



# ARTS & CULTURE

## Reflections on Ember Swift

BY JANET FRENCH

*Ember Swift is an emerging Toronto artist who combines rock and punk with some classical elements and a definite edge. Check out Ember at Reflections on Thursday, November 13, at 8 p.m.*

**Gazette:** Do you come from a musical family environment, or is your pursuit of a musical career a completely unexpected choice?

Ember: I come from a musical family, but not an intensely musical family. My mother is a fantastic singer, she has a beautiful voice. My grandmother on one side and my great-grandfather on the other side are really musically gifted.

**But they aren't musicians by trade?**

No, both my parents are teachers: my mother sings to her students, she teaches primary school. Actually, when my grandmother was young she did perform, she played the violin and she sang, but she was doing it as an aside.

**What made you decide that you wanted to be a musician? Was there some morning you woke up and realized this was what you had to do?**

I don't know. I guess it must have been gradual, because I don't remember the moment. When I started writing music, I was writing for a potential audience. [Although] I was writing for myself, I always pictured myself performing it. I've been performing since I was young, my first time performing as a soloist was when I was ten.

**What's the weirdest experience you've had in your performing career?**

At my release party I had some plastic fruit, because I have this cover song I do called "what do you do with a fruit?" It's a children's song, but it's got a lot of queer references and a lot of sexual references, [even though] it's right off a children's cassette. I threw the fruit into the audience and I asked them to throw it back at me when they heard the name of the fruit. It seemed that everyone got this violent streak and everybody was trying to nail me in the head! It became this big

joke, but I was ducking the fruit, it was bizarre, I expected it to just land on the stage, but *no*, they're aiming right at my noggin.

**What's the one thing you least expected to learn from launching your own musical career and promoting yourself?**

It's always been a lot of work and a lot of time. I least expected the point when it was too much. It's getting to the point where I need to employ someone. I always felt that I could do it all by myself. [Some of the other musicians I work with] have been taking on a lot of the menial administrative tasks, which has helped out incredibly. I least expected having to seek help and now I am at the stage where I absolutely need it.

**What words of wisdom would you give someone trying to launch their own musical career from scratch?**

If someone wants to do something that they truly believe in, then they have to believe in it before anyone else does.

I [learned] that even if there was only one person sitting in the audience it didn't matter because I believed in it and I thought that it was good. [You can't] rely on the opinions of others to make sure that you are doing fine.

**Do you feel that politics has to be a big part of promoting your music? In a past interview you said that you feel you have to participate in politically minded concerts and benefits.**

I think that politics are a part of music because a lot of the time your inspiration comes from what you believe in. I like to do benefits for specific causes because it makes me feel that I can make a contribution. If I can give [my music] to something that I believe in, then that is a satisfying thing personally. I don't think that [politics] has to be a part of music entirely because I think you can sing a song about marshmallows that doesn't have a political edge to it. Yet, I suppose you can pull a political message out of everything. I know that I have a lot of political

messages in my songs and I think this will always be constant because I believe in a lot of things.

**From listening to your music, it is evident that you have a degree of classical training in your background. Do you incorporate classical sound into your music because you enjoy the sound or because it is musically the best way that you know to express yourself?**

I was taught music classically, I took years of piano lessons, but I didn't learn how to write music. I don't know if I write in a classical fashion or if my riffs are classical in root. I think my music is a combination of both [the enjoyment and training of classical and traditional music]. When I started to write music I didn't write from a structure; I just wrote how it felt best to me. Maybe [the way I write] is subconsciously from my classical background, or maybe it is from who I was listening to at the time.

**Where do you get your best inspiration? For instance, in the bathtub, or...**

Actually, I have written a few songs in the shower. Different songs come from different places. Sometimes I think that I really want to write about [a topic] and I bounce around and I write and I pull forth certain lines that I like. Other times I start singing words and in ten minutes I have the framework and the song is done in a day.

**What's your least favourite interview question?**

Everyone says, "you sound like Ani DiFranco. What do you think?" (Exasperated sigh). I think Ani DiFranco is Ani DiFranco, and I'm Ember Swift. I think that we are very different in our song writing and in our style. She has many philosophies that I respect and I probably have them too. The whole independent, hardworking "say-it-like-it-is" and "not working for the man" ideas are held by people in all different areas, not just Ani DiFranco. It's a nice thing to see that progression happens, and I can now pull out crowds that Ani used to pull out; but [I feel] that as soon as you are aggressive you are put in that category with Ani DiFranco and the other "aggressive chicks".

