

Marina Belica

decembergirl

music review and artist reflections

In the run up to the release of Marina Belica's first solo release *decembergirl*, we had the opportunity to exchange several rounds of e-mail with the artist and her management. This latest Musical Discoveries feature integrates an exclusive interview with the artist with our review of *decembergirl* (Decembergirl Records (USA) DCE011, 2000). The first 1000 copies are individually numbered and inscribed by the artist and include 3D glasses to get the full effect of the cover artwork. It is a wonderful EP and raises great interest in a full length album. Of the five tracks, two are penned by Belica alone, one is cowritten with Dana Pomfret, one is an October Project cover and the final track is traditional.

Marina Belica is perhaps the unsung hero of October Project. Her keyboard work and backing vocals added significant texture to the band's sound as evidenced in video footage released by the band during their heyday considered by fans as the holy grail. October Project's albums are still generally available and regularly receive acclaim worldwide to this very day. A comprehensive artist biography is available at Marina's official website.

Marina provides lead and backing vocals as well as some keyboard and piano parts on the EP and is joined by a variety of guest artists: Joy Askew (guitar and backing vocals), Bill Debron (drums), Matt Garrison (bass), Cheryl Ann Futton (harp), Michelle Kinney (cello), Francois Mouttin (bass) John Peckman (drums) Randy Brecker (trumpet), Dave Richards (bass), Jim Thomo (tympani) and Chris Cunningham (guitar, keyboard, computers), Yuri Matveyev (guitar) and Artjon Yakushenko (violin). Backing vocalists also include Dana Pomfret, Deobra Kewallo,

Emil Adler (keyboards, harmonium), Jim Chapdelaine (electric guitar), David Sabitano (guitar), Urbano Sanchez (percussion) and Julie Flanders (backing vocals) guest on a stunning cover of October Project's "Return To Me". Naturally the return of several of the band's original members contributes to the faithful reproduction of the song albeit with Marina's sweeter and more crystalline lead vocal.

We asked Marina to tell us about her background. Her responses were quite revealing, insightful and quite frankly evocative. "While thinking what to tell you about my background," Marina told us, "it suddenly struck me how arbitrary that process is, and that what I exclude might be more interesting or revealing than what I include! What inspired this thought was a timeline that a friend of mine drew recently in celebration of

his 40th birthday, on which he chose to mention only a few noteworthy events in his life. When liberated from their context, the events seemed remarkable, even outrageous. They had no particular relationship to each other than that they had happened to the same person - which is a much different telling of history than attempting to piece together a coherent story. I thought it might be fun to try this approach. Here goes:

Age 4 - I begin learning to play the piano from my mother, an opera singer and pianist who studied at the Vienna Conservatory of Music and sang at the National Theater in Bratislava, Slovakia. I play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" with both hands for show and tell in kindergarten.

Age 7 - A perfect target for the record industry's first blitz of pre-teen pop music, I buy my first Monkees record. I shock my friends by expressing a preference for Peter over Davy. We put pillows on the playroom floor and jump from one to the next while singing "Stepping Stone" like we really mean it.

Age 8 - I am introduced to the Beatles by my older brothers (probably in self-defense against the Monkees). I get a portable four-track player for Christmas with a 4-track of Meet the Beatles. My friends and I sing along to "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" about a dozen times in a row at sleep-over parties and begin to wonder just what this holding hands thing might be about.

Age 10 - My older brother decides to wake my sister and I up one morning by playing Led Zeppelin One's "Whole Lotta Love" on our stereo at FULL VOLUME! His hormones were definitely in a different place than ours. My adrenalin still spikes when I hear that song.

Age 12 - My oldest brother's girlfriend introduces me to Joni Mitchell. I find my first musical idol and wear out my LP of Blue. My mother admits to me that she likes "Garmon & Sifunkel." [sic]

Age 15 - I'm cast as the female lead in my high school's production of Guys & Dolls. Unwittingly, I wear a bright pink bra beneath my white blouse on opening night which is visible under the bright lights. Much to my dismay, the very cute male lead is a senior who can't believe he has been upstaged by a freshman's brassiere.

