

The Long Journey Home

Lincoln native returns for album release celebration

By ERIN GIBSON
Senior editor

On Halloween night, folk singer Laurie McClain drove toward home on a winding country road outside Nashville, Tenn.

Her 6-year-old daughter, Sarah, sat next to her, buckled into the same yellow 1985 Toyota Tercel that took the longtime Lincoln resident and family to the country music capital two years ago.

A street lamp had burned out, so the night before them looked as black as the asphalt.

Then the road turned. McClain never saw the 6-foot ditch before her until her wheels hit the roadside gravel, and her car launched into a series of flips.

"I grabbed (Sarah's) head and pulled it into my chest. We were rolling in a ditch. I was calling out her name."

When the car stopped, McClain fumbled around her daughter's body, feeling her all over to make sure she wasn't hurt. Neither was injured, and a man who witnessed the accident called to them in the car.

McClain clung to her daughter.

"We're the luckiest people in the world." That same sense of gratefulness, hope and escape pervades McClain's music and her new album, which she will celebrate with a concert and release party Tuesday at Duggan's Pub, 440 11th St.

The genuine, upbeat nature of her original folk music will surprise listeners who know the moment after the car accident wasn't the only time the singer-songwriter felt "just happy to be alive."

She felt grateful for her life at the end of two abusive marriages, during which she was not allowed to play guitar or sing. She felt grateful for her health when mourning the death of her brother, three other family members and two friends within a few years.

When the memories of her life in Lincoln haunted her, she felt grateful she could pack up and move her life to Nashville with her three daughters, Sarah, 18-year-old Rachel and Anna, 14.

A blizzard held Nashville in a cloud of white the day they rolled in, Jan. 10, 1997. Like her music, she wasn't discouraged.

She went to Nashville for a new start, she said, and to learn from great musicians. She didn't go to find the love, joy and sentimentality that inspired her new recording. She just wanted to make an album.

Almost two years later, she's done it. McClain, who looked upon her first Lincoln audience as a seventh grader on stage at Irving Junior High School, is back in town tonight for a concert and CD-release party for her country-tinged folk album, "The Child Behind My Eyes."

"I really feel good about this record," McClain said. "It's the first time in my life I heard my songs without just my guitar and my voice."

After 8 p.m. at Duggan's Pub, McClain and her guitar will take the stage and perform her music, along with boyfriend and producer Charlie Chadwick on bass, and Lincoln musicians Steve Hanson on banjo, guitar and mandolin while Reynold Peterson mans the drums.

Like her album, McClain's concert will resound with feel-good tunes that reflect a child-like love of living, each song with simple, heartfelt lyrics and instrumentation true to the folk tradition.

McClain said the upbeat songs on this album reflect a promise she made at the end of her third marriage in Lincoln five years ago.

"I said a prayer, and I just wished I could do music for a living."

Though she's not there, yet, she promised to write and sing uplifting songs in return for that granted wish.

One such tune is the often-misunderstood "Let It Go," McClain said. "It's about realizing the people that hurt you are just people that are scared, and if you let go, it will really free up your life."

Though McClain keeps a box full of more than 200 shreds of songs she's written in her lifetime — some with lyrics scratched on napkins and the torn corners of pages — she wrote most songs on her new recording while in Nashville. They're more cheerful than most of her music, and a few show a



PHOTO COURTESY OF RACHEL McCLAIN
FOLK SINGER LAURIE McCLAIN has gone through a lot to finally celebrate a CD-release party, including bad marriages and a last-ditch move to Nashville, Tenn. Now she has returned to her hometown to share her first album, "The Child Behind My Eyes," with her old friends.

Southern country influence appropriate to Tennessee.

One track titled "Lightening Bugs" has a strong banjo twang indicative of bluegrass roots.

Two North Carolina musicians (McClain calls them "real hillbillies") played back-up for the tune.

Please see McCLAIN on 10

Fire code restrictions may end Zoo Bar's tradition

By SARAH BAKER
Senior staff writer

It's more than just a glowing neon-lit beacon of a bar with a few blues singers wailing away inside.

The Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St., has become a historical and cultural mainstay of the Lincoln music scene after more than 25 years of dedication to the artists of the blues.

