

Getting in tune

Four performers playing New York in the next week tell of the moment that changed everything **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

Maria McKee: ▶ Early 'December'

The teenage sensation in the '80s band Lone Justice, McKee was building a solo career at Geffen Records when she abruptly brought it all down with the wildly scattered 1996 release "Life Is Sweet." The album effectively ended her major-label career.

"It's a very dangerous path I've chosen," says McKee, who performs at Joe's Pub tomorrow and Tuesday. She's talking from the tiny L.A. apartment — one her grandmother lived in — that McKee shares with her husband and musical partner, Jim Akin.

"I've committed commercial suicide over and over again. And in some cases, critical suicide. Some people really want me to do one kind of music that I did really well when I was young. It's not an easy road, but for me, it's true."

On "Life Is Sweet," McKee was basically telling her fans: Anything can happen, wanna come along? Famous for her country-leaning Americana and a voice with real ache in it, McKee, on her new album, "Late December," tackles the Motown stomp of "No Other Way to Love You" and the husky terrain of the title track, not to mention a yelp at the end of "Destine." "You mean my Axl Rose moment?" laughs McKee about her recorded vocal keen.

McKee seems certain to return to her first love, the theater, soon. She has finished the first draft of a play about her relationship with her brother Bryan MacLean, 18 years her senior, who was in the classic rock group Love be-



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fore burning out, being born again and then living at home while McKee was growing up and luring her from theater to rock 'n' roll. (Two other plays are in various stages as well.)

And she's still reveling in the other turning point of her personal and professional life: meeting Akin, who co-writes, produces, photographs and collaborates with her on everything.

"I had four days to find a bass player. Actually," McKee laughs, "I knew Jim's wife at the time. She really, really wanted to get him to join the band. I think she wanted to get him out of the house because she had a boyfriend. So it worked out for everyone!" ♦ (Joe's Pub, July 23 and 24; 425 Lafayette St., 212-967-7555)

▼ Ann Hampton Callaway Hip to be happy

Callaway recalls her struggles fondly, like when she and her younger sister, Broadway star Liz Callaway, arrived

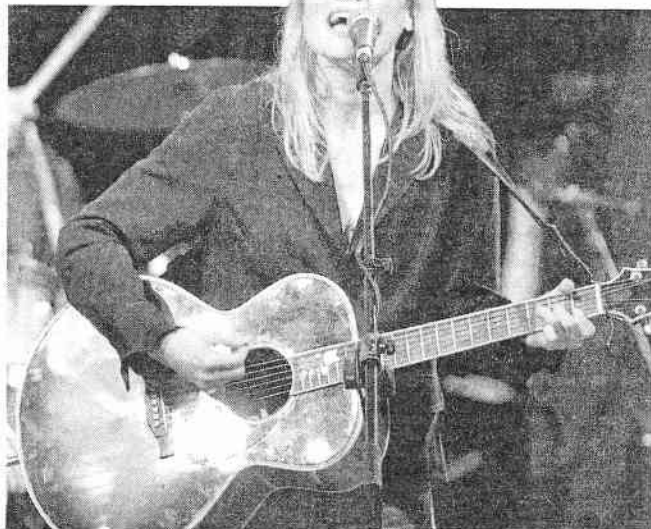


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in the city. "We thought we had a reservation at the Martha Washington Hotel for Women, but they lost the reservation," says Callaway, whose four-night stand at the Blue Note starts Thursday to support her new CD, "Blues in the Night." They ended up at a scary "dive hotel," she recounts good-naturedly.

But with her Tony-nominated turn in 1999's "Swing!" on Broadway, things changed. More change is coming: She's co-writing songs for the upcoming film "State of Affairs," and her next CD will be her first filled with originals. Plus, the night Callaway, 48, opens at the Blue Note, her pilot for a PBS series about the art of singing debuts on TV in her hometown of Chicago.

She says her own art got kick-started when she read Bob Dylan's stream-of-consciousness novel "Tarantula" at age 12. "I guess Bob wrote it quickly," says Callaway drily, "but I thought it was fascinating. [so] I wrote my journal in the same style. See how a kid can be corrupted by musicians? I hope to corrupt the same way." ♦ (The Blue Note, July 26-29; 131 W. Third St., 212-475-8592)



REUTERS

▲ Kelly Willis: Well-traveled

Having kids changes everything. For country artist Willis, it turned going on the road from a job into a chance to escape. She and her husband — singer-songwriter Bruce Robison — take turns watching their four kids and performing in clubs.

"It used to be, whoever was leaving was going out to work and you'd wish 'em luck — now it's the opposite!" Willis says about mixing a big family and performing (she's at Bowery Ballroom Saturday). "Now, whoever's leaving the house is gonna have fun, and you wish the one staying home luck!"

The 38-year-old Willis is having more fun than ever, thanks to a raucous new CD, "Translated From Love," with upbeat originals and covers. The singer-songwriter began as an unhap-

pily prepackaged country act on MCA in 1990. But she sprang to life creatively after joining indie label Rykodisc in 1999 and releasing "What I Deserve."

Then she and Robison took control of their personal lives as well, using in vitro fertilization to conceive a son, and then twins — only to be followed by another child a bit later. Naturally, Willis felt a little swamped.

"At one point, I told Rykodisc I was quitting," says Willis. "Having twins will make you take a second look at every area of your life. But I've got this family I'm so lucky to have, so I don't worry as much. I used to be really nervous all the time and self-conscious and stressing out about [my music]. Now it's just this great gift that I get to do this with my life." ♦

(The Bowery Ballroom, July 28; 6 Delancey St.; 212-260-4700)



▲ Liz McComb: Gospel stew

McComb began singing when she was 3 years old. But the true revelation came when somebody else stopped singing: It was Easter Sunday, and her older sisters went missing right when they were supposed to perform at church. "I will never forget that as long as I live," laughs McComb, who stepped up and sang her heart out and

hasn't stopped since. She plays Central Park SummerStage on Saturday.

The Cleveland-born McComb has since traveled the world with her all-embracing approach to gospel music that includes New Orleans jazz, funk, rap, soul and traditional. Her new CD, "Soul, Peace & Love," mirrors the first time she left the U.S. and found her musical home in Europe.

"I was in my late 20s," she says, "but I was a kid because I'd been under my mom's wing. I had a backpack, I didn't care about clothes or anything, I just wanted to travel and learn."

Travel she did, sharing the stage with legends like Ray Charles and James Brown and making a second home in Paris. It's an amazing path for a woman whose father died when she was young and whose mother was a Pentecostal pastor who, far from strict in terms of influence, encouraged all types of music in their home.

Now she's coming to New York, and she insists, all those years of good living haven't taken spice from her soul.

"I'm not a perfect person," she says. "And I don't try to make people think that I am. I'm a human being. Some days have been good, some have been bad. But God's grace has been around me." ♦ (Central Park SummerStage, July 28; Rumsey Playfield, E. 72nd St.; 212-360-2777)