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Melissa Yes I Am!

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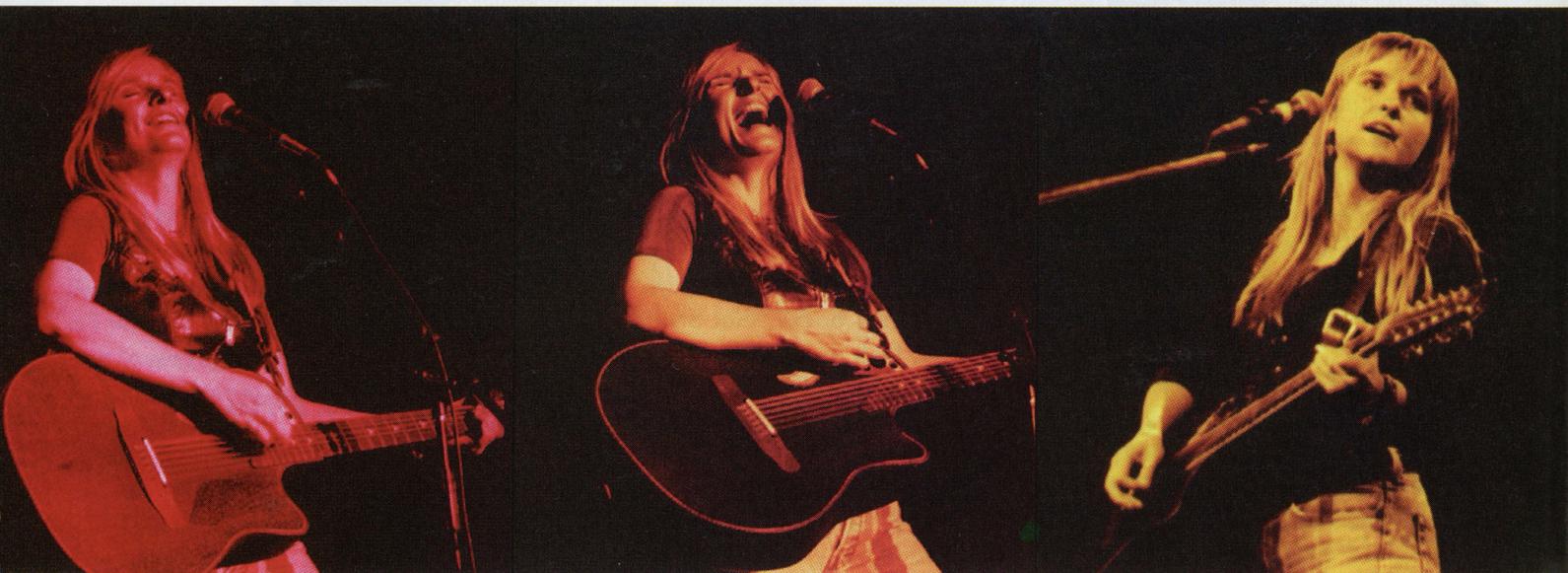
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Melissa Etheridge

yes she is



photos by Donna Santisi, custom color by Debra St. John

by Val C. Phoenix

It was an exciting time last January, when Bill Clinton was sworn in as President. The air was ripe with promises and hope. Melissa Etheridge was one of many revelers at the lesbian and gay Triangle Ball sharing in the victory celebration, and in that spirit she made a little proclamation of her own, telling the crowd, "I'm proud to have been a lesbian all my life."

With that sentence Etheridge joined the select group of out recording artists on major labels. One month later she won a Grammy for best hard rock vocal performance, and in April she performed at the March on Washington to ecstatic cheers. Now the record-buying public has its say, as her latest release, *Yes I Am*, hits the stores.

All this seems very far away when we meet on a hot, dry summer's day in Los Angeles. Removing her shades, Etheridge settles down at a table for the lunchtime interview. The restaurant, which serves health food, is one she frequents, though she's perplexed as to which veggie burger to order. Dressed in a black cotton shirt with cut-off sleeves, jeans and cowboy

of humor in that, possibly, but, eh, it's a real powerful statement."

