

Song Exploder
Natalie Merchant - Sister Tilly
Episode 255

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT)

Natalie Merchant is an award-winning singer and songwriter from upstate New York. She was the lead singer of the band 10,000 Maniacs until she left in 1993. And then, as a solo artist, she's put out nine albums over the last 30 years. Between 10,000 Maniacs and her solo work, she's had multiple multi-platinum records.

In April 2023, Natalie put out her first album of new songs in nine years. It's called Keep Your Courage. And for this episode, she talked to me about the song "Sister Tilly." It's a eulogy for a fictional character – a woman who represents the generation of women who influenced her. Women who were activists in the 1960s and 70s, when she was growing up.

(Vocals: "Oh, Miss Tilly, I think you should know / Everyone's missing you here / Your fortune telling cards, prayer flags in the yard / Your Rilke poems and your stacks of Mother Jones / Your feminist raves in your Didion shades / And your Zeppelin, so loud and so proud")

Natalie: My name's Natalie Merchant.

About three years before I wrote "Sister Tilly," I went to a funeral for a beloved librarian in my small town.

The memorial was so large that we had to have it in a school auditorium. Her husband came up to me before the memorial, because I was running the sound. And he said, when I give you the signal, play this song, as loud as you can. And he gave me the signal, and it was "Waterloo Sunset," by The Kinks. It was her favorite song.

And the entire group of people in the room started weeping, and laughing, and everyone stood up. And I was one of the people laughing and crying at the same time.

("Waterloo Sunset" by THE KINKS)

(Sings along) "Millions of people / Swarming like flies 'round / Waterloo underground." [laughs].

Fast forward three years: In the middle of the pandemic lockdown, I had a couple other friends of that same generation pass away, and we weren't able to have any memorials. One was Sally Grossman, who was a local legend in upstate New York.

So, between those two experiences, of being at a memorial with a full room of people, all celebrating this woman of that generation, and then poor Sally passing away and no one could gather for her.

I had them in mind, and how I wanted to celebrate the lives of these women, and so many others, of my mother's generation.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - demo piano chords)

I was just sitting at my piano. I wasn't really writing with the aim of making an album. I hadn't done that in almost 10 years. And I came up with the chord progression that made "Sister Tilly" appear.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - demo)

(Vocals: "Oh, Miss Tilly, I think you should know / Everyone's missing you here.")

I just said, oh, Miss Tilly. She just came outta my mouth. And that doesn't happen very often [chuckles].

Sometimes it's a blessing when you get a little message that says, *This is what your song is about*. And sometimes it's a curse, because then I was like, okay, I've created Sister Tilly, but I don't know who she is, where she lives...

I just had to flesh her out.

I really wanted to turn Sister Tilly into a composite character; an amalgam of many different women. Because I'm not really just eulogizing her. I'm eulogizing the generation of women. And so I thought that it'd be better to take characteristics from several different women I knew.

The women that influenced me at a young age introduced me to yoga, definitely a lot of the books that I've read, films that I saw... The influences are, they're just the air that we breathe.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - solo lead vocals)

(Vocals: "Crystals, chimes and your moonflower vines / Tinctures, teas and your secret remedies")

Once I determined that she was a woman who was in her prime in the mid to late sixties, early seventies, I decided I would make some references to some of the music that was popular at the time.

And so, the cadence is very much influenced by Dylan. (sings in exaggerated cadence) "Your *tinctures*, your *teas*, your secret *remedies*, and your *voice* like Buffy Sainte-Marie..."

And all the Sister Tillys are into tinctures, teas, and secret remedies. Just put this clove of garlic in your lower lip, Natalie, and you'll be great.

My mother was not a Sister Tilly. My mother was a teenage bride who had four children by the time she was 23.

She and my father were separated when I was eight, divorced when I was nine. And she went to work at the art department of the local college. And it was there that she found a group of people who inspired her to think more broadly.

And there was a Swedish woman who came to teach for a year. She taught ceramics. She had really long, braided hair, and wore ponchos and Birkenstocks, and didn't shave, and she would help me make pottery on the wheel.

And I think she was my first Sister Tilly.

I thought it was amazing that you could earn a living through your creativity. And I couldn't imagine a more successful outcome for life, than to be an artist.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - solo lead vocals)

(Vocals: "With your hair in a mess, in your outdated dress / When Halston was all the rage / Back in your Chelsea Girl days")

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - oboe)

We recorded up in a rural residential studio in Brattleboro, Vermont. I decided I would work with an arranger named Gabriel Kahane.

I met Gabriel years ago when he was workshopping his musical. So I asked him if he would be interested in coloring my narrative.

We started with a core band of drums,

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - drums)

bass,

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - add bass)

piano,

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - add piano)

guitar,

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - add guitar)

And that was Tilly's skeleton.

And then the strings.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - strings)

And it was still the fifth wave of Covid. So we decided that we would keep it to five people in the studio at a time. Which meant that these huge arrangements had to be layered.

