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Natalie Merchant defies odds by going solo

When The Smiths broke up and Morrissey announced his plans for a solo career, a great number of the singer's fans shook their heads and adopted the philosophy that "things would never be the same."

Of course things would never be the same. If Morrissey did not want things to change, he would not have left the safe haven of his successful band. Still, when I saw Morrissey in 1992, a presence was obviously missing. He had put out several successful albums and was playing to a near-capacity crowd at The Summit in Houston, but there seemed to be a void — in his performance, voice and style — that, at least in my mind, only The Smiths could fill.

So when I heard shortly after the concert that my favorite singer in the whole wide world, Natalie Merchant, had left my favorite band in the whole wide world, 10,000 Maniacs, to pursue a solo career, I could not help but be saddened and extremely skeptical. Here I had just witnessed the demise of Morrissey on stage, and I feared that I would have to face the same thing with Natalie Merchant when she would some day tour the world solo.

She proved me wrong. When I saw Natalie Merchant Monday night in Austin, I was blown away and so were my expectations.

Fate (and open phone lines) somehow landed me in the center of the front row, an unheard-of event in my concert-going career,

which made the evening even more enjoyable. But no outside element could upstage what I saw on stage.

The shyness and pretentiousness that often comes across in interviews with Merchant was nowhere to be found. Rather, the Merchant I saw was undoubtedly one of the happiest performers I have ever seen, and that attitude showed in every minute of her two-and-a-half hour set.

I must admit that sometimes it's nice to see the critics silenced. And that's exactly what Merchant is doing, night after night.

Merchant brought new life to every song she performed, including nearly every song from her debut solo album, *Tigerlily*, which has spawned two hit singles and sold over one million copies, despite receiving dismal reviews from both Spin and Rolling Stone.

Oh yeah, did I mention Merchant sold out Jones Hall in Houston Tuesday night? This is her first solo tour, mind you.

Even though I aspire to be a music critic, I must admit that sometimes it's nice to see the critics silenced. And that's exactly what Merchant is doing, night after night.

Merchant, ever-mindful of her extremely successful stint with the Maniacs, pleased the

crowd with four of her old band's songs, including a revamped version of "These Are Days" that, if you can imagine, made the song sound even happier. All of the old songs were remade and sounded better than ever, showing Merchant's reverence for her past, as well as her ability to grow as an artist.

Merchant brought down the house when she and members of The Innocence Mission, the night's opening band, led the crowd in a cover of "Will the Circle be Unbroken," during which she let members of the audience on stage to sing along with her.

And Merchant was the first performer I have ever seen that was willing to try any song she pleased on stage.

Although she would sometimes burst out in laughter in the middle of songs because she did not know the next verse, her charm and stunning voice would have made covers of nursery rhymes a pleasure.

There was nothing missing in Merchant's show. Rather than feeling that there was a permanent void she would never be able to fill, I got the feeling Merchant was free of the shackles of a life — and band — she no longer wanted to be a part of.

If there were any voids to be felt that night it was the one I sensed as I listened to 10,000 Maniacs on the way home. Something was missing — probably the life, energy and sincerity that I had just witnessed on stage.

I never thought I would say this, but Merchant is better off — she's just better period — without the Maniacs. Morrissey would be wise to take notes.

AMY UPTMOR

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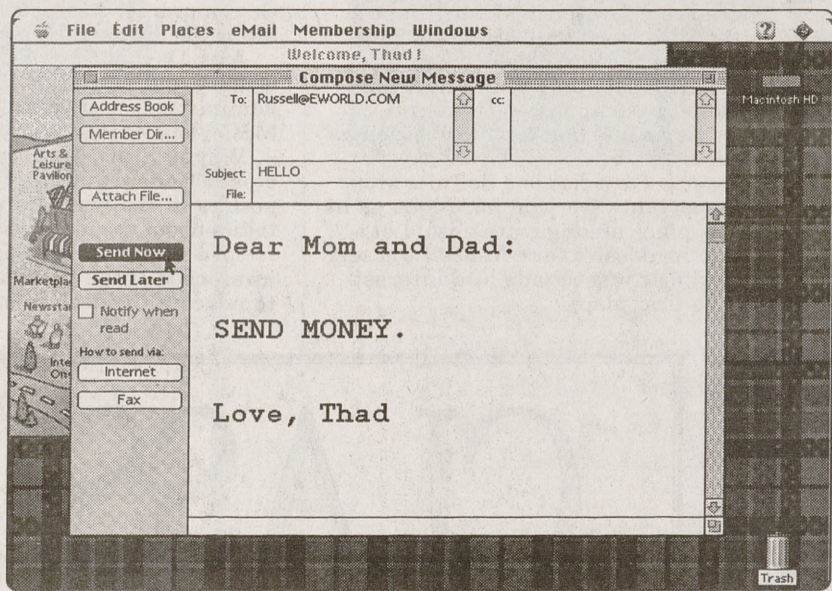
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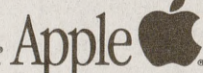
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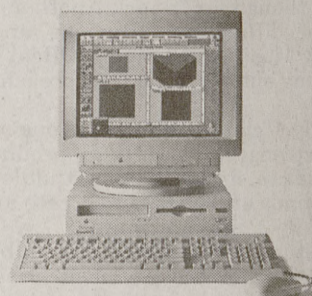
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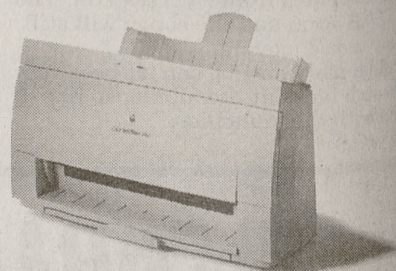
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