

McLachlan resurfaces after 5-year retreat

On tour promoting 'Afterglow,' singer never misses a beat

POP/FOLK

Sarah McLachlan

Where: Continental Airlines Arena; 50 State Route 120, East Rutherford

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday

How much: \$47-\$67; Call (201) 935-3900 or visit www.meadowlands.com

BY KAREN IRIS TUCKER
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

When we last saw folk-pop singer Sarah McLachlan in the limelight of 1999, she had achieved international recognition for her babes-only Lilith Fair tour.

McLachlan's multi-platinum CD "Surfacing" (1997) whirled through the airwaves alongside the missives of other female artists, many of whom, through Lilith Fair, had gained exposure in arenas filled with henna-tattooed teen and college-age girls.

It was, as McLachlan, 36, says rather mistily, "a really great time."

Then, McLachlan says, "the media wanted something new to talk about. So that door kind of got slammed shut. (The female singer-songwriter) was what radio chose not to play. Other music found the forefront — the angry white boy bands, the Nickelbacks and Creed, and also the Britneys and Christinas."

McLachlan enthusiasts argue she bulldozed a path for female musicians simply by demonstrating how adoringly the market could receive them in bulk. Detractors made hay of the homogeneity of Lilith Fair's largely white, acoustic-based performers and questioned the relevance of an all-female tour.

McLachlan, having met both fame and fortune, was able to pack up and retreat from it all. And that's exactly what she did for five years. In that time away, the ghostly-voiced singer experienced several momentous life events — marrying her drummer, Ashwin Sood; caring for her dying mother, and giving birth to her daughter, India, now 2.

Back on tour to showcase her double-platinum CD "Afterglow," released in November, McLachlan (who performs Monday at Continental Airlines Arena) says she had no illusions about merely picking back up on her career's former monster momentum.

"The longer you're out of it, the more work you have to do to get back in," she said. "The few people who really love me no matter what I do will buy the record, but all the rest — those are the ones you have to win back."

"Afterglow" makes few musical departures from where McLachlan's breakthrough CD, "Fumbling Toward Ecstasy" (1994) or "Surfacing" leave off. The piano-based set is awash in soothing, bewitching whispers; the tracks, accented occasionally by dance beats, undulate and ebb. McLachlan delivers confiding first-person narratives about the "lonely light of the morning" ("Fallen") and a haunting 9/11-inspired "visions clash, planes crash" ("World on Fire"). Her warm, lit-ing soprano is still a sun-baked sheet flapping gently in the breeze.

McLachlan says there was an assumption the record would be "about my mom or my baby, but I was way too in the middle of it to write about it." If she had, McLachlan is convinced the result would have been "completely self-indulgent drivel. It takes me a long time to process emotional information. I'm not sure those subjects will ever make it into songs."

Of her daughter, who is on the road with her, McLachlan says, "I could not imagine being away from her for more than a couple hours. I'm pathetic." Balancing music and motherhood, she says, "poses more challenges, but makes it so much more fun, too." What used to keep her "going throughout the day was the fact that I got to play in a show that night. Now, I have another distraction."

Having grown out her former signature choppy girl-style hair, McLachlan says she is reveling in relative anonymity. "When they get used to me with long hair," she said, "I'm going to hack it all off again."

Of the future, she says, "I'm really happy with my success and I'm going to keep making the music I want to make. I'm very selfish; I don't do it for anyone but me."

