

# PERFORMING SONGWRITER

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## Indie Artist Spotlight: Marina Belica



Photo by Pam Springsteen

**"You can follow every instinct** and intuition that you have. You're not forced to do something you don't want to do, and you're not limited by someone else's inability to share your vision."

Those are the words of recently signed BMI affiliate Marina Belica, speaking about the advantages of working as an independent artist. Belica has had the benefit of working on both sides of the fence: She was a founding member, vocalist and keyboardist of October Project, the pop/new age collective that recorded two albums in the mid-1990s for Epic Records. Today she is promoting her solo debut EP, *decembergirl*, released in late 2000 on her own imprint, and gearing up for more activity in the studio and on the road.

October Project's two Epic albums—1993's self-titled debut and 1995's *Falling Farther In*—sold over 300,000 copies and led to opening slots on tours by Sarah McLachlan and Crash Test Dummies, as well as the group's own tours and the placement of its best-known song, "Return to Me," in the 1994 film *Blown Away*. Belica's *decembergirl* includes a remake of that song, featuring several OP members; it went to No. 1 at Rochester, N.Y., station WBER, aired for several months on Atlanta's leading commercial alternative station 99X and is featured in the new independent film *The Adulterer*. "It just proves that a good song never goes bad," she laughs.

While recognizing that her years on Epic helped consolidate an avid fanbase, Belica still believes that the indie approach can be of great benefit. "Ani DiFranco and [DiFranco's label] Righteous Babe are definitely role models for me," she says. "Ani is a great example of persistence paying off. She has a line, 'I could be the million that you never made,' which I think

might be a message to the big record companies.

"I strongly believe that for an artist with some kind of following, whether it's been established through touring or being on a major label or what have you, you can do a lot yourself with the Internet," she continues. "For a baby band, it's a little harder—the net is so vast that you can't count on people just finding you. But if you're an established act, people can just enter your name on a search engine and sort of track you down. That's how a lot of people came to my website."

Belica reports that her *decembergirl.com* site logs 5,000 hits a month. "And we know there are something like 300,000 October Project fans out there. It's a great way to communicate and stay in touch with those people."

Belica gives much of the credit for her career as a songwriter to Julie Flanders: The pair met on their first day as roommates at Yale, where both were studying to become concert pianists. Flanders ultimately became an English major, which fostered her interest in penning lyrics. "She had become very involved in songwriting, and she encouraged me to try it as well, and we ended up writing our first song together," Belica recalls. "Music always came fairly readily to me, and as a result I wrote a lot of music without words. But good music evokes a mood, and that will in turn generate lyrics in the best of circumstances."

Soon Flanders's boyfriend, Emil Adler, got involved with the songwriting process as well, and after graduation October Project was formed. "The band defined the '90s for all of us," she says. "It really created a template for what would follow—we disbanded, but now it's kind of come full circle as we've re-established our associations. When we re-recorded 'Return to Me' for my CD, it was the first time we had all been back together in the studio, with the exception of [OP's] lead singer—because I'd usurped her role," she says with a laugh.

The three are now looking to record and perform as "opiii" (denoting both the October Project connection and the number of members),

while Belica intends to continue pursuing her own muse as well. "I have enough material to release an instrumental album, and I have been involved with so many different talented people that I would like to present some of that material as a type of time capsule." Recordings with Michael Brecker and Andreas Vollenweider are already in the can; Belica says she may make the first track available as a free MP3 on her website.

As a resident of Soho in downtown New York, near the site of the World Trade Center disaster, Belica also feels the urge to address that event in her art. "I've been struck by how much more of a connection there is now between people. The value of music, to soothe and heal, has become so apparent again, from the all-star benefit concerts on down. I have begun a song about seeing one man jumping from one of the towers. I believe there is a responsibility for those of us who were present to carry the story forward and to relate our personal experiences. It makes the event more comprehensible—it's so vast that the only way to absorb it is in small doses."

In the meantime, Belica is enjoying the freedoms of being an independent artist and the advantages of being a new BMI affiliate. "As a newcomer to BMI, I have been struck by how active they are in their involvement with both new writers and established writers. They have a very hands-on approach, and they're always creating opportunities for songwriters to show their stuff. For me it's been a breath of fresh air."

She is also looking forward to a new arrangement with Music Design, a distributor that specializes in reaching alternative retail outlets like spas and bookstores, which will result in *decembergirl's* first in-store presence in 2002.

"Being an independent, all the decisions are in your own hands," she says. "You can decide how to market yourself, where to play—everything. For me, that's all a part of the fun and the challenge." ■

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