

## 10,000 Maniacs are sane about their career

By JEANNETTE GIBSON  
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Collegian Arts Writers

When a band's lead singer takes on the roles of chief songwriter and band leader, that person is usually attributed a variety of images and labels — most of them false.

Natalie Merchant, lead singer for 10,000 Maniacs, is just such a person. Where the haphazard descriptions originate from is unimportant — people are willing to offer those that they have heard. Recently, prior to a well-anticipated interview with Merchant, the collective accounts of her that we received from roadies, fans and technicians had us looking for a woman who was at the same time short, medium, dark, not-so-dark, thin, fat and furthermore difficult to interview.

In the end she found us when a roadie alerted her to our presence. We converted a dressing room into a makeshift interview room and sat down to talk to Merchant as R.E.M. was swinging into "Moral Kiosk" for a sound check. While seated on the floor around a coffee table, we found Merchant to be a delightful, insightful spokesperson for her band — not the contradictory, eclectic tough interview we were expecting.

Merchant views her band from a unique position. Since rhythm guitarist John Lombardo left their band last year, Merchant has assumed the leadership role within the group. Now she is its driving force and the focal point of the Maniacs' growing popularity.

Despite the growing recognition that has accompanied their new, more pop-sounding album *In My Tribe*, the Maniacs don't consider themselves professional musicians as

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yet because they can't live by the means they have. "We still haven't arrived at that level," Merchant explains.

Presently followed by largely an underground audience, they hope to expand the scope of listeners without losing the loyalty of those who first discovered them. "I think that if we do have an underground audience they are bright enough to listen to the music and not to what the production is like or to what our intention was when we recorded it," says Merchant.

The message in the music then is all-important to the band, and to Natalie who writes the lyrics. Merchant's verse looks more like prose on the page and it reads better that way as well. She says she approaches her lyric writing with the intent of telling stories, often about difficult issues. "What's the Matter Here" for instance relates Natalie's frustration with child abuse, while the theme of "Don't Talk" (both from *In My Tribe*) is alcoholism. "I think I establish my opinions without being very preachy. Mostly through presenting allegories — little situations with dialogue between characters I invent that kind of exemplify my point."



Natalie Merchant, lead singer of 10,000 Maniacs, writes most of the band's songs, but the rest of the group pitches in with the orchestration.

This technique allows room for varied interpretation of meaning by the audience. "It's strange how a lot of people are interpreting songs, like 'Don't Talk' as a quarrel between two lovers where one is an alcoholic and one is not. I try to leave gender out of most of my songs — no one knows who the character is."

Actually Merchant derives a lot of what she writes about from her own life. The song "My Sister Rose" is a memory of hers from an old Italian

wedding, where her aunt Rose was married to a man named Rocky. Merchant describes the situation as "found poetry . . . their life to me is like poetry."

Other times her lyrics, she says, are more personal. "Verdi Cries" was a song I wrote and I was very possessive of it, so possessive that the band realized that they couldn't really fit into it, so we hired string players."

Still, she says she has no set formula

for writing songs, although in her opinion it is easier to fit words to music.

Sometimes she will work with drummer Jerome Augustyniak until a song idea starts to take shape. When composing "My Sister Rose" she explains that, "Jerry started with a chord progression and I helped him switch it around a bit. He knew his tempo and his rhythm really well — that was the strongest part of the song and we just changed the chord a

bit." Merchant writes the melodies but often collaborates with other members of the band to orchestrate the songs.

Listeners noticed as well that the band collaborated with Michael Stipe of R.E.M. for a brief cameo duet in "Campfire Song," both on the album and on stage during their Rec Hall performance.

The Maniacs have been acquainted with Stipe and his band for nearly four years, and Merchant often sings with him although she explains that this is the first time they have recorded together. "Besides," she said, "I wrote that part of (the song) and it was way too low for me to sing." That's the simple reason for the guest vocal of Stipe — says Merchant. "We didn't want to make a fuss about it because the comparisons between our two bands have been so thick for so long."

