

SUNDAY NOW

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Ladies' nights

Music's coolest women are getting New York in tune

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Any three-week span out of the year will find New York filled with world-class musicians playing stages large and small, uptown and downtown, in outer boroughs and in Manhattan hot spots. But over the next 19 days, an incredible array of major artists in multiple genres — Scotland's KT Tunstall, Russian-born Regina Spektor, the country female duo the Wreckers, Grammy winner India.Arie, singer-songwriter Nellie McKay, and Tony winner Audra McDonald — will descend on the city. That hum you hear is the whole town getting in the groove.

KT TUNSTALL ▶

CD: "Eye to the Telescope"
NEXT UP: "Acoustic Extravaganza,"
due Oct. 17
Performs: Oct. 6 and 7 at Webster Hall

America's first glimpse of the talents of Scottish singer-songwriter KT Tunstall came when "American Idol" contestant Katharine McPhee performed Tunstall's U.K. hit "Black Horse and the Cherry Tree" on her knees in front of millions of viewers. It gave McPhee instant credibility and earned raves from Simon Cowell.

But it was strange for the woman whose song it was, since Tunstall dumped her TV set a few years ago "because it was melting my brain." Did she question giving her permission to "Idol"?

"It was a quandary, definitely," says Tunstall. "It was a really difficult decision, because I really don't like pop reality shows. But ... at the end of the day, I would've been a fool to say no. It got my song heard by 40 million people."

In the end, Tunstall, 31, thought McPhee did a good job and was happy to have help winning over America the way she has the U.K. In Britain, her CD "Eye to the Telescope" has been a huge critical and commercial success, peaking at No. 3 and snagging Tunstall a Brit Award for Best Female Solo Artist.

"I started coming out to the States in fall 2005, doing venues like the Living Room in New York," says Tunstall. "I loved it. Then we did Mercury Lounge. And now we've got a few nights at Webster Hall. It's fantastic. But it's a bloody massive country."

Not that she's complaining: Tunstall loves the U.S. She lived in Connecticut for her senior year of high school and fell in love with American music. "I was actually doing a solo tour of coffee shops," she says. "I really couldn't face being like Phoebe from 'Friends'! Because I've sat in coffee shops and when a girl with a guitar came in, I've just groaned. I've felt like, Please don't ruin my scone!"

But now, she says, touring is a dream, especially with our great...tour buses?



KT TUNSTALL

"Tour buses in the U.S. just kick a— compared to European ones!" Tunstall says with a note of incredulity. "American tour buses are so swanky. They have air fresheners and carpets!"

What really stops her in her tracks is how crowds in so many places know the words to every song on "Telescope." (Her tune "Miniature Disasters" has been used on TV's "Grey's Anatomy," and "Suddenly I See" was in this summer's hit film "The Devil Wears Prada.") "It's so bizarre," says Tunstall. "We went to Annapolis. We didn't even know there was a place called Annapolis. We thought it was a typo. Was it supposed to be Minneapolis? Indianapolis? But it was an amazing show. It's like, you close your eyes and you're in your bedroom playing, then you open your eyes and there are people from Annapolis in your room. It's mad!"

THE WRECKERS ▶

CD: "Stand Still, Look Pretty"
Perform: Sept. 27 at a benefit at Crobar for breast-cancer awareness

Michelle Branch had two hit albums as an indie artist; both had gone platinum and received strong reviews. Her close friend Jessica Harp was just about to record her major-label debut. But the two women were drawn to the notion of recording country music as a duo.

No one else liked the idea.

"There was a lot of pressure from different people," says the 23-year-old Branch. "A lot of people weren't happy with this little idea that we had. Then a couple weeks after finishing the record, I found out I was pregnant [Branch is married to her bass player, Teddy Landau]. We tried to keep it a secret as long as possible."

"So we were on Maverick Records, and I felt like they were gonna throw [the CD] out there and if it didn't stick, they'd move on."

