

Sarah McLachlan

Concert At The Playhouse, Friday, March 20th, 1992

Ah, Sarah. You couldn't help but be taken completely by her music on first listening. I don't care whether you make your music collection out of Pet Shop Boys, Petra or Pink Floyd, classical or country, rap, rockapella or reggae. Even if her floaty harpsichordian operatic ballads and folkish arias aren't your style you will still always be taken with the power, beauty and waiflike strength of her multioctave, trained-yet-spontaneous sultry-to-swiftflight voice. Ms. McLachlan has taken modern musical Canadiana in this throbbing metropolis of Fredericton and turned it on its ear. She is tremendously popular amongst the most diverse of "cliques" and personality types.

Last Friday at the Playhouse, this reviewer looked out into the audience and saw all types of people in the sold-out auditorium: artists, premed students, french fryers, teachers, business executives, flashbacks to the 1970's, flash-forwards to the twenty-first century, and entrenched folk perfectly content with their time and place. All of them were delirious with excitement over seeing Ms. McLachlan perform. Leaning over from my quickly-secured front-row-centre seat (I don't know who decided to use rush seating, but fortunately there were no stampedes), I myself giggled a bit in anticipation.

The lights dimmed and lo...a lone figure, carrying a semi-acoustic guitar, appeared on the stage, charmingly silhouetted. It didn't look like Sarah to me — a little too masculine, a little too long-haired, a little too isolated. A fellow named Stephen Fearing had taken the microphone and was introducing himself. He was the opening act. I was surprised, as was most of the audience. There had been no mention of an opening act. We could only hope that he was almost as good as Sarah.

No one was disappointed. Fearing is an accomplished guitar virtuoso whose like I have never before had the pleasure of hearing; his hands moved rapidly up and down the strings, playing polyphony that would normally require two or more guitarists and a bassists to accomplish. It wasn't electrically charged, either, although sometimes you couldn't tell the difference. He sang self-composed songs (without additional accompaniment for the most part) for forty minutes in a smooth and sensual tenor that could shoot away as many Bryan Adamses and Jon Bon Jovis as you cared to throw at it. The songs themselves, evaluated as a whole, could stir and touch a heart to command tears from the most hollow heart. His performance, ended with a powerful rocker performed with Sarah's long-underwear clad band, made a perfect complement for what was to come. After a short intermission that allowed the doubled-up line of cross-legged women to file quietly in and out of the *ahem* bathroom with the silhouette of Donna Reed on it, everyone resumed their original seats and proceeded to go wild upon hearing the woman who needed (and got) absolutely no introduction.

Ms. McLachlan launched directly into two songs from her current album, *Solace*: "Drawn To The Rhythm" and "Back Door Man." These may not have

been ideal crowd-rousers but they were performed with great verve and power, introducing Sarah as being not just the waif that everyone thinks is "Sinead with hair" (by the way, Sinead HAS hair now) but a tremendously blessed performer in her own right, not to mention an excellent live performer.

Sarah covered mostly material from her current album. Luckily, she did not decide to take the easy way out and just flat-out duplicate her work on the analogue medium; some of the pieces were, at first, completely unrecognizable. For example, introducing herself with a simple comment of "If I were only wearing a fedora and a suit and holding a big stogie, this would make a whole lot more sense," she dove into "Black" and jumped around enthusiastically with it for at least two minutes before anyone really knew what it was. (The song as recorded

is almost impossible to do live with a standard two-guitar/bass/drumset/synthesiser/piano/violin band and would not have been convincing if she'd tried to do a perfect likeness). This, however, in no way detracted from the quality of the performance and actually tended to enhance it.

More obscure songs tended to highlight themselves for this writer. Perhaps MuchMusic has overplayed "Path Of Thorns" or perhaps it's the result of Canadian AOR radio not giving enough exposure to less "accessible" forms of music, but this writer found herself screaming with delight to hear "Home" performed while only applauding madly for the more common hits. Sarah seems to have realized that, while an audience often comes just to hear live versions of what they bop to endlessly over the car stereo or mesmerize themselves with on Dan Gallagher's Video Hits, that's not always what they should hear. However, it would have been nice to hear a performance of her two QUITE obscure instrumental jewels from *Touch* instead of a pure foray into vocalism — instrumental work was unfortunately left off of *Solace*, a choice that should be lamented.

The crowd itself was delighted with some of the more popular songs. "Ben's Song" from *Touch* was greeted most enthusiastically with a solid sixty seconds of frenzied applause. ("Ben's Song" may not be the most popular work Sarah has ever done, but it is probably one of, if not the, best songs she had ever laid upon staffpaper). "Path Of Thorns" — sadly, the only song rendered identically to the original recording — was given a similar accolade. It says something about a Fredericton audience, even one laden with fans of this most unique and individual artist, that more applause was given to the familiar.

Perhaps the high point of the performance was towards the end. "I don't know what the rules of the house are," said Sarah, "but I'd like to see some people up and dancing for these next two." Most of the first few rows were on their feet for the most vibrant and amazing versions of "Steaming" and "Into The Fire" (this artist's personal favorites) ever heard... but I can't really comment on the actual performances; I was not under the influence of any chemical substances but I felt like I was after getting into the music!! Those of us in the dance-lane went mad with the experience — this one in particular rotating her head quite fast in an attempt to let her hair do the talking and incurring a moderately painful case of whiplash during "Steaming." (And I don't dance).

Hilariously, the synth-keyboard player tossed in occasional clips of Madonna, Deee-Lite and C&C Music Factory songs (no one in their right mind would have ever thought they'd ever see Sarah voguing!). As well, Fearing returned onstage, clad only in trenchcoat and footwear, only facing Sarah... But it wasn't over. Sarah was called back twice for encores — the first time around she covered a Chilliwack song and, after much pleading, rendered "Vox" (her most popular song around here, apparently) as never before heard around here. The crowd was still wild — she came back on the second time and performed a very mellow Billie Holliday song that had been banned from American radio because, supposedly, "housewives were committing suicide to it." Four or five young girls (including myself) sat cross-legged on the stage to listen. It didn't calm anyone down afterwards — but at least Sarah left the audience wanting more.

The concert, this author's first experience with mainline rock performances, was almost ideal. The Playhouse was the perfect venue — not too small but not so large that the intimacy of performer-to-audience was lost. No technical glitch was large enough to warrant complaint. I am still ecstatic with the memory of hearing one of God's most nearly-perfect artistic creations sing just four feet away from me.

Come back soon, Sarah. We miss you already....

by *Bar White*

