

HANCHER

Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy: Masters of the Fiddle

Mac Morin piano • **Tim Edey** guitar, accordion

Tuesday, November 12, 2013
Englert Theatre
Hancher
University of Iowa



THE
UNIVERSITY
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ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Natalie MacMaster

Meeet Natalie MacMaster: wife, mother, and virtuoso Cape Breton fiddler. You know her more as the latter than the former; an electrifying performer whose passionate proficiency on the beloved four-string amplifies the traditional East Coast sound for contemporary times.

It's a signature sound that has resonated with world audiences through 10 albums, multiple Gold sales figures, and 27 years; numerous Juno and East Coast Music Awards; two honorary degrees (from Niagara University, N.Y., and Trent University) and an honorary doctorate (St. Thomas University); the Order Of Canada; and a reputation as one of Canada's most captivating performers.

She also has the respect and admiration of the crème de la crème of top-notch musicians: master violinist Mark O'Connor, whose camp MacMaster frequents as a guest instructor; legendary cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who invited her to prominently participate as a guest performer on his 2008 holiday-themed album *Songs Of Joy & Peace*; banjo prodigy Béla Fleck; fellow fiddling marvel Alison Krauss; spiritually electrifying superstar guitarist Carlos Santana - the list goes on.

But to Natalie MacMaster, her beloved family now shapes and informs her musicianship as much as the jigs, reels, air, waltzes, strathspeys, marches, and traditional folk that feed her spiritual soul.

"Not so much the sound as the delivery," states MacMaster, who married handsome fiddle phenomenon Donnell Leahy of Leahy in 2002. "I am a mom now. I am a wife. Those things are my priorities in life, and I think people get a sense of that - of that part of who I am - through my show. But my music itself hasn't changed."

If anything, family has reinvigorated MacMaster's commitment to the stage and her audience.

"I like being on stage even more," she enthuses. "When I appear onstage, that's my departure from Momhood - and I transform into Natalie MacMaster: the entertainer, the fiddler, the performer. I relish that now more."

As do her audiences, who are left clapping, hollering, and screaming for more as MacMaster and her band wow them with stylistic diversity as reflected in such top-selling CDs as the Grammy-nominated *My Roots Are Showing*, *Blueprint*, and *Yours Truly*.

The applause only increases in excitement when MacMaster incorporates step dancing into her performance.

"I was 16 when I started focusing on the step dancing, and it was kind of a joke at the time," she recalls. "I was with a bunch of other young musicians and we all played and we all danced. It was a joke at the beginning, but then I began pulling it out of the hat, so to speak, when I needed to perk up the crowd, and it always did the trick. As the years went on, people came to expect it, so I still do a little of that - even when I'm pregnant."

But it's her majesty with the bow and her intricate technique in making the fiddle sing and championing the Cape Breton tradition that floors her admirers for over 100 shows per year.

"I guess culture and tradition never go out of style," MacMaster explains. "For my crowds, they've been there for so many years - they just keep building and hanging on. I think they've seen me go from a very youthful new sound into a maturity and a confidence through the years. I also think they receive whatever it is that I give, not through me trying, but only through the nature of music itself. I always get the sense from them that they deeply understand the unspoken essence of what I do. That's probably a combination of the Cape Breton tradition and a combination of personality and time."

And she's not simply sticking to her roots.

"I am a very musical person," MacMaster declares. "I love music, and I don't just love Cape Breton fiddling, although it's my favorite. I love jazz and pop, rock and country. I grew up listening to Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Def Leppard, AC/DC, Anne Murray -- if I hear something really great, like Bonnie Raitt's *Luck Of The Draw* and 'Good Man, Good Woman,' I want to be a part of it. That love spawned a few tunes like 'Catharsis' I recorded on *No Boundaries* - my first rock piece - and 'Flamenco Fling' on *In My Hands*. I heard flamenco guitar playing and I thought it was awesome, and thought I could put a fiddle tune over flamenco rhythms. I guess I've never felt that because I'm from Cape Breton, that's all I can do. I've always felt like I can play music however I want to play it, although everything is rooted in the tradition of Cape Breton fiddling."

Born June 13, 1972 to her parents Alex and Minnie MacMaster in Troy, Inverness County, Nova Scotia, MacMaster's impressive musical lineage includes a cadre of amazing fiddlers, including her uncle, fiddle prodigy Buddy MacMaster (with whom Natalie recorded the 2005 gem *Traditional Music From Cape Breton Island*), her cousin Andrea Beaton, and the late, great Canadian folk icon John Allan Cameron.

