

The April 2001 issue of *Curve* magazine featured my cover story on queer, indie folk-rocker Melissa Ferrick. It was based on an interview that took place in Northampton, MA in December of 2000. Below is the original, unedited version of that story with roughly 500 never-before-seen words that didn't make it into print, as well as my original unedited intro. If you'd like to purchase an electronic copy of the story as it appeared in *Curve* magazine, visit Amazon.com and search for my name. This material is copyrighted. For more information about Naomi Graychase, visit www.Graychase.com.

—Naomi Graychase, May 2005

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Suggested pull quotes:

"It's becoming more and more difficult for me to find someone to go on a date with who hasn't already had sex to my voice."

"I was 'the other Melissa' for three years, and now I'm 'the queen of the anti-love song.' I am definitely *not* anti-love."

"When I play live, I'm just a little misguided navigator."

Potential sidebar/callout info:

New record label: Right On Records, www.rightonrecords.com

Newest Albums: *Skinnier and Faster Live at the BPC* [2 disc set], Right On Records (January 2000)
Freedom, What Are Records? (March 2000) www.whatarerecords.com

Next Album: Studio album with band, due out in March. Not yet titled.

For tour dates: visit www.rightonrecords.com

Confirmed: Michigan Womyn's Festival, Night Stage, 2001.

Favorite Curse Word: Fuck

Favorite Sound: Breathing

Worst sound: Yelling

Believe in God? Yes

Last CD she bought: Emmy Lou Harris

Music she likes to listen to when sad: Sarah McLaughlin, Joanie Mitchell

Music she likes to listen to when happy: Lenny Kravitz, Dave Matthews

Does she dance? Yes, alone and in public

Want a Family? Not sure.

Working hed: *Melissa Ferrick Speaks Freely*

Working dek: The singer/songwriter talks about sex, sanity and her quest for love.

The first thing you want to do when you meet Melissa Ferrick is to feed her. At 5'6" and barely 100 pounds, she seems dangerously small. If you're a co-dependent nurturer like I am, you want to give her some comfort food and fatten her up. On the other hand, if you're one of the 19-year-old fans who pressed themselves screaming against the stage at any of her recent sold-out shows in New England, you'd probably have other things in mind for her. Like, for instance, getting tied up, or having sex with her in your office, "preferably during business hours," as Ferrick suggests in the sexy single, *Drive* from her latest studio album, "Freedom."

Ferrick's weight, and her health in general, are issues she's focusing a lot of energy on these days. Her diminishing size reflects the strain that touring can take on a body. Despite her affinity for sharp cheddar cheese and strawberry pop tarts, Ferrick struggles to eat while on the road. It's a source of great frustration for her. Between the crazy touring schedule and her struggles with pervasive anxiety, it's just too hard to eat well.

“I weigh 106 pounds cuz I can’t eat right now,” she says. “I would like to get to a point where I could tour in a capacity that is a lot more healthy for my body and for my spirit. It’s becoming a big issue.”

Despite her birdlike figure, she exudes a stray-cat toughness. Off stage, she seems vulnerable, but intense. Her features are fine. Her nearly shoulder-length brown hair with dyed red tints is straight and often pushed carelessly behind her ears or into a haphazard ponytail that never lasts. In baggy clothes and worn out jeans, she hunches her shoulders when she stands. And when she sits, she curls in on herself, as though folding in her wings will shield her vulnerable heart.

Even when she wears her black leather jacket, it’s only her eyes that make you feel she could do something powerful. Her icy blues are like diamonds behind her wire-framed glasses. They’re so brilliant, it’s as though they belong to a magnificent animal, one who wears Melissa’s friendly girl-clothes as a disguise, so we won’t know there’s a special creature among us, ready to strip off her wool sweater and along with it all her inhibitions, to bare a wild, deep soul. When Ferrick steps on stage and plugs in her guitar, she is absolutely invincible. She becomes infused with a power and sexuality that literally makes her shake and drives audiences of hundreds of women to press themselves into a screaming mass at her feet. At last year’s Michigan Womyn’s Festival, “It was like she was the fuckin’ Beatles,” says her tour manager, Jen Perry.

Ferrick has been performing her deeply personal brand of folk rock (or rock folk, as she calls it) for more than a decade. She’s put out a total of seven CDs, including her latest, “Skinnier and Faster Live at the BPC,” which was the first record released on her own label, Right On Records (www.rightonrecords.com).

