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Defending Lilith Fair

Sarah McLachlan takes on critics of her (recently resurrected) festival BY ELIO IANNACCI

stage

It's hard to believe it's been 11 years since Sarah McLachlan's Lilith Fair wended its way across North America in Birkenstocks and hemp-made scarves. What started as a small songwriters' showcase geared toward celebrating female musicians of the folk and adult-contemporary variety has grown into an internationally renowned festival replete with top-billing pop artists and sold-out crowds. Ever since the event announced a 2010 return last year (the first city stop will be Calgary on June 27), posts on a variety of music websites are debating whether the new Lilith lineup will hold a patchouli-scented candle to the legendary concert series produced from 1997 to 1999.

Selling over 1.5 million tickets (\$10 million was donated to national and local charities), the event was a labour-intensive effort. "People don't know how exhausting it is to put on," McLachlan says over the phone from Vancouver, explaining Lilith's decade-long hiatus. "We were happy to put it up on the shelf once it ended on a high note [in 1999] because it was just so much work. Aside from juggling the [multi-artist] logistics of it, you have to realize that back then, I felt I had to defend it daily," she says. "During many of our press conferences, I remember saying, 'I started a musical festival here, not a political campaign.'"

What McLachlan was defending herself from was the copious amounts of criticism Lilith received (a few mainstream magazines, including *Rolling Stone*, used the words "estrogen-fest" and "feminazis" to describe the crowd). Although proceeds from ticket sales broke records and the bulk of reviews was stellar, McLachlan—who performed at each and every city stop—still took the flak for just about everything connected to Lilith: the charities involved, the lack of shoes worn on stage and the constant use of the other F-word: feminism.

Even now, when McLachlan hears that Italian fashion designer Miuccia Prada recently declared, "Feminism doesn't really exist anymore, does it?" to the *London Times*, the Halifax-born talent's voice shakes. "What world does she live in?" McLachlan asks. "That sounds like a really naive comment. There are so many places on earth where women have no rights and are fifth-class citizens, so I'd be remiss to say feminism is not alive or needed. I don't know how [Prada] can say that. It's not innocent, it's ignorant."

McLachlan is quick to point out that during her tenure at Lilith's helm in the late '90s, she wanted to ensure that equality and inclusion were a big part of Lilith's official mandate.

THE FIRST city stop in 2010 is Calgary on June 27; (below, top) Mansfield, Mass. (1999) and Vancouver (1999)



"There were moments I did feel like I was on a social crusade. Some people thought it was either too feminist or not feminist enough; it either had too many lesbians or not enough lesbians or it was too pro-choice or too this-or-that," she reflects. "But I've realized you can't please everyone and all those debates made me solidify my views even more."

A flip through the book *From Lilith to Lilith Fair*, written by McLachlan's long-time friend Buffy Childerhose, gives a detailed outline of what Lilith's goals were and still are: "to promote a community among female artists and fans." It's a tag line that 27-year-old indie-rock performer St. Vincent (real name Annie Clark) is far from comfortable with. Clark recently told popular music website *Spinner* that she feels musicians participating in Lilith Fair are "hop[ping] aboard the marginalizing train," and insists that the tour "helps perpetuate this idea that what women do in music is acoustic, sincere, sentimental and without edge."

McLachlan, hearing the comment, comes back with: "Has she even heard of Tegan and Sara?"—referring to the Calgary-born alt-rock duo, who happen to be twins, staunch feminists, proud lesbians and two of Lilith's headliners. "We never felt ghettoized before, during or after we played Lilith," says 29-year-old Tegan Quin, while on tour in Toronto to promote her band's latest disc, *Sainthood*. "People who know Tegan and Sara know we are certainly not cursed by Lilith." If anything, Quin reiterates, "Lilith helped us get airplay. There are a million festivals—and we've played most of them—but 90 per cent of the bands on all those bills are still men. Women who are a part of [Lilith] are 100 per cent empowered by it. When 15,000 people a night are coming out to see a bunch of girl acts, there's only one word you can use to describe it: awesome."

The notion that the tour lacked diversity is something McLachlan and her manager and Lilith co-founder, Terry McBride, have wrestled with ever since Lilith was born. Although Queen Latifah, Missy Elliot and Erykah Badu all shared the main stage during a slew of dates in 1998, many people still presume the event to be a sombre, single-white-female folk-fest. "I learned to set the perception differently from the past Liliths this time around because the media did a very good job at skewing it early on," says McBride over the phone from his L.A. office. "That's why my first announcement for [2010's lineup] had to have 40 artists on it. I made sure there wasn't one category

RAPHAEL MAZZUCCO

of music missing from it—Latin, country, rock, dance, indie, pop, heritage and urban.” McLachlan adds, “I would have agreed with [Clark]’s remarks if this was Lilith’s first go round, but it’s not. We are looking to push the envelope now.”