However, MacMaster forged her own sound, debuting her fiddling prowess at the age of 9-and-a-half at a Glencoe Mills, N.S., square dance. She delivered her first album, *Four On The Floor*, at the age of 16.

“It’s been quite a journey, traveling through many different paths,” says MacMaster, who also holds a Bachelor of Education degree from Nova Scotia Teacher’s College. “I remember the excitement of me just being able to take what was in your mind and put it out on an instrument, which, when you’re learning, isn’t so easy. So when it happens, there’s a great feeling of satisfaction and it keeps you wanting more.”

Her career hasn’t been without its challenges.

“I was incredibly shy on stage until I was in my early-to-mid 20s,” she explains. “I went through a phase of nerves – where you got better and better and then there was more at stake almost for you, in that you really felt the personal pressure to be as good as you could be. It was at a point in time where people were expecting you to be good because you established some sort of familiarity with the crowd. It lasted for a year or so – where I was so nervous going on stage. Finally, I said to myself, I can’t continue like this. I’m driving myself crazy. I can’t perform to the best of my ability because these nerves are affecting my bow. So I put mind over matter, triumphed and transformed that negative nervous energy into positive nervous energy. It made me stronger rather than weaker.”

This strength and confidence has only manifested itself through the years, whether it’s through albums such as the Gold *Fit As A Fiddle* that marks her fueling tradition; exploring Texas and bluegrass swing and Gaelic singing on the Gold *No Boundaries*; a touch of folk rock and new age during the Gold *In My Hands*; a contrasting embrace of the modern and old roots on *Live*; or the traditional-flavored album *Cape Breton Girl*.

It has served MacMaster on stage, whether performing with The Chieftains, Paul Simon, Faith Hill, Luciano Pavarotti, or in front of millions on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*, the ABC 2002 New Year’s Eve Special, and *Good Morning America*. It has thrilled audiences throughout Europe and North America, especially in her native Canada, enabling MacMaster to passionately perform and promote the universal language of her Cape Breton sound.

Her strength and confidence in performing on the fiddle continues to drive her passion and hunger to explore her love of music even further – and satisfy her audiences, and herself, in the process.

All of which is why Natalie MacMaster is so thankful for her talent.

“I have a gratefulness and an appreciation,” says MacMaster. “I am grateful for the ability to play music to people, for the ability that I have to extract so much from a tune or a melody, and the rich feeling I get from it. Music has given me another layer and dimension of feeling because it really broadens the soul and really broadens the heart, you know?”



Donnell Leahy

“**T**he violin sings, but the fiddle dances.”

It may be an old musician’s proverb, but it’s one that fittingly applies to the unique and contemporary style of master fiddler Donnell Leahy.

“Speaking from the perspective of a fellow fiddler, Donnell takes the violin and truly soars,” says Natalie MacMaster, Donnell’s wife and an expert on the bow-and-strings in her own right.

“It is remarkable how he can play with this intense power, but maintain the sweetness and tone of the instrument. He’s absolutely precise and articulate – a must-see to believe.”

Adds record executive Geoff Kulawick: “Donnell Leahy is quite likely the greatest fiddle player in the world right now.”

As leader of Leahy, the Lakefield, Ontario-based eight-piece family outfit that bears his surname, Donnell has helped the band achieve more than half-a-million in combined worldwide CD sales of Leahy, Lakefield, In All Things, and Live; propel them onto the global stage in a highly-praised run as the opening act for Shania Twain’s Come On Over world tour; and earn them multiple Juno Awards – including Best New Group, Best Country Group, and Best Instrumental Album.

Leahy isn’t Donnell’s sole musical concern either: He also performs with his wife, Cape Breton fiddling sensation Natalie MacMaster.

Spending time touring with both families is crucial to Donnell.

“It’s phenomenal to be able to tour with your family,” he explains. “I go out with my brothers and sisters on tour, and my three brothers and me may hang out together on a Tuesday afternoon. I know that other brothers haven’t got that opportunity because they all have separate lives and separate jobs. We really like our family and our group – we’re just best friends. To be able to

hang out like that is amazing.”

And with three young children of their own, it's also important that he devotes meaningful time to Natalie, a situation that can be complex when one spouse is on the road without the other.

