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# Claire Lynch Moves to Toronto!

Claire discusses her past, present, future and the move to Canada

**C**laire Lynch has been a mainstay in American Bluegrass since 1977. She is a three-time winner of the International Bluegrass Music Association's Female Vocalist of the Year's honours. She is considered one of the best female voices in Bluegrass. She has put out eleven high quality CD's, the latest being North by South, where she highlights her favourite Canadian songwriters. The members of her Canadian touring band are: Joe Phillips (upright bass, backing vocals), Shane Cook (fiddle), and, Darrin Schott (mandolin, acoustic guitars, backing vocals). These musicians are professionals, stars in their own right, and live within a workable distance from Toronto. I managed to chat with Claire after she returned from an outing at Value Village in Toronto.

By Mike Kirley



**BMAC:** What are your most popular songs?

**Claire:** If Wishes Were Horses, which is a Gretchen Peters' song, and Sweetheart Darlin' of Mine, which is a song I wrote with Pamela Hayes on the Silver and Gold album. Those two have been covered the most by other bluegrass bands.

**BMAC:** The book *Pretty Good for a Girl, Women in Bluegrass*, by Murphy Hicks Henry quotes you as saying your first real mentor was Ginger Boatright, in Alabama.

**Claire:** Yes, when I first joined Hickory

Wind, which later became The Front Porch String Band, Ginger was playing frequently in Birmingham in the band Red White and Bluegrass. She was kind of brassy and funny and played really good Bluegrass, and so I kind of modelled myself at the beginning after her. She was physically in front of me, and I would gawk at her onstage style. They had an independent label album, and Norman Blake was in their band at the beginning. Then they got a major label deal with Capital records. They were a lot bigger name than we were at the time.

**BMAC:** Let's go back to the beginning. You sang with your two sisters growing up I understand.

**Claire:** Yes, we were in Kingston, New York in the Hudson Valley, which by the way has a pretty healthy Bluegrass scene and Association. At the time I knew nothing about Bluegrass and we did gatherings, parties and church, stuff like that. It was strictly amateur but my mother taught the three of us to sing three part harmony. From there we would just improvise three part harmonies sitting in the back of the car on trips. We just sang all the time. We sang Folk songs and Gospel music too, 'cause my parents were involved pretty heavily in church.

**BMAC:** That's a good place for kids to learn.

**Claire:** Sure is.

**BMAC:** I understand you recorded with Linda Ronstadt. Can you tell us how that happened?

**Claire:** Her producer George Massenburg called me and said Linda wanted me to record on her album. I flew to Tucson, and we recorded together. I was singing harmony four feet away from Linda Ronstadt! It was unbelievable.

**BMAC:** What about Emmy Lou?

**Claire:** Yes, I recorded with Emmy Lou Harris. She called me because of John Starling, of The Seldom Scene

and Paul Craft, who was a writer. He wrote "Raised by the Railroad Line". They were buddies in Nashville. John had a long musical relationship with Emmy Lou and Linda too. I'm sure it was through John talking me up that I got to sing with them.

**BMAC:** I understand you recorded with Dolly Parton as well.

**Claire:** I sang harmony on three of her albums: White Limozeen which was one of her more Pop Country albums produced by Ricky Skaggs, and her two Bluegrass albums. I got to tour with her, and that was a wonderful experience. That went on for a couple of years.

**BMAC:** That would have been amazing.

**Claire:** Yes, She had some Bluegrass bluebloods in her band. First it was Sam Bush, and then Chris Thile. And you know, Brian Sutton on guitar and Jim Mills on banjo.

**BMAC:** Wow, that would have been some live entertainment.

Now, I wanted to discuss recording with you as well. Do you figure out the harmonies, arrangements, instrumentals etc. yourself? Or do you let band members become involved too?

**Claire:** Absolutely let them. I've done most of my albums with band members for the most part.

We have what Bruce Springsteen calls a benevolent dictatorship. I have so much respect and appreciation for these people. We got together and we worked up the arrangements. I have really great band members; I've always had really good players with good ideas. It's fun!

**BMAC:** I have a question for you about Linda Ronstadt. I was reading online that she likes recording, but doesn't listen much to her recordings after they are done. Is that true in your case too?

**Claire:** I listen to them a lot through production. I usually get them out two or three years after that. It's fun to listen to them, because you have different opinions of yourself as time goes on. Back then I might be thinking, "That was horrible." Then years later I think, "You know, that really wasn't that horrible."

**BMAC:** You are said by many to be a very soulful singer, do your live performances take a lot out of you?  
**Claire:** Yeah, I would say so. I'm not really what you would call "deadpan". We bluegrassers have that "stoic" approach. I used to be a lot more enthusiastic on stage that I am now. But now that I am working with Canadians...they are so appreciative and responsive. I feel really alive.

**BMAC:** Let's talk songs. Two of my favourites are Between the Two of Them and Barbed Wire Boys. What can you tell me about those songs? Are they autobiographical?

