

All This For Jamestown

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By TIA SWANSON

It's a hot summer night at Darien Lake and three girls in their mid-20s, dressed entirely in black, stand in a long line. They're waiting for tickets. When their turn comes, they step to the window, make their purchase, clasp tickets in hands and turn and scream at each other.

All this for a rock band.

All this for a rock band of considerable fame.

All this for Jamestown's rock band of considerable fame.

All this for the 10,000 Maniacs.

In bassist Steven Gustafson's words, the band's popularity is measured by the fact that "We can draw on our own anywhere up to 8, 9, 10,000 maniacs. ... We're all maniacs. Inside of everyone is a little maniac."

The five "maniacs" that make up the band are captive spirits.

In interviews, personalities, engaging and singular, leap forward.

The Singer

First is singer Natalie Merchant.

Here there is much that nobody else can light a candle to.

In this package a voice of wonder, a musical talent of immense portions, a poet of depth, a mind of conscience, a personality of strength, the coyness of a woman and the movements of a child.

In the words of a jealous 19-year-old, watching her twin, and croon from afar above a sea of several thousand, "She's so darn cute."

Ms. Merchant is more, much more, than cute. In concert, she is at once intimate and reserved, flirtatious and supercilious.

She tells the audience anecdotes from her life, and sings, between Maniac songs, tunes from her childhood or her young adult life. And yet she is always there in the spotlight seeming alone, a cushion of light separating her from other, more mundane, souls.

One isn't sure if her audiences really understand or appreciate what she's all about, or even if she wants them to.

Ultimately it is all beside the point anyway.

The importance in the evening for everybody is the band's music, her lyrics, her voice.

Asked what it is she wants to achieve with her talents, she replies, "I think we've achieved it already. It's moving people with the music that we write."

She says she is looking for music that really affects and infects people with her particular mood — be that joy, elation, introspection, brooding: "some kind of emotional change."

Ms. Merchant, however, also has things to say.

Her greatest satisfaction in the band's success, she says, is that they have proved people are willing and ready to listen to lyrics that the record company initially considered too complex.

"I think the most gratifying part is that now we can be respected by the company ... and now we can do as we please," she says.

What pleases her, apparently, are songs of import; she writes lyrics about child abuse, illiteracy, alcoholism, pollution, the army, war, the lost Kerouac generation.

In fact, the few negative reviews of the band's music have centered around the seeming preachiness of those songs.

Ms. Merchant doesn't agree. "I think I'm pretty lax about being ... dogmatic," she says. "I think the subjects that I might have been a little bit more opinionated about, everyone has to agree with me. ... Everyone shares that opinion."

No one can condone child abuse, she says; it is a problem for all of us.

Ms. Merchant insists, however, that what she is really writing about is love.

The mainstay of rock and roll, the inevitable love song, seems strangely absent in much of the Maniacs music.

"I don't avoid writing traditional man/woman love songs," she says, "I just think there are other things to write about," she said.

Those other things, she says, are kinds of love, be it love for brother, sister, family, children, reading, writing, life.

At Darien Lake, Ms. Merchant sings her kind of love songs. And in the crowd, a girl hugs her boyfriend, looks into his eyes and serenades him.

Not far away, teen-agers raise their fists in jubilation and join in.

And a few steps removed; a young man stands quietly, silently, hands deep in pockets, and mouths the words, every word, only to himself.

"Every time we play now, it's at a different level," Ms. Merchant says. "We're becoming a better group and the audiences ... are more knowledgeable of what we're doing."