Merchant's strong sense of self is apparent in both her music and her character. She is frequently compared to folk singer Suzanne Vega, although closer examination tends to reveal that they are more different than alike. "To say that I am like Suzanne Vega is a lie," says Merchant.

She believes that they are compared mostly because they face social issues such as child abuse in their lyrics.

Merchant and the rest of 10,000 Maniacs have the confidence that comes from believing in themselves and in their musical talents. "I think there are so many different dimensions to our music, our lyrics and our performance and things that we're involved with right now that there is more to write about than most bands."

## 'Grease' Cast takes on challenge of movie's legacy

By KIM FRIEDMAN  
Collegian Arts Writer

**Editor's Note:** This is the second part in a series celebrating the Penn State Thespians' 90th anniversary. This week's feature spotlight's this fall's production of *Grease*.

Hard work and dedication. These are two of the qualities that have kept the Penn State Thespians going for the past 90 years and will continue to do so in the future.

Under the advising of Carol Whittaker, the club is currently celebrating its 90th anniversary. Whittaker is very proud of her position as advisor, saying, "I feel quite fortunate in being able to advise the Thespians. It

was a big part of my undergraduate life."

Whittaker, who did both her undergraduate and graduate work here at the University, was a very active member of the Thespians as a student. She participated both on stage and off, and feels that now she is "... the continuity with the past and the present." She is now able to act as a resource person for all the younger members.

Membership in the Thespians does not require that you are a talented actor, singer or dancer. Anyone who is interested in any aspect of the performing arts can become a member. "It provides an outlet for artistic creativity in all aspects of the theatre. It also enables them to devel-

op a lot of skills that they can apply outside Penn State; organizing time, operating within a budget and dealing with the community," Whittaker claims.

In order to become a member, students must work on two shows in any capacity except usher. Then, along with the rest of the 'pledge class,' a pledge skit must be performed and a pledge project must be executed. Once these requirements are completed, there is an official initiation ceremony at which new members receive their initiation certificate.

The group now boasts a membership of over 50 students. Publicity Director Joann Kupstas explains that in the past year and a half the club size has doubled.

The club takes up as much time as members are willing to give, explains Kupstas. Initiated members are required to attend monthly meetings, and to do what they can for the shows. Acting in the shows takes up more time than working the box office, but each member contributes what he can. "If you want to act and you're serious about acting, in any other club you're a member and that's it," claims Kupstas. "If you want a position other than a main stage acting role then you have time."

There are many other things to do besides acting in the mainstage shows. The 'mainstage shows' refer to the shows produced in Schwab Auditorium once a semester. These are generally "Book musicals that have been produced on Broadway." In addition to these shows, the Thespians have recently begun to perform one children's show a semester. These are being produced in conjunction with the Kern Graduate programs. "In order to allow performance opportunities for those who can't sing and dance." This year's children's performance will take place the first weekend of December. "We're hoping to build up a following," says Whittaker.

Also, there are many positions on the production staff open to students. Jeff Fortney, Scenic Designer, Technical Director and Teen Angel for the production of *Grease*, explains that through the Thespians he has the chance to do every thing possible. "You can have a lot more responsibility here," he says. "The experience here has been helpful. It's given me a lot of confidence."

The Thespians manage to prosper despite the many obstacles they must face. Some of these difficulties have evolved along with the ever raising Broadway ticket prices and the popularity of television, and others that have evolved as the University expanded.

The cost of putting on a production has increased dramatically (no pun intended) over the past few decades. The Thespians face the problem of wanting to keep production level up but ticket prices down. "It's amazing to me that they're still able to pro-

**Some of these difficulties have evolved along with the ever raising Broadway ticket prices and the popularity of television . . .**

duce these plays." Whittaker explains, "given the obstacles they must overcome." The fact that they are still capable of putting on respectable shows she finds both encouraging and rewarding.