She’s been out as a lesbian since 1995. She knows the fierce loyalty of her lesbian fans has helped her, and that her visibility is especially important to young people, but she doesn’t believe her status as a lesbian has significantly helped or hindered sales. “I used to think that I didn’t get played on the radio because I’m queer, but other acts have been successful, so that can’t really be true. At this point, it’s really old news,” says Ferrick.

Her career has been somewhat of a rollercoaster ride. In 1991, when Ferrick was just twenty, she opened on a Morrissey tour. She quickly got a record deal with a major label, Atlantic. But when her first two records didn’t make it big, Atlantic dropped her. Ferrick says she lost herself to drinking and playing music that wasn’t really true to her.

In 1996, she took her last drink and she’s been sober ever since. Her latest demons include serious tendonitis in her right arm, which almost forced her to stop touring last year.

She turned thirty in September and now finds herself working harder than ever, touring nearly year-round with her band members, bassist Marika Tjelios and drummer Brian Winton. In many ways, she is a phoenix rising. She played sold-out shows with screaming fans all across the country, and was a hit at large shows like the Newport Folk Festival and the Michigan Womyn’s Festival. When she toured with Lilith Fair in 1998, “Everything I Need” outsold every other artist on the bill at the Boston show, and in 1999 she was named Best Folk Rock Band at the Boston Music Awards.

On a chilly Saturday in December, a fresh-off-the-tour Ferrick climbed behind the wheel of her massive maroon Suburban—which functions as her tour bus when she’s on the road—and drove from her home near Boston to Northampton, Massachusetts. She spent the afternoon with me in the kitchen of my home-away-from-home where she drank tea, ate brie (she doesn’t like the rind) and crackers, and smoked one cigarette standing in her beat-up, orange sneakers in the snow with Jen at her side.

When she smiles, her whole face rearranges into a new joyful version of itself with lots of wrinkles around her eyes. When something’s really funny, she tosses her head back quickly and laughs, then looks down, smiling. When she thinks, she often looks off into the space to her left near the floor, as though the answer is a pair of shoes she may have left lying there somewhere. She looks into your eyes when you speak to her, and whenever she talks to young people or fans who are nervous or overwhelmed by her presence, she

touches them as much as possible to put them at ease. She's silly and goofy and sick and serious. She listens as well as she talks. And she loves to play music.

During our four-hour interview, we talked about performing live, the genesis of her songs, her love life, homeopathy and the virtues of drinking tea, among other things. Below is an excerpt of our conversation:

The intensity that you have when you perform on-stage is incredible. What drives your live performances?

I love, love, love playing live because I love the way my guitar sounds through my monitors. It's like a fight. I feel 'less-than' the guitar. I will never, ever win that instrument and it always wins me live. When I play live, I'm just a little misguided navigator . . . The show is in charge.

Do you have a pre-game ritual? Something you do before every show?

I always say, 'Please let me be of service.'

And who are you talking to?

To God. I say, 'Please let me get out of the way.' In my head. I started doing it when I got sober. I was getting on my knees for a while. Before some shows, when I'm really nervous, I get on my knees.

During the "Freedom" solo tour, I was also doing this thing where I wore the same pair of leather pants for every show. I would dance around in the dressing room for Jen in just my underwear with my socks pulled up real high. And I would make all kinds of silly noises, so I wouldn't take myself so seriously. . . I'm just, like, the biggest nerd.

What kind of underwear were you wearing?

You know, little Victoria's Secrets or boxers. It depends. Sometimes I wear girl underwear, sometimes I wear boy underwear, but that's me, you know, top/bottom. It doesn't really matter [laughs]. I can be whatever you want on any given day [laughs].

What about after the show?

Smoke. I smoke. I hate that I smoke, but I definitely smoke a cigarette. And drink water, and sit. I'm tired. And I don't really want to talk to anybody. I feel really bad, because I love talking to the fans. . . I work so much harder now. I'm 30; I'm not 22 any more. I just don't have the energy. . . I'm also trying to keep the music sacred. . . that started in 1996 when I started to face my fear of success. . . Also, I absorb a lot of people's energies. . . Everybody that touches me is in me, so after the show I need a shower. I take salt baths, special soap. I started seeing a naturopath and a colorist in 1996 when I got sober.