“Touring has always been a challenge, and with children there are always a lot of logistics to work out,” he explains. “But we want to be together as a family, and we want to play together. Although Natalie’s style is very different from mine, we love the combination. Everything makes sense for us to tour together.”

There is that third component: the fiddle.

Just as it's impossible for anyone to extract Donnell from his family roots, it's unfathomable to distinguish the self-taught master fiddler from his instrument.

“The fiddle is such an extension of my body,” he admits. “The bow is literally an extension of my arm, and the energy I have in my arm goes into the bow. It expresses my personality, my spirit.”

Not to mention a palate of emotions verbally unspoken, but fervently articulate in his playing.

“I’m not the greatest with words, but on the fiddle, I can tell the whole story passionately,” says Donnell. “If you want to play a sad piece, it’s easy to be sad playing it. I’m aggressive, a quick mover, spirited, athletic and that comes out in my fiddling. I’ve always been willing to take risks and try anything on the fiddle. And I think I’ve learned that you really have to believe what you’re playing.”

Those who watch the mesmerizingly strident, exultant, and high-energy performance from Donnell are quickly converted into believers.

It’s been a lifetime of practice. Exactly how early did the Donnell Leahy story begin?

“Probably when I was in my mother’s womb,” he admits, half-jokingly – especially since Leahy parents Frank and Julie led their own band.

“They would play at local square dances, round dances, and weddings,” Donnell recalls. “Our parents had plenty of house parties and ceilidhs. We witnessed that as kids and it was just natural for us to play.”

Encouraged to start early, Donnell received his first fiddle at 3 years old, and Frank (a fiddle player) and Julie (a pianist, singer, and step dancer) started the lessons.

He credits his parents with teaching him how to hold the instrument.

“It allowed me to shift into all the positions and do things with my bow that one probably wouldn’t be able to do if you didn’t hold it properly.”

Only one year later, Donnell began playing competitively.

“You need a reason to play,” he explains. “You can’t tell your kids just to

practice - you have to get them an audience and have a reason to play. I'd be the 4-year-old playing against the 12-year-olds. I moved up to the older class, although it wasn't about the winning. It was about getting better."

Donnell would practice incessantly on the family beef farm homestead in Lakefield.

"Dad would take me to the field when I was a young lad," Donnell recalls. "He'd be working ground or baling hay and he'd put me under a tree with shade. Every time he came round with the tractor, he'd be able to watch me. Of course, I'd have my fiddle with me. I'd sit there and play the fiddle under the tree. The next time he came around I'd be asleep."

Donnell's competitive streak spurred him on.

He became intimately familiar with the music of New Brunswick fiddling sensation Don Messer, All-Ireland fiddle champion Sean McGuire, Cape Breton master Jerry Holland, Ontario's Graham Townsend, and Quebec's Ti-Jean Carignan, listening to their records and learning each song note for note by ear.

"I was exposed at the right time to all these different styles of music," Donnell notes. "Along the way, I heard a bit of classical and then the magnificent Stephane Grappelli. But my style is Canadian, my own thing."

As family members grew into their instruments, the octet Leahy was formed. And then during a six month residency in Germany, Donnell discovered the music of a young Cape Breton fiddler named Natalie MacMaster and decided they had to meet.

"I met her music first," Donnell recalls. "We were playing in Germany and one of my sisters had a cassette she would play. I asked her about it, found out she was an 18-year-old girl from Cape Breton. When I heard that style being played by a young girl, she tweaked my interest, and I decided I had to meet her. The day after I got home from Germany, I jumped in the car and drove to Cape Breton. I found out she was in Truro at Teacher's College, so I drove there and asked her out for dinner. I said, 'I don't know what you look like. Maybe if you brought your fiddle, I'd know who you were.' We went out for dinner, played some tunes, and the rest is history. As Natalie put it, we dated for two years, broke up for 10, and then got married."

Donnell says performing with his wife complements his studio and performances with Leahy.

"My performances with Natalie and Leahy fulfill me in different ways," admits Donnell. "Both remain career priorities."

And if life isn't busy enough for Donnell, he also continues to help run the annual Leahy Music Camp, co-hosted by MacMaster.

"We decided to hold a music camp in our hometown and invite people to come from around the world and learn the Leahy way," Donnell explains.

No wonder Sir Yehudi Menuhin once described a violinist - or, less formally, a fiddler - as "half tiger, half poet."

Donnell Leahy certainly fits the bill.