And Gabriel wrote this string part that sounds like it could be a Jimmy Page guitar solo.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT)

(Vocals: "Your feminist raves in your Didion shades / And your Zeppelin, so loud and so proud / Your Zeppelin, so loud and so proud")

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - string solo)

I give a passing reference to Joan Didion's sunglasses. And the week I did the vocals, she passed away.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - piano melody)

And that's why I dedicated the album to her. To Joan Didion and all her sisters.

And it just shows you, just, not a moment too soon. That's what I feel about this song. Every day we're losing more of these women.

And there's so many aspects of our lives that we take for granted.

The fact that I was able to have my daughter in a state-of-the-art birthing center.

My mother had a fully, she was fully anesthetized when she had all four of her children, and was handed some formula as she walked out the door. And it would've been considered, quote, perverse if she had suggested maybe I'd like to breastfeed, when I was born in 1963.

But by 1979? Completely acceptable, to have an unmedicated birth.

But those are things that the women of my mother's generation fought for.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT)

(Vocals: "Here's to your days at the barricades / Here's to the girls in the fray")

Alex Sopp came in with alto flute.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - alto flute)

And she put on five tracks, at least. And then came the oboe.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - oboe)

And then came the brass section.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - brass)

It's unusual, in pop music, to hear a lot of oboe, and alto flute, and flugelhorn these days.

But it makes it a richer texture, richer fabric.

I always make sure, even if it's just someone coming in to do a single instrument overdub. Everyone had to understand what the song was about.

And so, the cello line in (sings) "But you're gone" is just an octave, (sings) "Buh-uh."

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - solo lead vocal)

(Vocals: "But you're gone")

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - cello)

I remember just uh, telling Eleanor, the cellist, This is the moment when people realize that she's passed away. And she started crying. Her mother is a Sister Tilly.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT)

(Vocals: "But you're gone / You've gone so far away / But you're gone, gone / You've gone so far away")

There's several different movements to the song. And I thought it would be great to describe her life with the more dreamy, ethereal approach, this 3/4 feel:

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - section in 3/4 time)

And then, when she's making her departure, she's got places to go.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - section in 4/4 time)

(Vocals: "Oh, you've gone away / You've gone away")

I did the vocals for almost a full week.

(Vocals: "(Sister Tilly, you're a constellation) / (Sister Tilly, you're a white light vibration now)")

We tried doing it as a gang vocal. And it was a great amount of fun, to have everyone standing around one microphone, but it sounded god-awful [chuckles]. It just sounded awful.

So I decided that I would go in and sing all those vocals myself.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - lead and backing vocals)

(Vocals: "(Tears fall down like rain) / There's nothing but the big forever / There's nothing but a sweet surrender now")

And then at the very end it gets kind of mystical. when I am ushering, up, her off into the great beyond.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT)

(Vocals: "Go on without us / Don't think about us now")

That's another aspect of sixties music, the kind of Eastern influence, and the kind of Ravi Shankar, sitar kind of feel. And, you know, Sister Tilly spent some time in an ashram, of course. So I had to make some kind of reference to that.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - bass sound)

Hrishikesh: And who's playing that droning, tanpura sound?

Natalie: The bass player had, it's actually a tone generator that he uses to tune [chuckles]. And I said, that is great. We have to have that [chuckles].

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT - bass sound fades out)

I'm becoming a bit of a Sister Tilly myself, to be honest. And there's quite a bit of me in Sister Tilly.

The Rilke poems, and the stacks of Mother Jones. It's all – I'm a Sister Tilly in training.

Not only was I raised by women of that generation who had Tilly-esque characteristics; I'm a child of the sixties and seventies, so I can't escape the influence of counterculture. Because counterculture was my culture.

And it is a concern of mine that the work of the Sister Tillys of this country has not been credited to them, and has not been fortified and cherished, and therefore will be lost. Take, for instance, bodily autonomy for women. That's a right that my mother's generation fought...

I can't even talk about it. I can't, because I see this image... of thousands of women. Because this is my childhood, too. Thousands of women, marching in the streets of Washington. The momentum of those women, and the power... They fought so hard, and we didn't secure it, and now we're losing it. And I worry about my daughter's generation.

And it's almost like Sister Tilly knocked on the door, and I had to let her in. Not many songs come about like that. Yeah.

And now I'm getting to share her. And people are seeing themselves in her, and they're seeing their mothers, and friends. And I think maybe it will fill people with more urgency to appreciate them.

I'm being a real softy today [laughs]. I was just about to start crying again!

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all those ideas and elements came together in the full song.

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And now, here's "Sister Tilly" by Natalie Merchant, in its entirety.

("Sister Tilly" by NATALIE MERCHANT)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Sister Tilly."

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith, and Mary Dolan. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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If you liked listening to this, and you want to hear more Song Exploder, check out the Cranberries episode from May 2019. If you were a 10,000 Maniacs fan, I feel like there's a chance you might have also loved the Cranberries. And they talk about a song from their last album – one that they had to finish after the lead singer, Dolores O'Riordan, passed away. You can find that episode, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at songexploder.net/episodes, or wherever you listen.