And you started having anxiety attacks?

Yeah, I have a panic disorder.

What do you do about it?

I pray.

And that works for you?

No. [laughs].

When did that start?

It started when I was really young, it's something that I'm just starting to deal with now, so I don't really feel comfortable talking about it. I'm very excited about the prospect that there is hope and help for me. I'm thrilled. I'm seeking outside help for it.

Let's talk about *Drive*. Lesbians around the world are having sex to your song. What's that like for you?

Uhh. . . I think that I am all for it. I don't think that I feel weird about that at all. It's just becoming more and more difficult for me to find somebody to go on a date with who hasn't already had sex to my voice. . . [smiles].

I know that you wrote *Drive* because your girlfriend (at the time) dared you to write a song about sex. Why'd you decide to put it on the record?

Yeah, it was a dare. . . I wrote the whole thing in like five minutes, all the lyrics, then I recorded it that night. My ex-girlfriend has the original. It's about 12 minutes long. That was the first time I've written a song for a girl before. . . I think it was a pretty nice gift. I was *never* going to put it on the record. But I gave Jen a cigarette and a coffee and I said, 'Listen to this.' And she said, 'You are high if you don't put this on the record'. . . There's a live solo version on *Skinner*, *Faster* and a dance re-mix that should be in clubs this summer.

In everything I've read about *Drive*, you've laughed it off. You say that it's just a fantasy. I'm wondering why you do that?

I don't know why I do that. I think it's fear. I'm glad you brought it up, because I think that by laughing it off, I created a safer environment, but I'm actually diminishing the song. . . Owning it is difficult. Singing it is easy, but talking about it is harder. It's not that I haven't done those things, because I have; I'm not ashamed or afraid to say that. Although, I don't like having sex in public places . . . I've always wanted to have sex in a dressing room, though, and I had sex in a car, finally. I think that I would like to watch other people have sex in public places. I think that's a lot of what *Drive* is about. I'm definitely a voyeur. Absolutely. Right now I'm just trying to find someone that I want to make love to . . .

What do you think about the whole Napster thing and MP3s?

Napster is an essential and amazing source of music, but Congress needs to pass something, because I can't stress enough how much Napster has affected my sales. I'm sure it hurts artists who make lots and lots of sales, too. I'm sure that it must really suck to sell 14 million records instead of 15 million records, but the difference for me between selling 20,000 albums and 30-45,000 is huge . . . It impacts everything from my ability to get opening slots on major tours, to getting on the radio, to getting a record deal . . . I always ask my fans to download all they want, but please don't burn my music and please buy the CDs. The sales numbers really count.

I love the your cover of Train's "Meet Virginia." It was even better than the original.

Yeah, everybody's sayin' that [laughs]. I love the song, and Jen loves the song. I like the play on words. I like to do songs that guys do, and then when a girl sings it, that I don't change the pronoun. We'll put it on the next live album.

You've been called 'the queen of the anti-love song' . . .

I know! I'm not very happy about that! That just started. . . I was 'the other Melissa' for three years, now I'm the 'queen of the anti-love song'. . . I think I'm the queen of the I- want-real-love song. . . I am certainly *not* anti-love!. . . Not today, anyway [smiles].

All of your songs are about love, in some way. You're either looking for it, in it, or getting over it. How many times have you been in love?

Just once.

I love the cover of "Freedom." You're wearing a t-shirt with a story, and finally there's a shot of you that isn't all soft-focus and straight-girl-looking. . .

Yeah. In the past, I've been a baby [about asserting myself on photo shoots]. . .I think the shot looks like me this time. . .on "Willing to Wait" I looked like freakin' Demi Moore or something. . .The t-shirt says "Proud." My friend Philip gave it to me. It's from his first gay pride in Washington, DC in 1977. . .the Japanese characters on the front of the CD also mean "freedom."

Tell me about your new label, Right On Records.

I incorporated that name one night in a panic online with Jen because I knew I didn't want to work with What Are Records? anymore, and I wanted to do the "Skinnier and Faster Live" album. And now I've signed a national distribution deal, so it'll be in stores all over the U.S. in January. . .I'm not against signing with another label. I'd really like to. I'm *not* ani difranco [laughs]. I *so* respect what she's done now; it's a lot of work.