

jennifer marks

When Jennifer Marks heard Annie Lennox and Aretha Franklin singing "Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves" as a Long Island grade schooler, she never dreamed that she would one day grow into the song's living embodiment. Powered by a fiercely independent character that is balanced by an effervescent personality, Marks has made a career for herself out of her own resources and on her own terms, recording and releasing three albums on her own, while generating a sizable cult audience and accumulating an ever-growing stack of positive ink, like this rave in the CMJ New Music Report: "Singer-songwriter Jennifer Marks bears a musical resemblance to Aimee Mann, though Marks' style is slightly edgier. Her lyrics are always poignant and engaging...and her arrangements are equally gorgeous and entrancing." In light of her impressive career path up to now, it's a measure of her belief in recently formed Bardic Records that Marks has chosen to cast her lot with the nontraditional label. But hold on, we're getting ahead of ourselves. "I was a real tomboy as a kid," Marks says. "As I got older and the boys weren't chasing me for the football anymore-they were chasing me for something else-I had to give up some of the sports I loved. I was looking for something I could do, kind of dig into, and I discovered I could sing. I tried out for a concert and got the solo. It wasn't long before I was flying all over the world in elite choruses. But I didn't even realize that you could be a songwriter for a living until I was 17 or 18 years old."

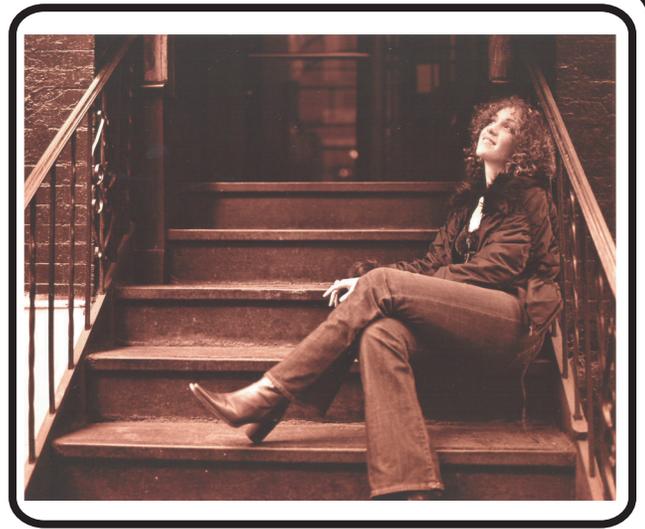


Photo By Patrick Haley

Marks traces her epiphany to a Howard Jones concert she attended while in high school. "In one song," she recalls, he sang the words, 'Put your dreams into action.' It was so freeing to hear that. Just this July, I opened for him, which finally gave me the chance to thank him for putting me on this path." Another of her muses was Nile Rodgers, whom she heard speak at a seminar. "He said during the speech that it was all about the writing. 'Don't think you're going to make any money just singing,' he said. I went home and started writing songs." Marks moved to Manhattan and attended NYU, majoring in music business-obviously she's a quick study. "While I was in college," she says, "I started trying to meet people in the music industry. I went up to BMI; they then introduced me to other people. During that time I became more interested in songwriting. So I started learning my craft. I was very lucky. I had a lot of people giving me good feedback, and they put me in touch with people who were really making it work for themselves. I learned how to craft the song, how to craft the lyric. I had some great teachers to co-write with." While she studied the music biz, Marks also studied the great writer/artists-James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Rickie Lee Jones and others. She started demoing up her songs with the hope of getting them cut.

"I've started thinking about where the songwriting impulse came from. Where did I learn that innately?" she reflects. "You don't just wake up and write a song. As a child, my favorite records were Sgt. Pepper and Fleetwood Mac's Rumours. Later, I remember Tori Amos coming out with something, and it made me think, 'Oh wow, a white woman who's not doing R&B or dance music.' In college, I was a huge fan of the Police, Howard Jones, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis-some of the excellent songwriters of my time. Of course, I loved 'Boogie Wonderland' as well. My mom was really into dance music; she used to drive me insane with Rod Stewart's 'Do You Think I'm Sexy.' So I had a lot of different influences, and they weren't limited to any one genre." After graduation from NYU, it didn't take Marks long to get a firsthand, real-life lesson in the vagaries of the music business. She got a publishing deal with a major music pubbery (the name has been omitted to protect the guilty). "They had me on a retainer, making stupid money right out of college," she says with a sadder, wiser laugh. "Unfortunately, two months after I signed on, the company was sold and everyone got fired, including the person who'd signed me. It was really disappointing." As it turned out, though, that jolt was just what the doctor ordered, because it inspired Marks to become an artist herself, rather than trying to write for others. In her new mode, she uncovered her resourceful streak: "I made some demos; I had nine songs. Then I saw somebody selling a CD at a show and thought, 'Hey, I'll make these nine songs into a CD.' There was a song called 'Pizza' on it, so I called the CD Pizza and packaged it like a pizza box." Clever girl-and that ain't the half of it. Marks brought the master to a duping house, and before she'd even received the finished product, she got a call from the head of a hip-hop-specializing indie label (don't ask) who told her he wanted to sign her. "I thought it was a joke," she says. Doing her homework, Marks discovered that the company was beset by internal problems and turned down the offer. The label folded soon thereafter.

"After that happened," she recalls, "I just thought, 'Screw it, I don't want to deal with these people anymore, and I have no desire to go through that again. I'm going to do it myself. I'll continue making records, and I'm going to open up my own label and do it.' I was watching other people doing it successfully, so I gave it a shot." Marks released what she describes as her first "real" record, My Name's Not Red, on her own Red Kurl label (yup, she's a natural redhead). "I was flying by the seat of my pants," she admits. "I had no idea about anything. But I started touring solo-I couldn't afford to take a band, which forced me to really learn how to play the guitar. I hired the independent promoter, the publicist, did all that stuff. I got a fair amount of attention from that record, sold a bunch of CDs and made enough money to make another record. I worked my ass off and made it happen." Two years later-in August 2002-the fledgling entrepreneur released It Turned Me On, co-produced by her longtime collaborator Brad Albetta and Cameron Greider (Freedy Johnston), which wound up selling more discs, garnering more press and getting more play on college radio stations. Her songs kept turning up on the soundtracks to independent films and on soap operas like As the World Turns. The checks were coming in with gratifying regularity. It was all good, and Marks was quite pleased with the way things were going. "Then Bardic called," she says. "Actually, I got an email from [U.S. label president] Jack Ponti. I spoke to him for a couple of hours the next day, then I met with the Bardic crew the following Monday. That same night, they said they wanted to sign me." Marks found herself saying yes, but only after consulting her attorney ("I'm not fresh off the boat" she quips).

"I was doing okay; I wasn't starving," the freshly affiliated Marks says of her decision. "There's a lot of opportunity in making music independently, and I think unless something unique comes along, something that's really going to make your life better, it's good to stay there. But the people at Bardic have so much energy, they have a great plan in place and they're incredibly smart. I'm looking forward to the ride." Marks, who signed on the dotted line in mid-August, is already recording tracks for her Bardic debut, which should see the light of day by mid-2004. She's still independent; it's just that she's now part of an independent family. You go, girl.

- Bud Scoppa