

July 7, 2002

MUSIC

## MUSIC; Natalie Merchant, Accidental Prophet

By BARRY SINGER

PROTEST singer is not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Natalie Merchant. Best known for her diffidently seductive vocals and Earth Mother persona as the lead singer of the alternative rock band 10,000 Maniacs, Ms. Merchant is today a million-selling solo act writing and singing for the most part about love, both its passion and pain.

Her left-of-center politics, while hardly a secret, had rarely figured in her music before "Motherland," her most recent CD, which was released last fall. It is not a relentlessly political album -- a handful of its songs address familiar Merchant subjects. But the rest speak with a fiercely confrontational voice.

"Soon come the day this tinderbox is gonna blow in your face," Ms. Merchant sings on the album's first cut, "This House Is on Fire!" an apocalyptic song delivered over a snaking Arabic string arrangement. "There's a wildfire catching in the whip of the wind that could start a conflagration like there has never been."

These lyrics sound as if they were written in response to the events of Sept. 11. In fact, the recording sessions for "Motherland" were completed days before. "I had already sequenced the album," Ms. Merchant, 38, said recently over tea at a Greenwich Village cafe. "This House Is on Fire!" had already been mastered."

The song has been a mainstay of her world tour to promote the album, which ends on Saturday at Jones Beach on Long Island. Its seeming prescience continues to unnerve her, though.

"The Cassandra syndrome?" Ms. Merchant asked rhetorically. "Oh, yeah. The album was supposed to be about oppression. I wasn't trying to evoke a particular conflict-ridden region of the world. Basically I didn't want the song to sound like a straight reggae tune. Now it just sounds like the soundtrack to the towers coming down."

The album's title song sounds similarly prophetic but far more consoling. "Take one last look behind," Ms. Merchant sings. "Commit this to memory and mind. / Don't miss this wasteland, this terrible place, / When you leave, / Keep your heart off your sleeve."

"A lot of people told me that song made them cry in the weeks after the attack," Ms. Merchant said. "I don't know. I figure the warning signs were there -- there was an inevitability about events. Maybe not

on that scale, but something was bound to happen. I guess I was just more receptive."

Her original concept for the photograph on the album cover was a picture of children in a field wearing oxygen masks. "We shot these kids in upstate New York on Sept 10," she recalled. "And then we were going to reshoot on the 11th. Of course we canceled the session. The day I brought the pictures into the city, there were articles on the run here for Cipro and gas masks. I was getting pressure, anyway, from the record label, friends even, that the image was too controversial. So finally I gave in." A photograph of a demure-looking Ms. Merchant was used instead.

Brian Cohen, a senior vice president for marketing at Elektra Entertainment Group, said the decision to tone down the cover "was not a confrontation, just a discussion."

"The music was never a concern," he continued. "We gave her our input and she made her decision."

"Motherland" began to sell immediately after its release in November, going gold (500,000 copies) in a matter of weeks. While many of Ms. Merchant's previous records had sold in the millions, sales of "Motherland" have been, as Mr. Cohen put it, "in this environment, a great performance."

Ms. Merchant, who was born and still lives in upstate New York, was, in her own words, "a child of the peacenik generation." She has her own explanation for the album's success. "I think a lot of people have been insulted by how quickly the media has reverted to business as usual since 9/11," she said. "I think many were expecting a revolution in the way people behave. They're craving authenticity and seriousness and genuine emotion."

But she sometimes wonders what audiences are actually hearing. The album's third song, "Saint Judas," is an evocation of Southern lynchings.

"When I go through a list of states where lynching occurred the most, people at concerts down South will cheer," she said. "I'm rattling off states that performed atrocities, and when I get to theirs, they go, 'Woo-woo!' "

From Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" to Andy Razaf and Fats Waller's "Black and Blue," political protest has a time-honored place in American popular music, touching nerves and selling records by saying in song things that many Americans have perhaps not wanted to hear.

Ms. Merchant suggests that 9/11 has changed all that, at least for the moment. "It sure doesn't feel safe to be critical anymore," she said. "Unpatriotic? The most patriotic act I can perform is to be outspoken. Maybe we are in a situation where those rights have to be temporarily suspended. I've never been in a country like that, though."

Mr. Cohen is more sanguine. "I don't know that the subject is forbidden at all," he said. "I definitely think there's room for it in pop music; in fact, I hope I'm not just being nostalgic when I say it's coming back."

So is there anything Ms. Merchant would change about her album if she could?

"I'd take out one song, 'Not in This Life,' " she said, referring to a midtempo meditation on love, "because it seems frivolous to me now. And I'd put back a song called 'The End,' which probably would have gotten me in trouble. Part of the lyric goes: 'That'll be the end of war/ the end of the law of Bible, of Koran, Torah.' I really wanted to put it on the record, but I felt there was so much serious material already that I chose something lighter, for balance.

"I don't like to put out albums that don't have hope. But the omission of that song is my only major regret."

Natalie Merchant

Jones Beach, Wantagh, N.Y.

Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

Photo: Natalie Merchant says that in the wake of Sept. 11, "It sure doesn't feel safe to be critical anymore." (Dana Lixenberg)