

Sylvie Bernard

The hesitant diva

BY ANDRÉE LAURIER

Sylvie Bernard carries enormous responsibilities on her shoulders. Why? Well, because, though this risks sounding extreme, this Quebec singer also carries with her a presence and a charisma that is extremely rare. Like an opera diva, she has a quality that suggests the mythic.

Just as surprising as *Sylvie Bernard's* talent is her attitude towards it—she is sincere, refreshingly so, and yet not quite convinced that she can measure up to the public's expectations of her.

Montrealers have known about *Bernard* for about three years, and the word has spread quickly: This year she was nominated for three Félixes—Quebec industry equivalent of the Juno—even though she hasn't even recorded a single, much less an album.

The reason for this incredible popularity is that no one has seen anything as intense as *Sylvie Bernard* on stage. She creates a show that is at once eclectic and spontaneous, and which pleasantly surprises even the most jaded concert goer. *Bernard's* repertoire includes unknown and forgotten songs she has resurrected as well as some more current tunes and a few of her own compositions. When she sings it's as if any of the



best francophone songwriters—Cabrel, Brel or Barbara—had just written her a song. Her eyes shine, hands stretch out; she interprets the material with a strength and fragility that is at once paradoxical and completely integrated within her. It's like watching a faun in the middle of a cyclone, and it's stunning.

Then, when everything seems altogether too wild, she sits down with her guitar and sings *au naturel*, without a microphone. And she still

projects with untamable force.

Everywhere *Bernard* goes, she leaves a trail of flattering reviews in the Quebec press. Critics talk about a "singer who has no comparison", a "big star", a "force of nature". And not only in Quebec: At the end of September she performed before a stunned audience at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Presently she's doing the rounds of Montreal's many Maisons de la Culture, and

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there's even talk of a tour of the rest of Canada.

To this point in her musical career *Bernard* has chosen to sing in French. But she doesn't want to limit herself, so she has decided that from now on she will simply perform those works—in any language—that attract her attention and pass her rigorous and personal selection criteria.

"I sink my teeth into the songs that I like. I really bite into the words—I've been told so many times to articulate. But it's not always easy to find rhythmic songs in French. . ."

With the help of Pierre Fortier, her manager, *Bernard* leads her career doing what she wants, when she wants. She neither listens to the radio nor watches TV, maintains a distance from world events and has a—probably healthy—quiet fear of the media.

Of course, *Bernard* has appeared on television lately and this is largely due to the efforts of Fortier, whom she now trusts. She has known him for 12 years, and he has continually encouraged her, even pressing her to action when she has needed the push. But Fortier has also learnt that *Bernard* can't be forced to do a concert or an appearance against her will. And it's the same with her material, the choice of songs in a performance and

with all the other details of her career. It's a unique artist-manager relationship that is based on mutual respect, just enough distance and spontaneity. For *Bernard*, things just happen, career plans fall into place day by day. What's really important is maintaining her composure, something that doesn't come too naturally when you have *Bernard's* extreme and passionate temperament.

"In fact, I can't really say that I've ever wanted to be a singer," she explains, "because wanting to do it and being able to do it are two different things. You don't just have to know how to sing, you have to know how to move, talk to journalists, and constantly adapt to what's happening. I'm not always certain that I am able to do that or even that I want to do it!"

"I would have liked to be able to lead a calm and simple life in the country with children and animals. That would be really nice. . . but I sense that I'm not like that. I need to be close to a fire that has just burnt me. Everything for me is a big fire. It's incredible what this career is costing me. The only moment that I'm happy is when I'm singing and when I can shake my public's hand."

And in fact, she does literally shake her public's hand when, after each show, she goes out into the audience, whether it be in a small club

or the National Arts Centre. Some claim that she ruins the end of her show this way, that she should instead do a proper set of encores, but she's indifferent to the criticism. Touching and hugging those that adore her is what nourishes her, more, even, than the thought of a best-selling record.

Bernard is, not surprisingly, ambivalent about the whole subject of recording. She writes, yes, but she doesn't push herself to write—songs come with emotion, when the guitar is at hand. She has lots of material, but won't accept just any song for an album.

"I don't really think that I need a record," she states categorically. "Maybe I'll do one, but I don't really know what it would bring me. After all, a record doesn't give you more talent than you already have."

Sober words from a very alive artist—so alive it's almost scary. And you just know that the media will never do her justice; she doesn't intellectualize, doesn't like talking about her work, just likes to do it, just likes to "be".

Sylvie Bernard is the kind of performer who gives the term "live" a new meanings. Whether or not she has a record out by the spring, she will continue to surprise, charm, upset—and become a major force in Quebec music. CC