 11th and latest collection of jubilant instrumental music that is beloved by audiences worldwide.

"I just wanted to do a straight-ahead, traditional record, and I find that they're becoming less and less common," declares MacMaster, a member of the Order Of Canada, the country's highest civilian honour.

Mission accomplished, as this invigorating collection of toe-tapping jigs, reels and strathspeys is not only a joy to behold, but with titles like "Alex MacMaster's Jig," "My Brother Kevin" and "Stoney Lake Reels" embraces all the values that Natalie holds dear: family, tradition, home and faith.

"Those are the things most important to me," says MacMaster, who is married to fellow fiddler Donnell Leahy and is a mother of four. "I work through my music, to strike a proper balance between life and work wherever possible."

It's her dedicated work ethic that has seen her accomplish so much: professionally, her three-decade career has watched her amass multiple gold albums, two Grammy nominations and one win (for her contribution to Yo-Yo Ma's *Songs Of Joy & Peace*, for which she received "a nice bottle of champagne"); a Juno Award for Best Instrumental Album for *In My Hands*; eight Canadian Country Music Awards, 10 East Coast Music Awards, an honorary doctorate from St. Thomas University and honorary degrees from Niagara University, NY, Trent University and – most recently – the Arts & Letters Award from the Canadian Association of New York.

MacMaster has also established herself as an electrifying performer all over the world, thrilling Carnegie Hall audiences and Massey Hall crowds; captivated radio audiences with multiple appearances on the CBC, *Canada A.M.* and Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*, and warmed TV viewers with guest spots on Christmas specials like *Rita MacNeil's Christmas* and *Holiday Festival On Ice* with Olympic ice skaters Jamie Sale, David Pelletier, Kurt Browning and world champion Jeffrey Buttle.

MacMaster's talents have also been in-demand by her peers, contributing to albums by Ma, The Chieftains; children's entertainer Raffi; banjo prodigy Béla Fleck; fellow fiddling marvel Alison Krauss, with whom Natalie played a duet on Krauss's *A Hundred Miles Or More: A Collection*; Dobro specialist Jerry Douglas, singer Hayley Westenra; former Doobie

Brother and classic R&B interpreter Michael McDonald and, most recently, Thomas Dolby's new album *Map Of The Floating City*.

In turn, such stellar talents as Grammy-winning fiddlers Krauss and Mark O'Connor, "Jesus, Take The Wheel" songwriter Gordie Sampson, Nuevo Flamenco guitarist Jesse Cook, members of The Rankin Family, Edgar Meyer and Alison Brown are just some who have contributed to Natalie's own projects through the years, such is their respect for her musicianship.

More recently, MacMaster's talents have expanded to include author, co-writing and publishing the picturesque 161-page coffee table book Natalie MacMaster's *Cape Breton Aire* with Pulitzer Prize-winning wordsmith Eileen McNamara and featuring Boston-based Eric Roth's breathtaking photography.

"I'm really proud of the book," notes MacMaster, of the work that's available at independent bookstores and on her website, nataliemacmaster.com.

"Eileen did an amazing job and Eric's scenic photos are wonderful. They helped me perfectly capture the Cape Breton I wanted to portray."

But music is as important as home and tradition, 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. Faith is also important. 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," enthuses the mother of four, who gave birth to daughter Julia in January 2011. "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*, and the visually intoxicating DVD *Live in Cape Breton*, featuring Hayley Westenra, Bela Fleck, Donnell Leahy and Buddy MacMaster among others.

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

“I was 16 when I tried step dancing and fiddling at the same 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 watched me grow from a youthful new musician into a mature and confident performer.

“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 personality.”

And she’s not simply sticking to her roots.

“I love music, and I don’t just love Cape Breton fiddling, although it’s my favourite: I love pop, rock, country, classical, jazz, bluegrass, Latin, and so on.

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

“That love spawned a few tunes like ‘Catharsis,’ which 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.

“Being from Cape Breton has never made me feel restricted to playing only that tradition,” MacMaster declares. “I’ve always felt I can be a part of any type of music.

“But certainly, no matter how it comes out, it always has the Cape Breton groove.”