MARTHA REDBONE: A Hancher Residency Spread Across the UI Campus

By Erin Donohue, Hancher Education Programming Director

It's not typical for an artist to cry during a visit to Iowa City (we try to take very good care of them, after all). Out of sight, they might shed a tear because they've been laughing too hard at a band member's joke, but never in front of a class of college students.

But when it comes to Martha Redbone, she has such a passion for her Native American heritage and sharing her history with others that she sometimes gets emotional. And it was very powerful to see how her stories affected classrooms of students all around the university.

Martha Redbone had a busy residency at the University of Iowa from September 29 through October 3. Her musical and cultural background made it possible for her to connect with a wide range of classes—she talked to over 600 students during her visit. The band started the week performing as part of the Celebrating Cultural Diversity Festival in Hubbard Park. Martha and her son spent the rest of their afternoon at the festival, eating food, making crafts, dancing to the music, and hanging out with Herky. The band also performed for students in the College Transitions course on Tuesday night at the Iowa Memorial Union, teaching them about the music of Appalachia.

Martha spoke to a number of classes about her personal identity, growing up as a Native American and African American woman. She talked about her struggle to maintain her Native American roots as many of her family members have passed away. Martha has extensive knowledge about a number of different tribes living in the United States and has friends who are a part of these communities. She also spoke about current issues that are changing her hometown in Kentucky including mountain top removal and job losses.

Martha is actively involved with several aid groups including WhyHunger.org. She encouraged students to find topics they are passionate about and to get involved with important causes. In almost every class, she urged students to vote so their

opinions would be heard. Part of her mission is to share with students the stories about her family and the ongoing work that is happening in Native American communities. She was moved to tears when telling students that she often hears that people think all Native Americans are dead. This misconception is why it's important for her to tour with her band and share her stories with different communities. She called it "activism by default," and it's essential to her self-conception. "I'm not willing to give up certain aspects of myself," she said, "so I need to keep my peoples' history alive."

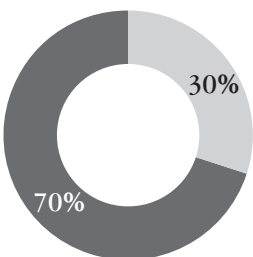
For her most recent album, Martha used poems of the British author William Blake as the text for her songs. It was a natural fit for her to visit an English class that specifically focused on Blake for a semester. The professor invited two UI emeritus professors who edited the Norton Edition of Blake poetry used in the class. Martha was thrilled to meet them and both professors took part in the discussion during the class period. Martha spoke about her process of creating the album—finding a book of Blake poetry one night on her bookshelf and how every poem seemed to inspire a fitting melody. She looked through 150 Blake poems, wrote songs to 25, and 12 songs made it on the album. Many of the themes Blake wrote about are very relevant today including such issues as politics, religion, love, and war.

Martha also met with a couple of music classes about her composition process and creating music. She talked a lot about her time in the music industry as a writer at Warner Brothers and how this experience influenced her career. Arts management students mentioned how inspirational it was to learn about her conscious decision to be an independent artist and manage her own label. It's difficult to be a grassroots musician, but Martha feels it's worth the work because it allows her to make decisions about her message, image, and band members. She ultimately has complete artistic control. Students noted that they loved how genuine and honest she was about her career. Her response to a question about removing herself from a famous manager and a recording contract was fitting: "I don't need to be a star. I'd rather be a moon. Stars fall."

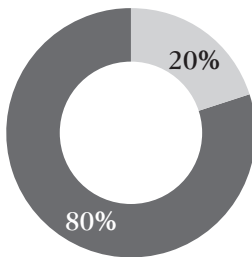
Throughout her visit, it was clear that Martha's music brought to life many of the discussions that are happening in a variety of academic areas. She was thrilled to have the chance to speak with so many college students. She deeply cares about this new generation of students and wants to inspire them to be involved in their communities.

UI students in the College Transitions course attended a special performance by Martha Redbone. Afterward, Hancher surveyed them about their experience.

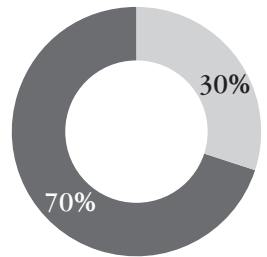
I greatly enjoyed the performance by the Martha Redbone Roots Project.



I learned something about Native American history and cultures.



I have greater empathy for Native American cultures.



■ Agree ■ Neutral or Disagree

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