

On finding a good anchor

Maren Morris proves a hit at the first-ever NMS New York Music Festival
by Tom Geddie

IN THE SPACE ON FACEBOOK WHERE MOST people put short, pithy, philosophical quotes, Maren Morris shared this offbeat joke:

Peter: "So I was sitting in my cubicle today, and I realized, ever since I started working, every single day of my life has been worse than the day before it. So that means that every single day that you see me, that's on the worst day of my life."

Hypnotist: "What about today? Is today the worst day of your life?"

Peter: "Yeah."

Hypnotist: "Wow. That's messed up."

If I were telling that joke, I might have made the hypnotist a therapist of some sort, but you get the idea.

Morris is 22 years old now, and she's been writing songs and performing on stage since she was ten or so. A friend of mine said she heard Maren sing, as an eight-year-old, "Me and Bobby McGee" around a campfire at some music festival. It's possible she was already ten; she still looks younger than she is.

To some people, she may always be the little girl with a big voice.

In June, Morris was standing backstage at a theater in New York City, chatting with Wyclef Jean, Tommy Ramone, and some other musicians and industry folks when she heard her name called out from the stage.

"I didn't really understand what was happening," she said. "I didn't hear my name being announced because I was talking to someone."

She was one of three finalists—from among thousands of entrants—in a nationwide showcase in front of "visionaries and leaders of the new music business, media and the music industry," as organizers put it, at the first-ever NMS New York Music Festival.

"I got on stage and didn't know if I was runner up or the grand prize winner," she said.

She was the grand prize winner: close to

\$150,000 worth of promotion, marketing, consultations, and music equipment including a 1962 Gibson Les Paul reissue—"one of my favorite gifts," she said; I've been wanting an electric guitar for a long time"—and a new keyboard.

That was on Tuesday night. By Friday, she was home in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and, after a good night's sleep, she was

getting back to normal.

"I'm kinda coming down from the state of shock I was in right after they presented me with the grand prize," she said just a couple of hours before reporting for work at her parents' Maren Karsen Salon in Arlington.

With three CDs already to her credit, including 2011's *Live Wire*, Morris has been gigging around the area once or twice a week for a long time and working part-time at the salon. She also spent a bit of time studying finance and political science at

the University of North Texas.

Although the competition led to her first New York gig, she's toured England, France, and much of the United States. She's performed with other musicians including Pat Green, Gary Allan, Marty Stuart, Radney Foster, Bob Schneider, Monte Montgomery, and Eli Young.

Evolution

Her music has evolved over time toward—but not into the heart of—alternative country.

"It changes every week," she

"I began writing songs — even short little poems — and that helped me a lot. A great byproduct of being a singer-songwriter is having other people feel a similar emotion with what you've written. You can express yourself and connect with other people emotionally."

—MAREN MORRIS



At 22 she has three CDs to her credit, including 2011's *Live Wire*; Maren Morris

said, exaggerating. "On *Live Wire*, you'll hear a lot of genres. The whole album was kind of a transition phase for me. I was experimenting with different instruments and synthesizers and harmony layering — everything from country to rock to a jazzy piano number kinda reminiscent of Norah Jones.

"I feel like it's not my place to say I'm so different or I work harder or anything. I'm young. I've been writing for more than a decade now. I'm very honest in my songwriting, and I'm kinda all over the map because I love music."

She's not sure yet what the grand prize at the New York Music Festival will mean for her career.

"I have a good general outline of what it means," she said. "They gave me a list of all the things I'd be receiving, but it won't be until July that anything's really in motion."

In addition to the guitar and the keyboard, she also gets 10 days of recording time at a studio in Seattle plus promotional help and a series of consultations with people in music publishing.

"I'll be chatting with a lot of people, getting advice about how to get to the next step," she said.

Morris got into music because it was a good way for her to express her emotions.

"I was always really shy as a kid until I took over the karaoke machine at my parents' house one night, and then my dad bought me my first guitar," she said. "I began writing songs — even short little poems — and that helped me a lot. A great byproduct of being a singer-

songwriter is having other people feel a similar emotion with what you've written. You can express yourself and connect with other people emotionally."

Sometimes, she's still into a shy person's solitary activities.

"I really like sketching. It's kind of a newfound love of mine in the past year or so. I love movies. One of my favorite things to do is go to an art house theater on my day off and watch every movie they are showing that day. Movies and music go hand in hand lots of times. I love scores, the emotion that music brings to the movie.

Morris plans to fulfill a recent-years dream by moving to Nashville beginning of next year, finding a job, and finding places to gig.

"After the consultations, I plan to take life day by day," she said. "I try to be consciously optimistic about things. Even when I was in New York and there was a prize at stake, I wasn't really focused on that.

"I was focused on playing my first show in New York City and on reuniting with some old friends. It will be the same in Nashville. I'm very hopeful things will go well, and the same with the consultations. All I can do is be honest with myself, and not let anyone try to change the core or make me lose sight of myself.

"I've been disappointed so many times meeting people I've idolized; what's that saying, familiarity breeds contempt?"

"Any time it's like you hype it up in your mind before you meet them. That's not how I want to be. Being genuine is a good anchor." ■