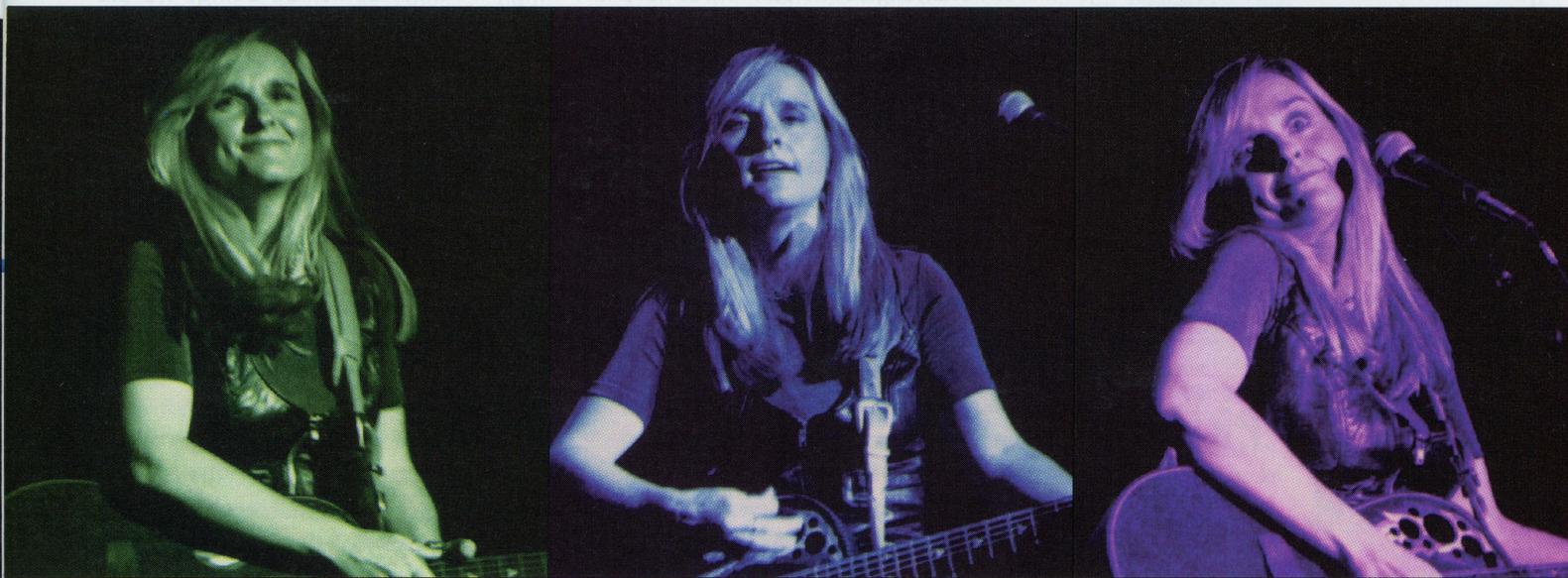
This powerful statement is number four in a line of releases going back to her self-titled debut in 1988. Originally from Leavenworth, Kan., Etheridge, 32, was discovered by Island Records' founder Chris Blackwell when she played the lesbian bar Que Sera in Long Beach, Calif. Before that, she'd had her demo tape rejected by Olivia Records, a fact which gives her a chuckle now.

Yes I Am marks a return to form for her, a back-to-basics approach after some stylistic wandering on 1992's *Never Enough*. The new record was mostly recorded live, Melissa's preferred

Melissa explains, while chewing thoughtfully, that the song meant several things to her. "It's a song where I'm totally outside myself, third person, singing about things I've observed and feel looking at other women. But, also, I felt like in rock 'n' roll women don't have like a powerful American anthem. You know, we have 'Born to Run' or 'Born in the USA'.

"I like singing about women's issues. I don't think in rock music that they're ever addressed or ever brought up. I like putting it in a strong rock 'n' roll vehicle where you can move to it. And that's what I wanted to do with that," she says.

Another new song, "Silent Legacy," was inspired by the story of a man who



boots, ornamented by a labris earring and some jangly bracelets, she seems tanned and healthy, if a bit tired. But, once her food arrives, she seems to perk up, offering to share some of her hummus quesadilla. Punctuated by throaty chuckles and guffaws, her manner is brisk and authoritative, yet still friendly and accessible.

Titling her post-coming-out album *Yes I Am* might seem to be a defiant challenge to homophobes, but, in fact, it's not. "It's because I think it's a powerful statement. I think it's motivating, you know, 'Yes I Am.'" She gestures firmly with her hand. "It's nothing to do with me comin' out at all, which is the first thing everybody asks. I decided to do that before I came out. So, you know, maybe there's a bit of a sense

approach, and it sticks to rock shouters and ballads. The album's title track is a slow burn that builds up to the climax of the chorus: "To the question your eyes seem to send, 'Am I your passion, your promise, your end?' I say I am. Yes I am." As such, it is the latest in a series of Melissa's patented "my-hormones-are-out-of-control songs," steeped in unfulfilled desire: "Like the Way I Do," "Bring Me Some Water" and "Meet Me in the Back."