President Rob Russo agrees. He adds, "Theatre audiences have changed so much because of television. Now they want to see high tech shows." It used to be that the Thespians performed many original shows. Within the last five years only one original show was produced, and for that show it was only the book and not the music that was student written.

The other area of difficulty the Thespians must deal with is the expansion of the University. Schwab Auditorium is home to the Thespians. It has housed their shows for as long as it has been standing, and it still has on its walls showcases of various Thespian decades. Now because of the change in the status of the building, the Thespians must compete both with classes and with other organizations for the space. Thespians also used to build their sets in a loft in the auditorium. In this loft, many of the club pledge classes initialed the walls and left their mark. It was a sort of historical room where the spirit of the Thespians could always be felt.

None of these minor setbacks have stopped the Thespians, however. Their performances are still a very high caliber, bringing joy to both audiences and actors.

The mainstage shows are not limited to Thespian members. Any student interested can audition and "Everybody makes them (non-Thespians) feel welcome," says Russo. The actual rehearsals have nothing to do with the club.

The cast of this fall's production, *Grease*, is very enthusiastic about the show. They are full of energy and excitement, and, Russo observed, "They can't stand to be away from each other." He feels that people have been giving the extra push, above and beyond the expected to make this production successful. Rehearsals are progressing smoothly, and the show looks as if it will be first rate.

*Grease* will be performed in Schwab Auditorium Thursday Nov. 5 through Saturday Nov. 7 at 8 p.m., and Sunday Nov. 8 at 2 p.m. Tickets can be purchased in the HUB from 8:30 to 4:30 and are \$5.00 each.

## Sting, R.E.M. hang on

The following lists compile the top ten albums for the week ending Oct. 30, as indicated by State College record store sales.

- ARBORIA—USED BOOKS & RECORDS, 151 S. Allen St.**
1. *Nothing Like the Sun* — Sting
  2. *Document* — R.E.M.
  3. *Tunnel of Love* — Bruce Springsteen
  4. *Lonesome Jubilee* — John Cougar Mellencamp
  5. *In My Tribe* — 10,000 Maniacs
  6. *Big Generator* — Yes
  7. *Hold Your Fire* — Rush
  8. *Frank's Wild Years* — Tom Waits
  9. *King of the Delta Blues* — Robert Johnson
  10. *Music for the Masses* — Depeche Mode

- CITY LIGHTS RECORDS, 316 E. College Ave.**
1. *Kick* — INXS
  2. *Eye of the Hurricane* — the Alarm
  3. *Nothing Like the Sun* — Sting
  4. *Vampire Can Mating Oven* — Camper Van Beethoven
  5. *Dublin Lady* — Andy Stewart & Manus Linnly
  6. *Music for the Masses* — Depeche Mode
  7. *House of Dolls* — Gene Loves Jezebel
  8. *Document* — R.E.M.
  9. *Kohuept* — Billy Joel
  10. *People Who Grinned Themselves to Death* — the Housemartins

- NATIONAL RECORD MART, 226 E. College Ave.**
1. *Nothing Like the Sun* — Sting
  2. *Tunnel of Love* — Bruce Springsteen
  3. *Dirty Dancing Soundtrack* — Various Artists
  4. *Hysteria* — Def Leppard
  5. *Kohuept* — Billy Joel

6. *Vinyl Idol* — Billy Idol
7. *In My Tribe* — 10,000 Maniacs
8. *A Very Special Christmas* — Various Artists
9. *Tiffany* — Tiffany
10. *Document* — R.E.M.

### WPSU NEW MUSIC TOP 20

The following records compose WPSU's new music survey for the week ending Oct. 30. The New Music Top Twenty will be broadcast tonight at 10 p.m.

