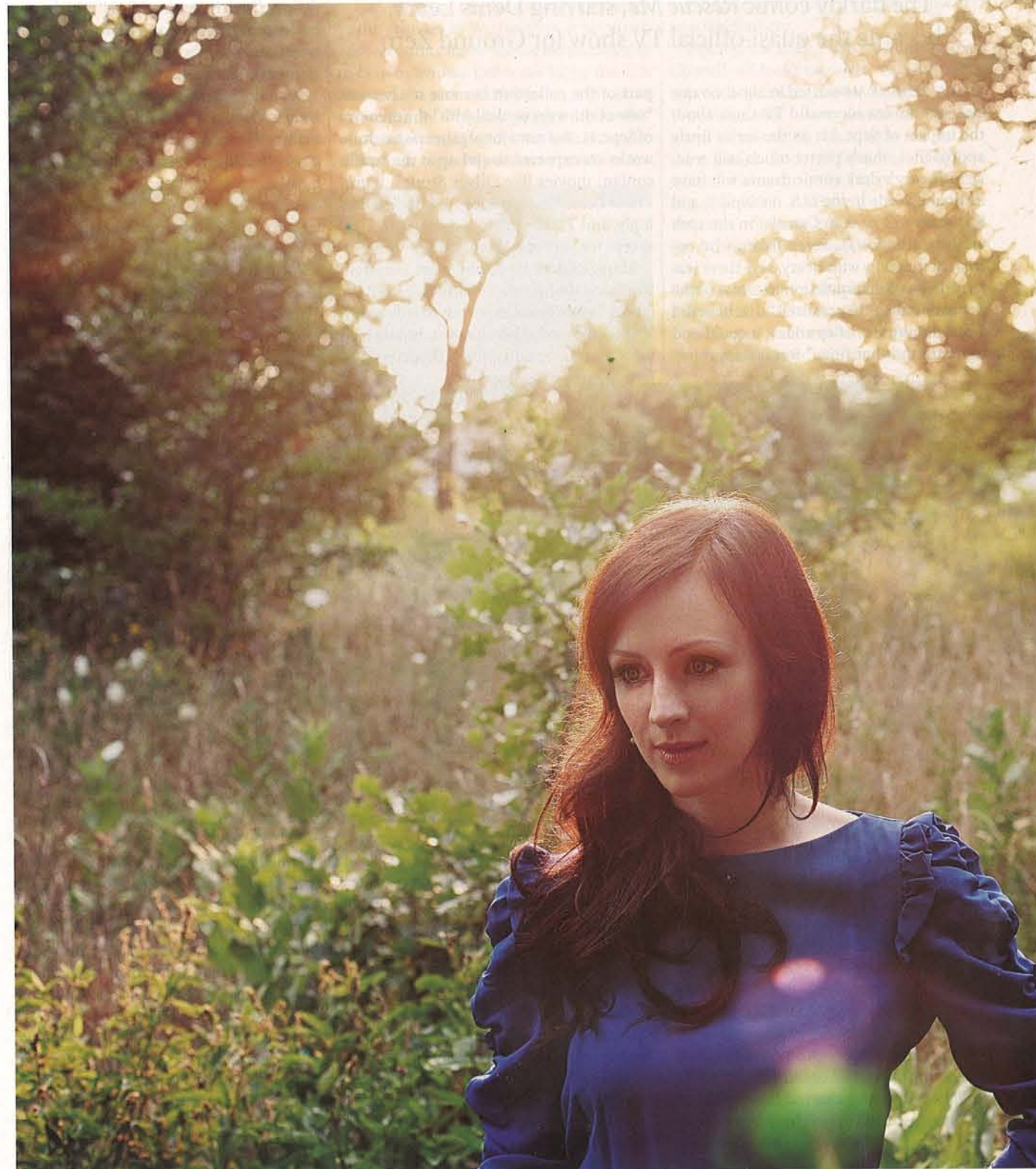


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Music

Sarah's sea change

Sarah Slean closes the crisis chapter of her life with an ambitious new double album that soars

SARAH SLEAN LIVES for her flourishes. After laying down the vocals for a track called *The Cosmic Ballet*—an elaborate cut from her upcoming double album *Land & Sea*—she kicks off her heels and runs over to listen to the playback with a kid-at-Christmas grin. It's evident that the state-of-the-art studio in Toronto's east end where she's working has become Slean's playground. While it is populated by a 23-piece orchestra and a room filled with middle-aged recording experts, everyone remains silent until Slean's ear makes a call. Around the three-minute mark—just when the song hits its string-heavy climax—she turns to the pack of engineers futzing about with buttons and knobs and jubilantly says: "Gentlemen, more bells and whistles, please!"