Occasionally, she does step outside herself to observe someone else's experience. "All American Girl" records the work-a-day life of an average American woman, one whose dreams have been beaten down and who, Melissa sings, "will live and die in this man's world, an all-American girl."

threw his teenage daughter out of the house when he caught her having sex. Etheridge is indignant. "How come we, in this day and age, just say, 'Don't do it', when we know what we went through as teenagers? We know how hard it is. We know how the world seems and feels, and how our parents never talked to us about anything. And why do we pass this on? It just — it makes me crazy! I grew up in the Midwest where nobody talked about it, and you just learned it as you went along, and in this day and age that's dangerous." The song, which she sang in D.C. before the March, declares, "The legacy stops here."

Melissa started writing songs when she was 10, then moved on to playing in churches around town, but she says she ➤

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photo by Donna Samitzi

It's that sort of passionate energy, that other kind of energy that I don't think women get to express a lot, you know.

was never religious herself. "I was never of the mind that I believed what was going on. I thought it was very curious, the organized religion, but I felt that there was a greater spirituality than these rules and this judgment that these people were laying down. And I still have a real hard time with organized religion. I think that it's the root of a lot of our problems." She leans over her meal and adds grimly, "As the Christian right is proving right now."

Those early songwriting efforts were pretty simple and not really true to her. "I was copying, you know. I would write about love, and I didn't know love, you know, 'cause I hadn't had an experience. I would just sort of write what I thought people would write songs about. Wasn't 'til I was about (chuckles) 17 or 18 that I really started writing about personally what was going on."

That year coincided with another auspicious occasion. "I, uh, had my first lesbian experience when I was 17. Now, I never told anybody about it, you know," she says with a laugh. "I never came out. Not 'til I moved to Boston when I was 18."

After studying music in Boston, she returned to Kansas with some news for the folks. "I moved back and told my parents and kind of came out and just drove out here. I told 'em like the week before I left. They knew anyway. It was very obvious. Very clear. They were fine. You know, long as I'm happy. That sort of thing."

Her songs now frequently address relationships and the search for fulfillment, a subject she knows well. "Lust is just search-

ing — I think as human beings we are searching for, you know, what's gonna make us feel better, what's gonna take that pain away. And, um, a lot of people go drinking and taking drugs to try to numb the pain. I found it in physical relationships. I wrote a lot about that, because I was fascinated and absorbed in that. I mean I basically sang and had a relationship, you know, or relationships. That was basically in my 20s what I was doing, which is where the first two albums and half of the third album comes from — is that inner growth, is that experience, is trying to find relief," she chuckles. "Or security or whatever you look for in a relationship that you don't know that you're looking for."

What she was seeking relief from was a whole host of nagging, inner demons. "Loneliness. Fear. You know: 'Why didn't my mother love me enough?' You know, the things that were missing, that I hadn't found in myself yet, that I couldn't fill up in myself. So, I was looking for someone else to fill them up."

Now settled in a four-year relationship with Julie Cypher, Melissa is happy to list what she looks for in a woman. "I think I'm attracted to strength," she says with a smile. "Independent ability, you know, to have their own career, have their own things that push them on, wicked sense of humor. 'Course I'm just describing my girlfriend is what I'm doing, so..." Her voice trails off with a chuckle. "Intense and willing to challenge and grow and push themselves and me. Yeah," she finishes.

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OK, so where would she rate herself on the butch-femme scale? She doesn't even pause. "Well, you know, being a Gemini I can go from one into the other real quickly. Just lookin' in my closet it's like how do I feel today, so I think because of my work and because you know, it's rock 'n' roll and all that, I tend to be more butch. I tend to put on a much more strong outward push. My, I'm just a little femme inside, so... And I actually don't like to categorize anyone. I think a woman can be many things, whatever she wants."

What Melissa wants to do now is get in touch with her body. Sitting at the table, she isn't hefting anything heavier than a veggie burger, but, in fact, she's been working out this year. It's a decision influenced by her turning 30. "That was when I first started going, 'You know what? I think I'm gonna start taking care of my body.'" With a mock-butch growl, she shows off the results by flexing her arm, revealing, well, if not a grapefruit-sized bicep, then at least one the size of a small peach. "Ah, well," she sighs. "I'm not really working out to be impressive-looking. I'm working out just to be stronger, 'cause what I do is really hard."

She'll have to be in shape when she gets back on the road to play live. Etheridge's dynamic with her audience is intense and fraught with sexual energy. The stage, she says, "is a place where I can really let loose. It's a safe place for me to let some energy out that I might not let out one-on-one. I really enjoy pulling an audience in. And, yeah-h. There's a lot of energy. There's a lot of sexual energy there. It's that sort of passionate energy, that other kind of energy that I don't think women get to express a lot, you know. And I enjoy doing it, and I enjoy my audience: women and men, and you know, straight and gay, and all of them together just, you know, hollerin'. I love it."