1. "I Can't Be Counted On" — the Meat Puppets
2. "In a Jar" — Dinosaur
3. "Magic Sky" — Volcano Suns
4. "A Rush and a Push and the Land is Hours" — the Smiths
5. "Columbian Necktie" — Big Black
6. "You're My Drug" — Dukes of Stratosphear
7. "Outside My Window" — Angst
8. "All Going Out Together" — Big Dipper
9. "The Highway Talking" — Wooden Soldiers
10. "Alien Nation" — Always August
11. "Bad Vibes" — Nixon's Head
12. "I Hate the Man Who Runs This Bar" — Eugene Chadborn
13. "Everything's Exploding" — The Flaming Lips
14. "Nirwegian Wood" — Electric Love Muffin
15. "Weasel Face" — Ramones
16. "Offsprings" — Volcano Suns
17. "These Boots are Made for Walking" — Nancy Sinatra
18. "Welcome to the Occupation" — R.E.M.
19. "Kill Surf City" — Jesus and Mary Chain
20. "Good Idea" — Screaming Broccoli

— compiled by Ron Swegman

## Puzzles for the patient

By KIM ALISON DALINKA  
Collegian Arts Writer

If the problems and puzzles of life don't phase you and you are itching for a greater challenge, here is a book for you. *The Thinking Person's Book of Puzzles and Problems* by Victor Serebriakoff is filled with mind twisters and teasers which border on the impossible.

Included in this collection are over 100 of the most wickedly difficult quizzes, word games, logic problems, anagrams and 3-D crossword puzzles to keep your head spinning.

### book review

The author, Victor Serebriakoff, is the International President of Mensa. His title is synonymous with big trouble. Mensa is an international society of approximately 70,000 people with especially high I.Q.'s. It's members, Mensans, are incurable puzzle addicts, and included in this book are the puzzles they found the toughest.

The problems become increasingly more difficult as the book progresses. Beginning with a 3-D crossword puzzle by the name of "Trilogical Acrossdownthroughword", the ambitious solver must fit answers into the framework in their proper place, down, across, and through! Good luck!

Problem 43, entitled "Operation Hara-Kiri", presents the now tormented, tortured solver with a list of fragmented words. From a mere four to five letters, the reader is expected to guess a word by filling in the

remaining letters. The only other clue given is that the fragment was originally placed in the center of the word.

Here is an example to help clarify. The letters given are "owgo." The word is SNOW-GOGGLES. Can you believe it? Unfortunately, there are many more where that came from to irritate you.

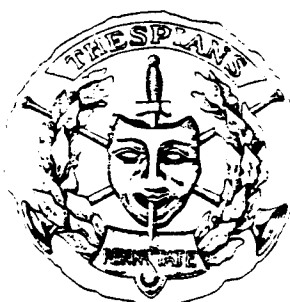
So far, the reader has been babied and sheltered from the real fun. Compared to what he is about to encounter, the previous puzzles were tic-tac-toe. At this point the masochistic solver should be experiencing insomnia, bitten nails, and an inability to concentrate on anything other than the current problem. This was the intent of the author. He says so in the introduction. Really.

Problem 85, "An Impossible Anagram," is exactly that. Well, almost. The letters given are: L L P N S S S S E E E E. A word with five S's and four E's? Sure . . . sleeplessness!

Problem 94 is called "They Are Unlettered Squares — Throw Them Out!" The solver is given what appears to be a completed crossword puzzle. The problem here is that there are no shaded letters to house the answers. The puzzled puzzler must eliminate those letters which should have been blackened. The puzzle is 13 squares by 13 squares. No clues are given.

Serebriakoff takes his puzzling so seriously that he was careful not to put the answers in order. This makes it impossible for the solver to snatch a peek at the following answer when he checks his solution.

If, after reading this article, there are still a few fairly confident souls who wish to do their thinking caps . . . have fun and good luck! The Please see Puzzle, page 21



Danny Zukko, played by Dan Jeck (junior-pre-law), and Sandra Dombrowski, played by Jayne Decker (senior-elementary education), take time out during a rehearsal for *Grease*, the Thespians' fall production.

