

# a LIFE in VERSE



ON THE MOVE: LIANNA'S UPCOMING PERFORMANCES INCLUDE A MAY GIG AT LEESBURG'S TARARA WINERY AS WELL AS SHOWS IN D.C. AND MARYLAND

BY AMY ROGERS NAZAROV

**L**isten carefully to Lianna's catchy pop tunes, and you'll hear snippets of a life tucked among the bridges and choruses.

"From Here" contains assurances of faithfulness to a faraway lover, while "What About Me?," though permeated with self-doubt, ends with a hopeful twist. "The Lie" is a rock-and-roll fable about the pain of owning up to hurting a friend's feelings, while "Beautiful Life" examines what happens when one's assumptions about fame prove illusory.

Sit down with Lianna, who uses only her first name professionally, and she can tell you the backstory for each of these songs. Stemming from her own experiences, they ultimately serve as a way for the singer/songwriter to process life's setbacks and successes. Her fondest wish is that her songs might help listeners do the same.

"I love putting my music out there and having someone connect with me through my songs," says Lianna, a self-taught guitarist who has been playing live music in bars, at clubs and on festival stages for over a decade. "Maybe they'll say, 'Wow, that was exactly the song I needed to hear tonight.'"

A chance encounter in 1999 set in motion a chain of events that ultimately led Lianna to leave her hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina, and head north to the metro Washington area.

A friend from eighth grade, Jonathan Wright, was browsing at a Borders in Raleigh when he stumbled upon Lianna's first CD, *Walk in My Shoes*. He thought the woman on the cover looked like

the Lianna he knew from a church youth group back in Salisbury, North Carolina. After he dropped her an e-mail to say hello, the friendship was reestablished.

Jonathan was about to move to Washington himself, and he encouraged Lianna to consider

advancing her career by trying to break into the thriving D.C. music scene. In the fall of 2002, with the blessing of her then-boyfriend, Lianna headed north, stopping at the DMV en route to affix "FOLOW HRT" vanity plates on her car. Jonathan, between jobs at the time, became her manager.

While he no longer manages Lianna's career, Jonathan is arguably the person who's most closely witnessed her musical evolution.

"She writes [songs] from the heart," he observes. "It is a combination of thoughts and feelings and emotion right out of a diary."

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And, Jonathan continues, "I think she does a better job of embedding the energy and enthusiasm you get from her live performances into [the new CD] than she did with the first album."

Since settling in Arlington, Lianna has fallen in with local musicians, taught music in D.C. public schools to pay the bills, played gigs tirelessly and teamed up with the musicians—Arch Alcantara, Seth Brown and Dave Mehring—with whom she recorded *From Here*.

Lianna learned her first chords as an undergraduate at Western Carolina University and started playing open-microphone nights—or "open mics," at which anyone can get up and play a song or two—at local clubs when she was a senior.

Music later provided sweet relief from the demands of Campbell University's law school, from which Lianna graduated in 1997.

"I was so miserable in graduate school," she says. "That's where music really opened up for me." Every Tuesday, she'd drive 45 minutes to take part in a regular singer/songwriter jam at Raleigh's Berkeley Café. She befriended other regulars, some of whom make an appearance in a song that pays homage to those weekly sessions, "Don't Turn on the Lights."

After completing her J.D., Lianna recorded and released *Walk in My Shoes* the following year. She cringes a bit when discussing her first studio recording, but concedes that it was all part of the path that led to releasing *From Here*.

"I am proud of [*Walk in My Shoes*] for being the type of art I created in the place I was then," she says. But "I didn't understand anything about instrumentation and production, and the essence of who I was got lost."

Creating music from scratch, Lianna says, is one of the most therapeutic things she has ever done; in fact, she calls it "journaling to music."

Songs often percolate for years before they are polished up and performed live, Lianna says. For example, she was unable to finish the verses for "What About Me?"; she deemed it "too whiny" and shelved it. Months later, after she had moved to Northern Virginia to pursue her music career, she was able to fill in the blanks on the song,

adding a hopeful verse about watching the sun set on the Potomac River and the inner contentment that accompanied the view.

Other times, Lianna says, songs pour out in a rush, especially after she's been to a performance by a musician she admires.

"I had been to see [singer/songwriter] Eliot Bronson, and his performance was so endearing and creative," she recalls. "He had played this jazzy little love song. I'd never written a song like that before, so I started fumbling around with [guitar] chords at midnight and stayed up until five a.m."

The result of the marathon writing session was "From Here," which is not only the title track of Lianna's latest CD but an ode to her husband, who still lives in Raleigh where he runs the U.S. subsidiary of an Italian manufacturing company.

Lianna admits that living apart isn't easy on the couple, who married last April. "Bill knows he could say, 'I need you here,' and I would be home like that," she says. "But he loves me freely and supports me completely in my quest" to make a career from music.

Regional bands such as the now-defunct Layman's Daughter out of Charlotte, North Carolina, and national acts like Indigo Girls have inspired Lianna, both with their showmanship and their gifts for combining memorable lyrics and beautiful melodies. But her greatest influence, she says even now, stems from the college pals who'd throw open their dorm-room doors, strum their guitars and, in minutes, draw a crowd.

"Music is this incredible community-builder," says Lianna, who began a tour of the national college circuit last month. To that end, "I would love to be able to create work that is meaningful to me and that can be appreciated by other people."

Lianna performs this month at the Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington and has club dates at Evening Star Café in Alexandria, Austin Grill in Silver Spring and Staccato in Washington (see Calendar for details). For more information, visit [www.liannaonline.com](http://www.liannaonline.com). *e*

ALL FOUR ONE: LIANNA THE BAND IS, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SETH BROWN (DRUMS), LIANNA (VOCALS, GUITAR), ARCH ALCANTARA (GUITAR, VOCALS), DAVE MEHRING (BASS)