Having observed her mixed audiences, Etheridge sees similarities in their responses and says, "That's what I think we as a community should try to get across: that it's the same passion. It's the same desires, you know. It's just whom you're deciding to direct that towards. And that's why I enjoy seeing straight and gay sitting next to each other feeling the same

energy, because it is the same."

Though sexually exuberant, Etheridge has resisted being marketed as a boy-toy sex symbol. Fierce, unrestrained, defiantly unvelte, she has had one of the most distinctive images of women in rock, and one not calculated to appeal to men. Of her record company she says, "I never let them market me as a sexy symbol, or you know, for men. They knew better than that."

So, it was a bit of a surprise to many long-time fans to see the glamorous, slick photos of a heavily made-up Etheridge that accompanied *Never Enough*. She has gotten some grief over the photos and says a bit testily that they were entirely under her control. She has no time for suggestions that they undercut her strength by molding her to the corporate image of women in rock: a slim, blonde, processed sex bomb. "I don't think that being pretty means you're not strong or you can only be pretty for men. I was being pretty for my lover." The underlying issue of just what constitutes "pretty" remains unexamined. Ah, well. Perhaps that's best left to *The Beauty Myth* to explain.

Etheridge has undergone a political awakening in the last couple years, speaking out as a feminist and performing on behalf of concerns from gay rights to AIDS to reproductive choice. In January she canceled a performance in Colorado to protest the passage of Amendment 2. "I started looking around a bit, and my eyes just were opened a bit. And I started realizing that this has a lot to do with me. Women's rights, gay rights have everything to do with me," she declares.

In awakening as a feminist, she says, "I was realizing that I was, um, undermining myself as a feminine entity and not taking a hold of that power, not saying, 'You know what? There's not equality.' So, there's a lot of power in saying I'm a feminist. And I think that the backlash of the '80s was to make feminism a bad word, and I just think that takes so much power away from us, and feminism is a beautiful word."

Etheridge's coming out as a lesbian was partially prompted by an awkward magazine interview in 1992, in which the interviewer prodded her to be a role model for gay youth. Unpleasant though it

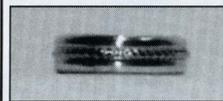
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was, the experience got her thinking. "I was like, 'You know what? I want to come out. I want to find the right way to do it.' k.d. [lang] did it great in *The Advocate*. Boom! There it was," she recalls.

"And there I was at the Triangle Inaugural Ball, and k.d. said something and she introduced me, and I just said, 'Well, you know, I'm really proud to have been a lesbian all my life,' not realizing that what I was doing," she says chuckling, "was coming out. I was just stating the fact. You know, there's the community and the friends, and I kinda walked off stage and went, 'You know what? I *th-hink* I just came out.' Boom! It was out then. So, it was an incredible moment for me. I really couldn't have asked for better."

There is still cause for concern in the attitudes of the record industry, which hasn't historically been kind to out lesbian and gay artists. Warner Bros., k.d. lang's label, tried to censor her interview with *The Advocate* before it was published. Etheridge fired her own publicist this year, after discovering she was cutting the singer off from the gay press. "I really had a big, big change-up in my company and in the way that they handled things. I think they were more homophobic than I ever knew." She now sees every request for an interview that comes in to insure that it doesn't happen again. "It's much better now."

Having worked in the industry for five years, she says, "See, the thing is that I think that the business part of it — the record company part of it, the management part of gay artists — is that they're just afraid that somewhere there's gonna be a huge backlash. That all of a sudden the whole middle part of America, the big record-buying public, is gonna burn records and not support their artists. And it needs to be proved otherwise, and that's what artists like k.d. and myself are trying to do — to prove that one can be successful and it doesn't matter, and even people in Idaho and Missouri and Arkansas are gonna buy our records." And Kansas? "And Kansas! Well. Yeah," she says chuckling, "Kansas." That's an all-American girl talking, so America would be wise to listen.



Val C. Phoenix is DENEUE's Arts Editor and hefts the occasional veggie burger in her spare time.



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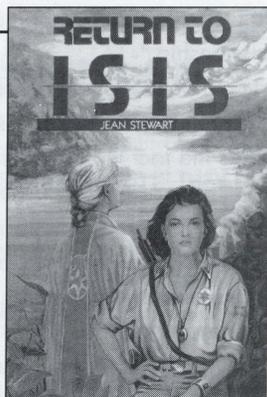
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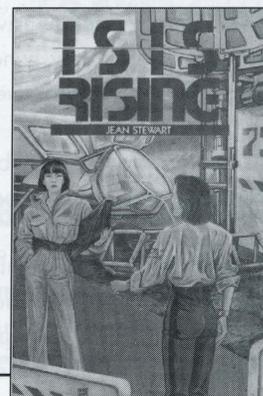
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