Turns out, everyone was wrong — even Branch and Harp themselves. As the Wreckers, the two have become the first country duo to hit No. 1 with a debut single ("Leave the Pieces") since the mammoth-selling Brooks & Dunn. Now, their little side-project idea has taken on a life of its own.

"The people who were the biggest naysayers are now the biggest a--kissers. It feels really good it worked out this way on a totally selfish level of rubbing



AUDRA McDONALD

RON SACHS

it in their faces!" Branch says with a laugh. "But on another level, we worked really hard for this and we followed our guts, and it was a big change for both of us. And for it to work was pretty miraculous."

Even though New York doesn't have a country-music station, it feels like home to the Arizona native (she and Harp recorded the CD at a studio in the Meatpacking District). But soon they'll be back on the road with Branch's daughter by her side.

"She's a good tour baby," says Branch. "The only thing I feel guilty about is that she doesn't see any other children. All she knows are roadies. It's funny to see the tattooed, hasn't-showered-in-weeks guys come over and start talking baby talk."

▲ AUDRA McDONALD

CD: "Build a Bridge"
Performs: Oct. 11 and 12 at Lincoln Center's Allen Room

Actress and singer Audra McDonald says she began acting lessons as a child to counteract her hyperactivity. Clearly, it didn't take.

She's currently workshoping a revival of "110 in the Shade," heading to Broadway in the spring. She appears on PBS concert next month, around the same time she's filming a TV-movie version of her revival of "A Raisin in the Sun" with Sean Combs (it'll air on ABC next year). On New Year's Eve, she'll perform on "Live From Lincoln Center." In February, she's doing a Kurt Weill opera in Los Angeles co-starring Patti LuPone. And then there's her recurring role on the new NBC drama "Kidnapped."

Oh, and she has an album coming out Tuesday.

Called "Build a Bridge," the CD is a departure for the performer, who's won Tonys for her work in dramatic productions like "Raisin" and the moody musical "Carousel." Unlike her eclectic collection of theater and art songs, "Bridge" is dominated by pop from the likes of Neil Young, Laura Nyro and Elvis Costello. Costello



NELLIE MCKAY

DEBRA L. ROTHENBERG

track — "God Give Me Strength," which he wrote with Burt Bacharach — kicks off the album.

"That's a difficult song to sing," says McDonald, talking from London, where she's working (of course) before heading off to Los Angeles for, well, more work. "We really had to tease out the right arrangement for me. It took a long time to find."

"I love the absolute desperation of the song. I think it could be about someone who's maybe even an atheist; someone who has no other place to go. They say, 'All right, let me try this thing I don't even believe in, because I am that desperate.'"

In Neil Young's aching "My Heart," McDonald hears "some sort of struggle with addiction." In "It Ain't Easy Bein' Green" (the Kermit the Frog favorite), it's the struggle to feel good about yourself. But lest anyone think McDonald's gifts are limited to high drama, she throws in witty

gems by John Mayer, Rufus Wainwright and Nellie McKay.

"All these songs, apart from the one that's actually from a Broadway show ['Dividing Day,' from 'The Light in the Piazza'], sound like they could be in a musical," McDonald says. "I didn't want to do all theater music this time. But I'm still attracted to songs that fill the requirements for a theater song — they all have an emotional arc."

◀ NELLIE MCKAY

CD: "Get Away From Me"

Next Up: "Pretty Little Head" in October
Performs: At a benefit concert Oct. 4 at the Hiro Ballroom

She hasn't even released her second album yet, but Nellie McKay has had a storied, crisis-filled career. Her first CD, "Get Away From Me," is often called the only double-album debut by a woman in history — and McKay had to fight her label, Sony, to get it out. Then she and Sony parted ways over the length of her second CD, "Pretty Little Head," which was originally slated for 2005. While the album was delayed, McKay starred on Broadway in "The Threepenny Opera."

"Pretty" is listed on Amazon.com as coming out Oct. 24, but the real date is rumored to be Oct. 31. Such confusion is par for the course for McKay, but Halloween would be appropriate, since the 24-year-old mixes rock, folk, rap, jazz, cabaret, Broadway stylings and everything else into a bewitchingly original brew.