Think this sounds like a scene straight out of a Judy Garland picture? Slean would be delighted by the thought. In fact, much of the 34-year-old Pickering, Ont., native's inspiration is fuelled by old Hollywood musicals. "If you listen closely to the chords off the soundtracks to those Garland and Hepburn-type movies, you realize the genius at work there," she says, two months later in a café on the other side of town. "On the surface," she explains, the songs in films like *The Sound of Music* and *The Wizard of Oz* "are grand and whimsical, but underneath them, there is this real intensity. I'm attracted to that sense of mastery."

Set for a Sept. 27 release, *Land & Sea* is

chock full of the singer's taste for opulence. "I have dreamed of most of them," she says of the catalogue of songs from her past six albums, including radio favourites such as *Sweet Ones* (from her 2002 disc *Night Bugs*); *Mary* (from 2004's *Day One*) and *Get Home* (from 2008's *The Baroness*). "And I dreamed up most of this new album as well. I just hope the songs come out as vivid as I remember them."

For *Land & Sea*, Slean was dreaming so deeply she felt motivated to craft two albums at once. "It's almost as if two different people were writing two different albums," she says of the song segregation, noting that the title has nothing to do with where the songs were born geographically. "They just come from two different families."

Slean's trek to *Land & Sea* has admittedly come after a few hard knocks.

Although she's been in the business for more than 13 years and come to terms with the fact that her music will most likely never muster Céline Dion-type sales, Slean has also had to contend with being compared to the other Sarahs in the Can-pop market. "I raged against people saying I sounded like Sarah McLachlan or Sarah Harmer. I was also angry people compared me to Tori Amos. The reason I was angry was I was unsure of who I was. Now I have a sense of certainty of what I can make. There is finally no hesitation."

Personally, Slean has also had her share of troubled experiences. "The period of 25



'One True Love': Slean with husband Royal Wood at the 2011 Juno Awards

to 29 was rough for me," Slean reveals. "It was a time in my life where I hated myself. I tried writing about it in *Shadowlands*," she says, referring to a track from her last studio album, *The Baroness*, the lyrics of which touch on issues of anorexia and alcohol abuse. "I was being a complete tyrant. I remember moving to Paris to find myself and having a moment of clarity before coming home where I promised to stop beating myself up. I finally realized if I continued the way I was going, I wouldn't last."

Closing a chapter on what she jokingly refers to as a "twi-sis" (her emotional crisis in her twenties) in *The Baroness*, Slean began writing the grand arrangements and heady lyrics found on *Land & Sea* soon after. Her imagination was given a literary vitamin-B shot from the type of images found in books such as Leo Tolstoy's *Confession*, Tom Harpur's *Water Into Wine* and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. "A lot of *Land & Sea* came from the amount of reading I've done over the past six years," she says, noting she just finished a degree in philosophy and music at the University of Toronto. "My program had me studying neuroscience, Christian mysticism and Buddhist philosophy, as well as reading works which explore the way religion relates to the brain."

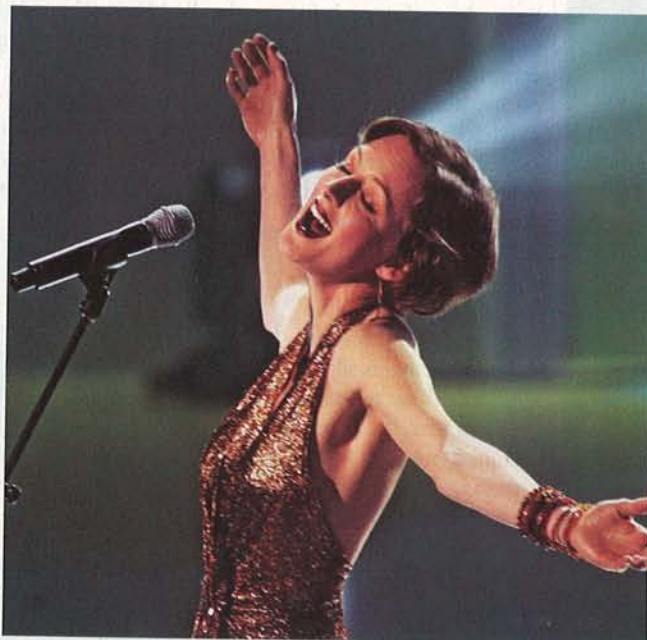
After finishing her degree, Slean promptly focused on *Land & Sea*. The tracks seem to have come together at a pivotal time in her life: Slean was getting used to being a married woman. Having wed pop singer Royal Wood (real name John Royal Wood Nicholson) in 2009, she started fighting doubts once again. "When I first got married, I almost had a spiritual meltdown!" Slean says with a chuckle. "I thought, what have I just done? I've lost everything! The whole story of who I am is centred around being this individual artist! And now what?"

