

Murray McLauchlan's style may be soothing but never sappy

McLauchlan's style is back-to-basics folk

interview by Neil Hedley

"People are starting to lean towards actual people playing actual instruments," says Murray McLauchlan, "mainly because audiences are getting tired of that electronic shit. Audiences at the Sidetrack Cafe were treated to exactly that the past two nights. In the middle of a tour that will carry him across the country until May, McLauchlan's stage show is far from dazzling: an electric piano, guitar, a pair of microphones, and a stool. The light show is equally simple with one, maybe two spotlights. This is Murray McLauchlan in his element; a simple, back-to-basics approach that has been something of a trademark for the Juno winner.

Normally, sitting at a concert with your ears 12 inches away from the speakers means a raging headache. Not so with McLauchlan, whose style can be almost soothing at times, although he does very few of what he calls "downright sappy love songs . . . I like folk music 'cause it's all I can play!" Although he balks at the use of the term "grass roots" to describe his music, McLauchlan admits that that style is beginning to make a comeback, citing artists such as Los Lobos, Dwight Yoakam and Steve Earle as major forces. But there's still a long way to go. "Country records can get a shitload of (radio) airplay, but the stores don't stock 'em of course, 'cause country records don't sell," he said sarcastically, "even though Steve Earle's new album sold half a million copies in its first three weeks."

Except for a musical version of "The Madrigal" designed to poke fun at poet Ogden Nash, and a version of "Oh The Street Where You Live" that "I just felt like throwing in", all the songs were McLauchlan compositions. Most of his material is personal in nature, and it's been suggested that he writes "too many depressing songs". Examples include "Louisa Can't Feed Another Child" — a song about a woman with 5 children who is raped by her drunken ex-husband, and because she is so poor, has no choice but to visit the doctor, while people carry protest signs out

front. Or "Me and Joey" a decidedly rocky effort that earned McLauchlan a lot of airplay on Top 40 and FM Rock stations about "playing soldier" with a "three foot seven infantry" of childhood friends. "Me and Joey" makes a lot of very strong statements about Vietnam, and war in general. "I'm trying to write stuff in a more positive light" McLauchlan said, for an album that's due out in the early summer. The personal touch in his writing also comes through in the music on the album *Herdes*, which features songs written about people McLauchlan met on a cross-Canada trip. This experience was later made into a CBC film.

Despite some sad songs, Murray McLauchlan is far from depressing, on or off stage. He manages to have a lot of fun with the audience, telling a great number of tales along with his music, intertwining it with hits like "Farmers Song, I'm Best at Loving You", "Down By The Henry Moore", "Whispering Rain" and others. Face to face, his offbeat sense of humor shines. And he is very candid about his success in Canadian music: "I'm not happy with where I am now . . . and I probably never will be happy when I get where I'm going." Then why does he keep doing it? "Everything I do is a learning experience. I'd like to think I'm always learning . . . always getting better." Another reason for his persistence made itself clear at the end of the show. The Tuesday late show ended at 2 a.m. but McLauchlan invited the audience to "stick around . . . we'll probably be jamming a bit later . . . 'cause we really like doing this."

Even momentary sound problems did not take away from the show. It's hard to take anything away from a performer who obviously loves his craft. Success hasn't had any effect on Murray McLauchlan. For instance, I asked him for a photograph to accompany this article, but he doesn't even carry any with him. "That's just one shy of carrying a change machine on your belt," he said. The new album this summer will be a treat to listen to; it's nice to know that McLauchlan's style is one of the few things that'll never change.

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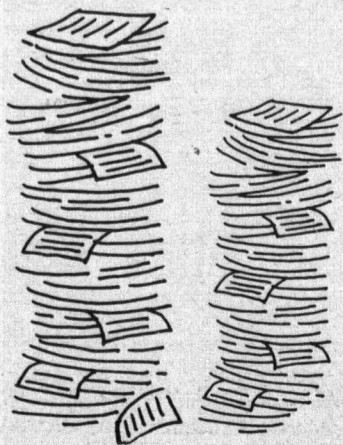
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