**Claire:** I didn't write those songs. I know how to pick 'em though don't I?

**BMAC:** You sure do.

**Claire:** I usually don't record more than four of my own per album. On Love Light I cut seven of my own. Mickey Newberry wrote "Between the Two of Them". And that song was brought to me by Bill Vorndick, my producer at the time for my album, Friends for a Lifetime. His parents were buried with a monument that had a rose between the two of them. He went berserk over that one, and I really liked it too, so I cut it.

**BMAC:** It reminds me so much of my parents. That's why I love it. Who wrote The Barbed Wire Boys'?

**Claire:** Her name is Susan Werner. This is a true life experience for Susan because she grew up on the plains of Iowa amongst a lot of cattle farmers, and she called them "The Barbed Wire Boys". I didn't grow up with cowboys, but I had a father who fought in World War Two, and there was that sense of giving, duty, sacrifice, and

"She was kind of brassy and funny and played really good Bluegrass, and so I kind of modelled myself at the beginning after her."

"But now that I am working with Canadians...they are so appreciative and responsive. I feel really alive."

building something for others, putting other's happiness before your own kind of thing, you know? I certainly experienced this with my own father so it really rang true for me to sing it.

**BMAC:** Recently you had great success with the song Dear Sister. Tell us about that one.

**Claire:** That was during the Sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War in the United States. It had been 150 years and they took a four year period to perform reenactments and all kinds of performances all over the U.S., North and South. In Nashville, in the Bluegrass community all the songwriters were writing Civil War songs. And so my friend from Alabama Louisa Branscomb came to me and said she had a great idea for a Civil War song, and so we wrote Dear Sister. She had four great great uncles who fought in that war and who all wrote letters home to their sister in Alabama. She saved the letters, put them in a box and a hundred years later Louisa's cousin found the letters when they were going to sell the old home place in Union Springs, Alabama. The letters were so precious to them that they combined them into a book and called it Dear Sister. Louisa and I decided to write the song as one of the letters sent home to the sister. When we got through, we knew it was a really special song. It was just one of those that you go "Wow, this is good." It won song of the year at IBMA!

**BMAC:** It is an amazing song.

**Claire:** The idea of "Dear Sister" is I also wanted to say that the atmosphere in today's society is kind of like another civil war. People are at opposite ends from

each other. I know we are all trying to figure out why that is happening with the internet and Facebook and everything...but I just wanted to put the song on a higher plane, you know.

**BMAC:** I have some questions about Canada. You took up residence here because a fan wrote to you. Then he met you and that was it, right?

**Claire:** Pretty much, he was sending emails to my web girl on my website, who was handling the merchandise, you know? He told her, "You're not charging enough postage to ship to Canada." He went back and forth with emails, and he was already a fan of mine. She brought him to my attention, and I said, "Oh let me handle him." Anyways, we became pen pals, Skype pals, and Skype dating, and then eventually he came to visit me in Tennessee. And that was pretty much it. We dated for about four and a half years.

**BMAC:** You never know when your life is going to change, eh?

**Claire:** Boy you never know.

**BMAC:** Are you working on a project now? I notice you are giving workshops on song writing and singing at Winter Village Music Camp. Can you tell us about this?

**Claire:** Sure, it's in Ithaca New York. It's been on for a few years. It started out with the Winter Village of Bluegrass Festival. It's indoors.

**BMAC:** Who is running it?

**Claire:** His name is Rick Manning. He's a fiddle and mandolin player. The workshops take place on a beautiful resort, La Tourelle, that's like a French country inn. The food's

“The other thing about the music business that I think is really important is that we are really a service industry.”



really good and it's lots of fun. There's a link on my tour site on my web page if people are interested.

**BMAC:** Okay, I want to leave you with a quote you made for the book, “Pretty Good for a Girl, Women in Bluegrass.” I live for the music. I burn for it in my soul. I can't let my soul go, I have to control it.” Is this still true today?

**Claire:** I suppose so. Since then I've had a lot of great things happen to me in my career. I'm at that point where I'm looking back on it now, and thinking all that happened and it's amazing! The creativity part still burns in me. The performance part has been going on for a long time. I'm not burning to get on the road necessarily. I don't think I'll let up on the music and the creativity until I'm just not able to anymore I guess.

**BMAC:** What advice would you give to a young woman who wants to sing Bluegrass today?

**Claire:** Find some players and get out

there and do it. The only way to get known is to be seen. Get in a band and play. Play live. You will learn how to perform on stage, and you will soon learn what you do that pleases an audience, and what you do that leaves them indifferent. And you capitalize on that knowledge. And perfect your own presentation so that you're giving them a show. The other thing about the music business that I think is really important is that we are really a service industry. It's not all about us and our ego. If you are heading down that way, it's not entertainment. Entertainment is about having your audience members come in at one level of emotional state of mind and leaving a couple of inches off the ground. In other words, to be elevated in their feelings, to get high on their endorphins! (laughing) To me that's what musical performance is about... to serve your audience members.

**BMAC:** Thank you for your time today Claire, that is a good thought to leave us with, take care. Maybe we will meet in Value Village someday!!

*And all that I could see when I closed my eyes to dream was home sweet home...*

“Dear Sister”