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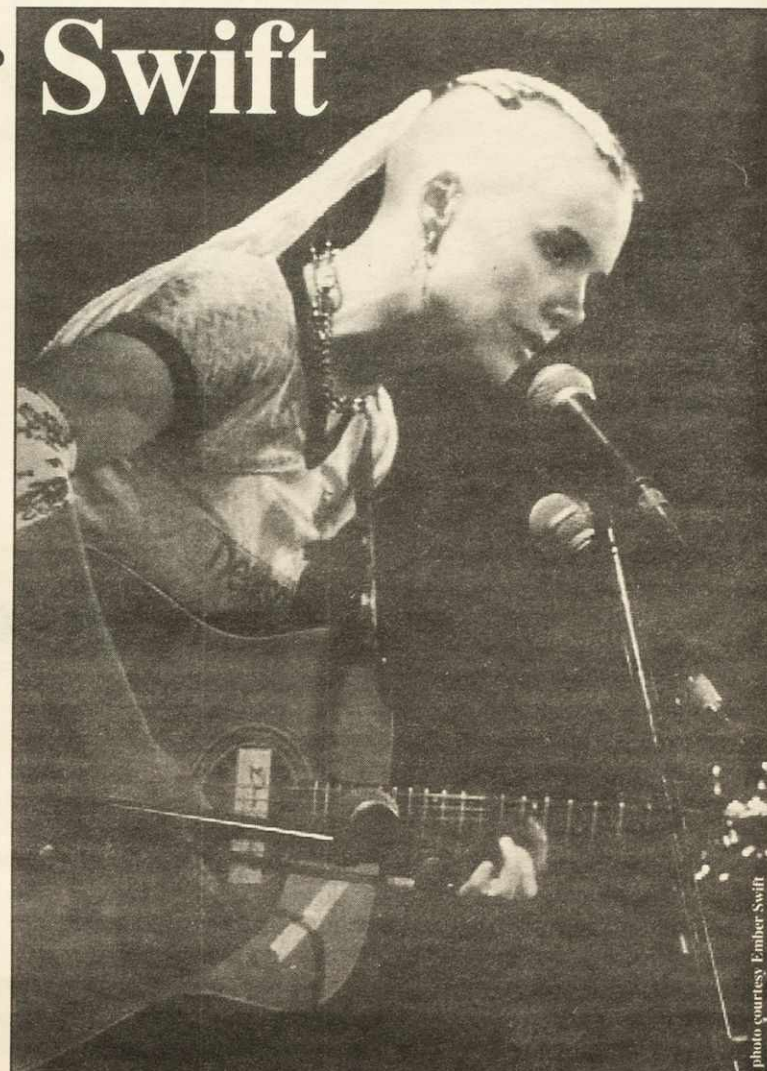


Photo courtesy Ember Swift

## California Dreamin'

BY ANGELA BELTAOS

*Dream a Little Dream*, now playing at Neptune Theatre, is about the popular sixties group the Mamas and the Papas. The play stars co-creator and Halifax native Denny Doherty—the original guitarist and singer for the Mamas and the Papas.

*Dream a Little Dream* is not your average play. It doesn't have much in terms of costumes, acting or sets. It is more like a concert mixed in with a fully detailed story of the Mamas and the Papas.

Doherty stands in front of three large transparent screens, while musicians (The Dream Band) perform from behind the screens. He tells the story through a microphone while pictures of the band (and other related images) are projected on the screens behind him. Quite often, there is a break in the narrative and a song takes over the storytelling.

After seeing this play, one really gets the feeling of what it was like to be a part of The Mamas and the Papas, and life in the sixties in general. Doherty talks of Cass Elliot

and John and Michelle Phillips in detail. It seems that every significant event in the band's history is included in the story—the travelling, the music, the drugs and alcohol, the relationships and their encounters with other famous people.

Doherty adds humour to the story with his exaggerated "nearly true" accounts of certain situations. Sadly though, his jokes about Cass' weight are not in good taste; neither was the audiences' laughter in reaction to these crude comments.

The live music portions of the play are well performed. It's probably the closest thing that this generation will have to seeing The Mamas and the Papas live. Most of the songs are Mamas and Papas tunes, including such hits as "California Dreamin'" and "Monday, Monday". Singers Doris Mason and Janet Munson do not sound exactly like original Mamas Cass and Michelle; however, their voices are close enough for the music to be enjoyable. The men in the band also did a good job with special mention to Richard Burke for his excellent voice and beautiful flute solo in "California Dreamin'".

The play received a standing ovation Friday night from the mostly baby boomer crowd. One grey-haired woman commented, "I feel like dancing in the aisles." Despite the appeal the play has to an older crowd, it can be enjoyed by younger fans as well.

*Dream a Little Dream* is playing at Neptune from November 6 to 30.

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