But now, because of a recent crackdown on fire codes, the bar has not only lost money in the past two months, it has lost many of the renowned acts it used to regularly advertise with pride and singularity.

But the most visible loss is that of the once boisterous crowds that have now become sometimes hesitant and, more often than not, invisible.

Larry Boehmer, owner of the Zoo Bar, said the "crackdown" began Sept. 18 at a Baby Jason and the Spankers show.

Boehmer said the bar received two write-ups for not complying with the code and since then has stuck to the strict rules.

The code calls for a maximum occupancy level in the Zoo of 86 people, allowing for each person to have 15 square feet of space. Before the crackdown, the Zoo regularly packed in crowds of at least 150 people without complaint or police intervention.

"We are contracted with national acts, and we couldn't get rid of those contracts, even though we aren't meeting costs," Boehmer said. "We have lost a sizable amount of money in the past two months."

Boehmer said the bar is still regularly receiving calls from national acts that want to perform at the venue, but because of the money loss, the bar can't afford to pay the bands to play.

As a result, Boehmer said the bar's schedule will experience a shift toward almost all local acts, and it will be most noticeable in the January lineup.

If worse comes to worse, Boehmer may have to consider closing the Zoo Bar's doors.

"I don't know what is going to happen," he said. "Right now, it's all up in the air."

Boehmer said although he wasn't sure what triggered the recent interest in the bar's occupancy, rumors are circulating as to what may have tipped off the fire marshal.

“*(The Zoo Bar) is not competition to anyone except itself. It's an institution. It's not something you should tamper with; you just enjoy it.*”

ANDY FAIRBAIRN
Duffy's Tavern employee

"We are being told that complaints from customers, from other bar owners and from bar employees that our bar was too crowded are what triggered the interest," he said. "We have also heard that a competitive bar sent the police over, not for safety, just as part of mean-spirited business."

Boehmer didn't name any one bar specifically but did say that it was "one of the O Street bars."

"I don't know the motive, and I don't even want to hazard a guess," he said.

Andy Fairbairn, music director at Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St., said he had also heard the rumors of battling bars becoming vindictive.

"It doesn't surprise me," Fairbairn said. "We

don't know who it was, and it doesn't matter. It's still a horrible thing to do."

He added that competition, no matter how stiff, should never come to this level.

"(The Zoo Bar) is not competition to anyone except itself. It's an institution," he said. "It's not something you should tamper with; you just enjoy it."

He added that the loss of the venue would be detrimental to the city as a whole.

"If Larry hadn't done what he did at the Zoo,

we wouldn't be able to do what we do now," he said. "If the city lets (the bar) close, it's going to be an incredible loss. They should never forgive themselves for it if it goes."

But not all bars in downtown Lincoln hold the Zoo, or its situation, in such high esteem.

Shawn Tyrrell, a bar employee at Smickerbockers, 901 O St., said his bar faced the same situation and turned to expansion as a solution.

He added that he didn't think the loss of the Zoo, which may face closing, would be missed as a musical contribution to the city.

"It's been around for so long, it might be missed historically," he said. "For his size,

(Boehmer) does what he can do, but he is limited as to what he can bring in.

"Blues music is hard to get a crowd for," he continued. "He is just known for that and has a built-in crowd."

Tyrrell said he believes the Zoo Bar promotes itself as the only bar in Lincoln that brings in national acts. He added that he disagrees with the statement, calling it "ridiculous."

"For a road house blues club, they do what they do," he said.

He said he had heard about the rumors as well, but said most of the talk is surrounding the "14th Street bars."

"They are battling each other, and since we are a long way away, we aren't involved with it," he said. "It just makes it bad for everybody."

Boehmer said as of now, no decisions concerning the future of the bar have been made.

"If we can get the numbers up, people will come," he said.

Boehmer said the officials were being cooperative when working with the Zoo, and are going to re-measure the bar and re-figure the occupancy limits.

Representatives from the Lincoln Fire Prevention Bureau did not return calls to the Daily Nebraskan on Monday.

Boehmer said expansion is not an option, as the bar is landlocked, and he does not want to move after all the history behind the current location.

But the only thing Boehmer really cares about is keeping the blues in Lincoln, and keeping his doors open.

"I just don't want to offend the powers that be. I'm not trying to tick anyone off or point fingers," he said. "All we know is the end result: that we have lost a lot of money."