

RIFFS

Lianna's faith, hope shine

Ex-Tarheel feels 'blessed'

By Paul Stelter
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

“When people are out on a Friday night . . . they want to hear that kick drum, they want to hear that energy,” says **Lianna**, who brings her twangy folk-rock band of the same name to Bistro Europa in Alexandria tomorrow.

The former Tarheel and part-time lawyer, who uses only her first name in performance, credits her faith for her success so far: “Blessed” is a frequent word as she describes her path from the area around Raleigh, N.C., to the District.

“We went to the Cherry Blossom Festival literally three years ago . . . and I saw the stage set up, a solo acoustic songwriter performing, a beautiful sunny day, and it just hit me — I have to move here,” she says.

A week after she moved here that July, she got a job teaching music in D.C. public schools. Then she went online and searched on “open-mic nights,” and found one at Jammin’ Java in Vienna.

As for why she picked Washington over Nashville and Los Angeles, she alludes to the Washington Area Music Association and its Wammie awards: “The word of WAMA and the Wammies travels quite a bit,” she says, including to Raleigh, N.C. Supportive environments, musical and otherwise, are clearly key for her.

Her husband is in North Carolina, but he’s also throughout the new album “From Here,” Lianna’s first as a real band. (Washington is also there in the form of cherry-blossom and Metro photos.) Those averse to lovey-dovey lyrics should focus instead on Arch Alcantara’s gurgling, chiming guitar work on “Everyday” and Seth Brown’s jazzy brush drumming on the title track.

The album’s tone is relentlessly hopeful, an optimism made even more overt by the emotional vocal support she gets from Mr. Alcantara on songs such as “Better Days,” a track tailor-made for lighter-waving.

“[Faith] is really this overall umbrella to my life,” she says.



Band mates in Lianna are (from left): Seth Brown (drums), Lianna (vocals and guitar), Arch Alcantara (electric guitar and harmony vocals), and Dave Mehring (bass and harmony vocals).

“And yet I have never felt led to write overtly Christian songs. But I think in all of my songs what comes out is hope.”

Lianna can belt it out (“A Little Longer”), but she is strongest on her awesomely pretty self-backing vocals, which give an ethereal folk quality to an otherwise upbeat “Misunderstood.” Her usual voice evokes comparisons to Sheryl Crow.

“I don’t mind” the comparisons, she admits, although she says, “I was a little disappointed to see her live and it was all about the sex,

■ Her usual voice

evokes comparisons to Sheryl Crow.

drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll persona.”

Speaking of live: “At Europa, we have a good time,” she draws. “We get people up and dancing. It’s just a great crowd.” She prefers live gigging to recording because an album “lives forever, and you don’t have anybody’s energy there but your own.”

One song that probably works well live is the honky-tonk weeper “What About Me,” which starts off doubting but (of course) ends optimistically: “Now I’m watching the sunset/And I’m filled with such peace/It disappears in the Potomac/And this is where I should be.”

It’s common for a family to invite you into their living room, but it’s not common for the family to be a band and the living room to be Jammin’ Java,

which is where **Cecilia** the band (aka former locals the Veltz family) returns for a special “living room show” Saturday.

“There’s a mystery snack, gift bags, and we’re gonna give everybody a toast/drink, and it’s a really fun evening,” says singer-guitarist-daughter Laura Veltz from home in New York. “We’ve done three of them in New York; everyone’s gone home happy.”

The independent jam-pop band has long distinguished itself via a mix of Laura’s growly delivery and sister Allison’s classically sweet voice. Laura says she expects that they’ll soon finally have a big-time distribution deal for their first studio-quality album, “This,” but in the meantime, they’re focusing on live shows. They just finished touring with Lisa Loeb, playing nearby at Wolf Trap.

The parents’ 30th wedding anniversary is Tuesday, so expect drummer and dad Ken to sing his funny Mars-Venus ode “You Like Her” to singer-mom Jeannie as the daughters softly coo in the background. The stage will allow a full electric show on one end, and on the other a “living room/rehearsal space type of thing” where the audience can interact in ways beyond (though probably including) yelling for the old Lynyrd Skynyrd standby “Free Bird.”

Cecilia’s live shows tend to be fairly random affairs anyway, as the family members inevitably start goofing on one another and going off on tangents, musical and otherwise. “Cecilia in general is very living-roomy,” Laura says. “The band has always portrayed a lighthearted approach to music.”

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