It wasn't long before Slean and her 33-year-old husband both realized the value of being in a relationship with a partner who has a similar occupation. "Although we don't want to be known as a musical couple and we've been trying to keep our lives separate in the press, we trust each other's ears fully," she says. The comfort level is such that Slean asked her husband to co-produce one of the songs on

Land (which she says touches on "our generation's oversharing obsessions"), called *Everybody's on TV*. "It's gotten to the point where [Royal] and I show each other *everything*—masks are always off—and that includes romantic songs about other people. It's uncomfortable, but we have a healthy understanding."

Slean first recognized Wood's boyfriend potential during the recording of a song on her previous disc called *Looking for Someone*. "I invited all these male vocalists to my house because I wanted them as backup voices for the song," she recalls. "One by one they were

'Royal and I show each other everything—and that includes romantic songs about other people'



'Finally no hesitation': Appearing on Slean's new album *Land & Sea* are hand-picked players from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra

coming by and I was wearing pyjamas, zip-up sweater and a ponytail, and then when [Royal] knocked on the door, it was like I saw him for the first time. Not long before this happened, I remember being backstage at the Harbourfront and Royal was playing the same night. I could hear him having a fight with his girlfriend and at the same time I was dealing with an ex who was being a complete tool."

Another creative turning point for Slean was her parting ways with Warner Music, her record company for a decade. Although she maintains that "the label was supportive and not constraining me creatively," Slean admits

to feeling "a real sense of emancipation" from the separation. "Now," she says of the change, "my only focus is making what I hear in my head instead of meeting with a label to discuss making it economically happen for them."

Slean's choice to "go indie" after agreeing to break it off with Warner and signing on with Toronto's Pheromone Recordings did not stop her from going bigger with her sound. One of the first things she did after the label split was choose Toronto's Revolution Recording studios for *Sea*. The spectacularly outfitted brand-new facility was then filled with a hand-picked troop of players from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and two extremely different music producers. For *Land*, Slean sought out Juno-winning rock musician Joel Plaskett to spike the melodies on tracks such as *I Am A Light* and *Girls Hating Girls*.

The latter track, which includes the line "30-something can be one big high school," is Slean's take on adult girlfriend rivalry. "Why do women insist on competing with each other?" she asks. "Why do they have this tendency to want to tear each other down? Sometimes I feel we have such a tall-poppy syndrome, so I wanted to explore this Lordess of the Flies-type pecking order, which happens with some women in their thirties. That rehashing of their morally underdeveloped days in high school is fascinating."

For *Sea*, Slean asked composer Jonathan Goldsmith—known for making soundtracks for films such as *Away From Her* and *Casino Jack*—to co-produce the bulk of her tracks, in hopes of capturing a cinematic soundscape. The result of choosing Goldsmith is best heard on *Sea*'s most poignant track, *The One True Love*, in which sweeping violins adorn Slean's unique view on the subject.

"I don't see [Prince William] and Kate's wedding as romance, just TV. I wish them every happiness but I didn't wake up to watch it. My version of romance would be a quote from Joni Mitchell—'Love is touching souls.' *One True Love* is about the partnership I'm in now with [Royal]," she explains. "For either partner, there is a one true love and it's not the other. Life's love of itself comes first." **ELIO IANNACCI**

NATHAN DENETTE/CP; PREVIOUS SPREAD: DEE DAILY FOR TRESEMME HAIR CARE/AUDINC.COM; PHOTOGRAPH BY JAIME HOGGE, CHRISTIAN LAPID/CP

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