Age 17 - I play the first movement of Chopin's Piano Concerto #1 in E Minor with my high school orchestra. At a party friends and I turn the stereo up full blast and lie back on the living room carpet to listen to FleetwoodMac's Landslide.

Age 17 - Julie Flanders—future lyricist for October Project—and I are freshman roommates. I meet her high school sweetheart, Emil Adler—future composer for October Project. Visiting Julie on a school break, I discover that we suffered teen angst on exactly the same bedspread. We room together for our entire college career. We also go to our first Bruce Springsteen concert.

College - I perform two solo piano recitals and direct the only coed a cappella singing group, with whom I tour and record my first album. I study piano at the Aspen School of Music, where I also sneak into the local disco at night to dance to "Get Down, Boogie-oogie-oogie" with a French cellist. I audition for a job the next summer as a singing waitress by singing "Over the Rainbow" unaccompanied in a real estate office in Martha's Vineyard. I collaborate with Julie and Emil on our first evening of original music in my senior year.

Soon after college - Julie, Emil and I move to New York and are accepted into a songwriting course at BMI. I begin to study voice. Emil builds his own recording studio. The first recording Julie and I ever sing on together is a song she and Emil write for a Geraldo Rivera television special called "S-E-X."

Between then and the start of October Project - I investigate how it might be possible to make music and to make money at the same time. I consider conducting musicals, writing and singing jingles, and music management. I sing on a Jiffy Pop jingle, go to my first Grammys ceremony, am kissed by Vangelis and tour Japan with Art Garfunkel. I record all four parts of The Roches version of the Hallelujah Chorus at Emil's studio. Five friends come together in that same studio to create October Project, setting out on an unforgettable journey that we share for the next six years.

The time between October Project and now - October Project gives its last performance in the summer of '96. Opening for that tour is Joy Askew, who I discover is a neighbor of mine in Manhattan. We become friends and I join her on stage at her gigs periodically. In 1997, I begin to perform with new friend Julia Macklin's band Molly's Last Word, and in 1998 with another new friend, Dana Pomfret, and her band. I also begin to write my own material.

In 1999, Joy produces a benefit compilation album for Orchard Records entitled Refuge, with royalties going to the Kosova Relief Fund. She invites me to contribute a track, my first as a solo artist, and Julie & Emil write the song. I share a mic with Joe Jackson at the release party for Refuge, open for David Crosby at Tramps with Dana, and sing in Carnegie Hall in January of 2000. I spend the rest of the year preparing and recording my first solo release, *decembergirl*, which is made available for the first time on my website on December 15th."

We asked Marina to tell us who her favourite artists were. After the above discussion, we weren't surprised with her response, "The Beatles, Joni Mitchell, Crosby Stills Nash & Young, Annie Lennox, Sarah McLachlan, anything produced by Mitchell Froom, Beth Orton, Vertical Horizon and so many more."

Decembergirl opens with an original track entitled "When You Go" written very much in the October Project style. We were reminded instantly of "Where You Are" when hearing the song's arrangements and drum part. Marina's voice is delicate yet powerful and it is wonderful to hear her singing lead. "The Wheel" is an upbeat coffeehouse-style track.

Layers of harmony vocals contribute add density in the chorus. Instrumentals are richly arranged but achieve a live sound in the recording.

We asked Marina to elaborate on her musical training, education and the development of her vocal style. "I began studying the piano as soon as I was big enough to get up onto the piano bench myself," Marina told us. "I used to love playing duets with my sister, and we were always encouraged to sing. My mother's singing voice was so beautiful and powerful, however, that I was a bit intimidated and not inclined to follow an operatic path. I credit Norma Garbo, a vocal coach in Manhattan, for teaching me that one's singing voice can be a natural extension of one's speaking voice, and for helping me to find mine."

We asked Marina to comment on the artists that influenced her sound. She told us, "Vocal harmony is one of the great joys of my life, so I have always gravitated toward groups that emphasize it. I have also always appreciated the way that music can open my heart, and have responded to artists that have that knack. After the Beatles, my earliest, strongest influence would have to be Joni Mitchell. More recently, I have great respect for the integrity and emotionality of Sarah McLachlan."