The result of such a push is that the sought-after mix of performers added to this year’s lineup promises the most interesting acts Lilith’s stage has ever seen. The eclectic combo of women includes hit-makers such as Ke\$ha and Rihanna, vintage girl groups like the Go-Go’s and the Bangles and country icon Loretta Lynn alongside R & B innovators Mary J. Blige and Jill Scott.

“I will definitely change the face of this

Scott. “Witnessing where all these women are in their varying levels of age, success and talent is knowledge. To see and hear who’s happy, who’s lonely, who has children and what’s missing in their lives is wisdom. Sisterhood is power.”

Belinda Carlisle of the Go-Go’s wishes Lilith could have happened years ago. “Who knows how much farther the Go-Go’s would have gone if Lilith Fair was around when we first started in the late ’70s?” the 51-year-old asks from her home in France. “Back then, it felt like we were the only girls on stage. A lot of the guys around us were a bunch of sexist, violent, drugged-out punks who threw things at us while we played. We could have developed our musicality a lot quicker if we

able options. As soon as the Lilith team was informed, various charities were dismissed from the running.

It isn’t the first time McLachlan has crossed paths with anti-choice groups. “I remember a bunch of pro-lifers came to a press conference at a past Lilith Fair stop and started giving me s—t about why I allowed Planned Parenthood tables and why they couldn’t get a table,” she recalls. “I just said: it’s my festival and I believe in pro-choice.”

As if all the other pressure wasn’t enough, McLachlan has also timed the relaunch of Lilith with her new CD release. Titled *The Laws of Illusion* (“the title is an oxymoron,” she says), the disc is slated for release on June 15 and is the first collection of freshly penned

ROLLING STONE DESCRIBED THE CROWD AS ‘FEMINAZIS’



SAN FRANCISCO, 1999: Among the performers on stage are Sandra Bernhard, Sheryl Crow, Sarah McLachlan, Bijou Phillips and Beth Orton

concert and I’m glad to be a part of breaking some of its traditions,” says Mary J. Blige from New York. As one of the tour’s biggest headliners, the media-crowned Queen of Hip-Hop Soul is booked to play Lilith’s Montreal and Toronto dates. “I can’t wait to experiment on stage because that’s what I know a lot of singers do at Lilith. People can expect me to sing [Led Zeppelin’s] *Whole Lotta Love* and *Stairway to Heaven* and my hits, too. It’s going to be all-out Mary.”

Blige adds that Lilith’s stage is a place she’ll feel comfortable to express what she calls her “personal politics.” “Women need to be told that they are queens and princesses. It’s our job as leaders in the music industry to be teachers and tell women how they should be treated by men and by themselves. I truly believe that if we save the women, we save the world,” the 39-year-old singer explains. “Listen, if it weren’t for us, there’d be no life. We have wounds, we carry children for nine months, we go through cramps, we suffer through the worst pain that men can’t even imagine. That’s why this concert is so important—if you take away the classroom, nobody’s gonna learn.”

Philadelphia’s 38-year-old Jill Scott agrees with Blige. “When I see Sarah McLachlan sing and chat up Sheryl Crow backstage, of course my own art is going to grow,” says

were able to see how other women played. We were usually seen as competition by male groups—not comrades.”

The only thing that comes close to a competition at Lilith is the inclusion of a digital *American Idol*-esque contest called the Lilith Local Talent Search. For the month of May, local acts from around North America will be able to submit a sample of their best performances for a chance to be on tour with McLachlan and company. This feature isn’t the only newfangled addition to the Lilith legacy. Aside from the occasional Twitter update—which is not written by McLachlan (“I hate Twitter,” she laughs. “It’s banal and turned into a society pager for people with too much time on their hands”), the tour also has a campaign on their Facebook page that allows people to vote on a charity for Lilith to donate to. Recently ticket buyers discovered that a handful of anti-choice organizations were among the charit-

songs she’s recorded since 2003’s *Afterglow*. Although she split from husband and ex-drummer Ashwin Sood last year (the former couple share two daughters), she insists the recordings are not indicative of a divorce album.

“I know everybody is going to go, ‘oh that song is about your ex,’ but you know what? It’s not,” she says. Produced by long-time collaborator Pierre Marchand, *Laws* will address what she refers to as “coming to terms with loss and realizing everything that you thought was true is, in fact, an illusion. I’ve been through a s—t storm and so have some of my friends,” she laughs. “The songs do reflect that.” Dark themes aside, McLachlan swears that no matter what she goes through, she’ll always be a glass-half-full kind of woman. “I’m an eternal optimist with a small degree of cynicism,” she says. “I never want to lose either. One of my favourite lines is: if it doesn’t happen, the world will continue to spin.” M



PERFORMANCE OF THE WEEK... IRISH ANTHEM

A group of 240 musicians performed the Irish national anthem, earning a place in *Guinness World Records* for the most musicians playing the song at once. The recital happened at the Donaghmore-Ashbourne GAA Club, which was packed to the rafters with performers; music notes were projected onto the arena wall so all the performers could read them. Ian Jenkinson, who helped come up with the idea, called it a “wonderful occasion.”