

Heather McCready: A Songwriter's Sojourn

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Tuesday, 08 February 2011 09:07

I've always dreamed of being a songwriter. It was in my soul. It's who I am. I'm a writer and a musician. I felt like I was going to burst if I didn't begin to express myself.

– Heather McCready



When singer songwriter Heather McCready performs a live show, she shares more than music with her audience.

McCready, who will be at the Crossroads in Winnsboro on Sat., Feb. 26, also talks about her journey with mental illness.

“At every concert, I say, ‘I’m bipolar,’” McCready said during an interview from the Arlington home she shares with her husband, Mark, and two children, Marshall, 15, and Ruthie, 12. “I say it out loud. I just say it as if I’m diabetic.”

During her shows, McCready hopes to “become a soul. I just want to be one soul communicating with another about feelings.”

McCready, 37, and her sister, who is also bipolar, realized there was something wrong after each had children.

“We were what we call post-partum bipolar,” McCready, who was raised in Fort Worth, said with an easy laugh. “I was hospitalized more than one time. Sometimes, it was for mania. Sometimes, it was for depression. It was catastrophically painful. I was out of touch with reality.”

It took shock treatments to stabilize McCready’s condition.

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"I tried medication," she explained. "I gained 100 pounds in one year. I understand why people don't want to take medication. It numbs you."

Mental illness has been a presence in McCready's family for a long time.

"My grandfather was bipolar and had shock treatments, but they didn't tell anybody," she said. "It was hush-hush."

Although her parents were understanding of her condition, McCready says her Aunt Diane, her father's sister, was not so lucky.

"I blame the stigma for her death," she said. "She was also bipolar. She was artistic and brilliant. Her mother [my grandmother] was of the generation where you swept it under the rug. I tried so hard to help her. I wanted her to see that I had gotten well, but she died. A year later, on his 25th birthday, her son committed suicide. It was so tragic."

McCready's friendly demeanor heats up a bit when she talks about the many misconceptions surrounding mental illness.

"I hate it when someone says, 'Just suck it up.' That'll make me cuss and want to run over them. It doesn't mean something's wrong with your character or with you spiritually," she says. "It's an imbalance."

McCready has channeled the family's tragedy and her ongoing journey into something creative. Rather than being resentful of her eccentricities, she has embraced them.

"I've always dreamed of being a songwriter," she said. "It was in my soul. It's who I am. I'm a writer and a musician. I felt like I was going to burst if I didn't begin to express myself."

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With a crystalline voice reminiscent of Emmy Lou Harris, McCready has released three CDs, "Finally Free," "Neverland" and "Give It A Day." She describes her sound as a mixture of Celtic, classical, bluegrass and folk music.



McCready shares co-production on "Give It A Day," released in late 2010, with Milo Deering, a much-sought after Dallas musician and a member of the popular trio Beatlegras.

"I was very impressed with her songwriting and singing," Deering said in an e-mail. "Heather has a very good harmonic sense and understands how tension and resolution can help convey the emotion in a song. We put that to good use as we worked up string and vocal arrangements."

"Milo and I co-wrote on this album, too," explained McCready. "There is so much of a coming together on it. Where Milo's talent starts to fade, mine picks up. Where mine drops off the planet, his picks up. We've made beautiful music together."

In addition to Deering, McCready has a strong roster of talent backing her up in the studio and in live performances.

George Anderson sits in on the upright bass. Anderson graduated from Grand Prairie High School, studied music at the University of North Texas, playing the upright bass in the world-famous UNT One O'Clock Lab Band. He began his professional career as the bassist with the famed Woody Herman Big Band and has played with Ray Charles, Tony Bennett, Marvin Hamlisch, Chuck Berry, Joe Williams, The Coasters, Brook Benton, The Fifth Dimension and Doc Severinsen. His 2003 CD "Faces" was nominated for a Grammy in the Best Contemporary Jazz category.

John Landefeld handles the cello for McCready's band. Landefeld holds a bachelors' of music degree in cello performance from the Eastman School of Music. In addition to appearances with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra and the Dallas Chamber

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Orchestra, Landefeld has performed with musicians from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Milwaukee Symphony. Kade Eckhardt, a Sulphur Springs High School cellist, is one of Landefeld's private students.

Sam Swank, who once served as Olivia Newton-John's guitarist, is a recent addition to the band. Percussion and banjo duties are handled by Bob Gentry.

"I'm very grateful to my band," McCready said. "Everyone's coming to Winnsboro."

When it comes to the end of the day, Heather McCready's living her passion. She's creating music her way, and she's an outspoken advocate for mental illness.

"Through my music, I want to connect with people who need hope," she said. "We're not alone. We can conquer this thing together. I want to make a dent in the stigma that's still out there. It's the driving force that keeps me going when I get low."

Tickets for McCready's show are on sale now at Crossroads Music, 200 Market St. in Winnsboro. They are priced at \$15 for pre-sale, \$18 at the door and \$20 for reserved seating. Call 888-342-1854 or visit their website, www.crossroadsmusiccompany.com, for more information.

This is the 12th in "A Songwriter's Sojourn," a series featuring songwriters from Texas – or with close ties to Texas – who stayed true to their craft, lived up to their gifts and left their mark on the world of music.

For more information on Heather McCready, visit her websites:
www.heathermccreadymusic.com or www.heathermccready.com