Marina told us about the sequences she goes through when writing her music, the studios she uses and folks that work with her in the recording process. "More often than not, music is what comes to me first. I like to sit down at the piano after having taken some time to be still or meditate, turn on the tape recorder, and improvise. In a few rare instances, music and lyrics have arrived together, nearly complete; occasionally, I have woken up from a dream with music in my head. In any case, I like to record my ideas and listen back to make sure they hold up after repeated listening. The music inevitably suggests a mood and a lyrical theme. I may browse through my journal to see if something I have written relates to the music, or go for a walk and sing the melody to myself until fragments of lyric start to show up. I also really enjoy collaborating, something I did first with Julie Flanders back in college and most recently with Dana Pomfret on "The Wheel," a song that appears on my new CD. Dana and I both like the song so much that she is going to record the lead on her new CD and we plan to record it as a duet, too!

Once music and lyrics have come together, I like to record a piano/vocal demo in a studio which then becomes the template from which I consider the vocal harmonies and instrumental arrangement. For *decembergirl*, I made a conscious choice to work with a number of different producers, as it was my first solo recording and I wanted to experience different approaches to production. What was remarkable was that all four producers are composers and artists, all with their own home studios. When necessary, we went to an outside studio - to record the rhythm section on "When You Go," for example, or the tympani and grand piano on "Come With Me." It was such a pleasure to have their artistic input, and every one of them also contributed tracks either on instruments and/or vocals. It felt like one big circle of friends."

The bluesy ballad "Come With Me" illustrates the evocative sensuality of Marina's voice. The trumpet part is especially notable and carries the instrumental arrangement poised against the cello. A unique arrangement of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is the final track on the EP. It is dominated by vocal layers with only a hint of instrumentation until the bridge where it echoes the theme established by the vocals building to a dramatic climax. Sensitive vocals, violin and guitar conclude the piece.

We asked Marina if she has a career or works outside the music industry. "I have worked as a consultant in music management for the last dozen years or so," Marina added, "a choice I made as it was a strong complement to working as a composer/performer. I got to know the business side of the music business, which has been incredibly informative and useful. I'm also interested in music publishing and have worked with a few colleagues to get their music catalogues in order and get publishing representation overseas. For love, I also started up an unplugged performance series at Gilda's Club in New York."

Marina's on-stage work with October Project was always a treat. She told us, "The idea of an on-stage persona has always been a bit repellent to me, although there are some who carry it to great heights and great effect—Liberace, for example. I suppose it's a matter of personal taste. I much prefer the notion that a performer's on and offstage personas can be seamless and integrated. An artist like Sarah McLachlan was such a pleasure to work with because who you saw onstage was who you got backstage. My goal is to be as real as one can be standing on an elevated stage with amplified sound and lights shining in my eyes. My goal is to connect with the audience, to find common ground, to offer catharsis and a sense that we are not alone. We are connected. There are moments of love, loneliness, suffering and joy that we have all experienced that are different but the same. Music is magic. It can open your heart."

She continued, "I plan to do concerts of my own material on a regular basis for the first time this year. I am sharing the bill with my friend Dana at a Valentine's Day benefit for the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition in Vermont, and we are looking next at dates in Rochester, New York and Hartford, CT in the March/April time period."

We asked Marina about the internet and its influence on her career and the promotion of her music. "The internet has made an enormous difference to artists such as myself, who have been on a major label, developed a fan base, and are now interested in releasing records independently." She continued, "I actually spoke about this at length at a music business panel in New York City last October." Read the transcript at Marina's website.

"My website was designed by one of my college roommates and her husband who have built an impressive web design business in a very short time," Marina added. "I like it and hope my fans and people who have never heard of me will, too. In fact, an impressive number of people who have joined the mailing list at my website are newcomers, i.e., not on any of the other mailing lists I have maintained over the years. Perhaps it's true that if you build it, they will come!"

Marina commented on our interview, "What thought-provoking questions!
I enjoyed the opportunity to explore the topics you raised."

Marina's decembergirl EP provides a wonderful introduction to her plans for a full-length album. It is destined to achieve widespread critical acclaim and worth a cross-country journey, we certainly think it is a must listen!.

Musical Discoveries' interview and review:
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