A member of PETA and a strict vegetarian, McKay — born in London but brought up mostly in the city and in the Poconos — will be part of a concert at the Hiro Ballroom co-sponsored by ASPCA to benefit rescue groups and promote no-kill animal shelters. The bill also includes the Beastie Boys, Marshall Crenshaw, Deborah Harry and MC Chi Chi Valenti.

REGINA SPEKTOR ▶

CD: "Begin to Hope"

Performs: Sept. 27 and 28 at Town Hall

A Bronx girl by way of Moscow, Regina Spektor may have a flashy Web site and the obligatory MySpace page, but she has developed as an artist in a remarkably old-fashioned manner: releasing albums on a smaller label, touring, doing the requisite press and slowly working her way up. Now, Sire Records has released her sixth — and breakthrough — album, "Begin to Hope."

And like many of the best songwriters, Spektor creates tunes that are firmly rooted in where she lives. On "That Time," she sings, "Hey remember that time when I found a human tooth on Delancey?" And "Summer in the City" has a line that certain New Yorkers might embrace: "I'm so lonely lonely lonely/ So I went to a protest just to rub up against strangers."

Yet it's her song "Fidelity" that stops the show. Spektor performed it recently on "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," prompting the host to gush, "That was amazing! That was one of my favorite performances in a long time by anybody!" Spektor, for her part, smiled shyly.

But it's the fans seeing her live who can really smile. On "Fidelity," she delivers the line "... and it breaks my heart" with a catchy sort of stutter, singing the last word as a plaintive "he-aaaaaaa-rrr-t-t-t." Anyone singing along to the song on an iPod would sound silly. Yet with hundreds of people joining in with Spektor, it'll sound just right.

INDIA.ARIE ▼

CD: "Testimony: Vol. 1, Life & Relationship"

Performs: Oct. 7 at the Beacon

Something happens when India Arie sings the song "Private Party" from her new album. Something sort of ... intimate.

"'Private Party' is very sexy to me," she says, "because it talks about the female anatomy and appreciating it, you know what I mean? The way I feel when I sing it — I don't know what I do with my body, but the band is always like, 'Wooh!' I haven't seen myself [do that]. I haven't recorded any of the shows. They're always like, 'Dang, where'd you get that?'"

All that won't come as a surprise to anyone who's seen Arie live. But her first two CDs were so smart, and so aware of the world around her, that people might be forgiven for thinking that she's always at political protests wearing traditional garb.

(She addresses the idea in the first single, "I Am Not My Hair.")

"When I hear a lot of my earlier music, I hear a female but one lacking a sensuality — there's a lack of sexuality in the sound," says the woman born India Arie Simpson and raised in Atlanta. "I think a lot of people relate to me in that way. If I have on a pair of jeans, people are like, 'Oh my God, look at you!' Everybody wears jeans, but when I wear a pair, it becomes a big deal."

"They say, 'I didn't know you were curvaceous like that.' My past two albums had, for lack of a better word, an asexual type of energy. I think even



REGINA SPEKTOR

GETTY

though the subject matter [on the new CD] is not sexual, because it talks about relationships, it has a more sensual element to it. And that, to me, is very womanly."

It also talks about heartbreak: Arie was in a serious relationship, one she thought was heading toward marriage, that suddenly ended, and she says it took three years to work through the anger and pain and produce "Testimony" songs like "There's Hope" and "I Choose," tunes that embrace forgiveness and self-respect.

She has always had huge success; her first two CDs have sold 3 million copies, and Arie has won two Grammys and been nominated for 12 — but "Testimony" debuted at No. 1, giving Motown Records its first chart-topper since Diana Ross' "Lady Sings the Blues" in 1972.

"Yeah, it is satisfying, because I did what I wanted to do and it worked," says Arie, who'll turn 31 four days before her Beacon show. "That's what really makes it cool. There were days when I was really sad going over the different events in my mind of that relationship. Then to go from crying on the floor to No. 1 on Billboard was a life journey that I will always remember." ♦



THE WRECKERS

