

MERCHANT, from page 1

that there was no thimerosal, or preservatives of that nature, in the vaccines.

S.Z.: *You come from working class roots, can you talk a bit about your childhood and how those experiences have influenced your work, your career and your life?*

N.M.: I grew up in a small town, in the rustbelt in the Northeast. I grew up with a sense that things were in decline. I'm sure that affected my world view which then affected the things that I chose to write about. By the time I was cognizant of the world, we were deep into a recession in the '70s and the area where I grew up never really recovered.

We were a very close-knit, Italian family. Italian was spoken by all of my older relatives and we kept a lot of the traditions of the small village where they came from alive. We were raised Roman Catholic so there was a sense of tradition and family. That was really wonderful.

And then I also spent lots of time in nature — really unsupervised time in nature. I spent so much time in the woods and the forest. I had my own garden from the time I was 10. In second and third grades, I had a wonderful, really inspiring, elementary school music teacher who would teach me folk music and I fell in love.

S.Z.: *You mentioned that you were disenchanted with school bureaucracy. I read that you dropped out of school at age 16. Is that true?*

N.M.: No, that's not true at all. I went Advanced Placement to college when I was 16. There is quite a difference between dropping out and starting your freshman year at college.

I was precociously mature. When I was 12 my mother said I acted like I was 30. I went to them at 15 and said my plan was to go to college the next year my parents were like, what's your rush? These are the best years of your life. I didn't really feel like I was flourishing in a high school environment.

S.Z.: *It was about this time that you became a member of 10,000 Maniacs. What is the most valued experience you came away with from your time in the band?*

N.M.: (Long pause) I didn't anticipate that I would have a career in music. I just thought that being in a band was something interesting and it was a fun, creative outlet. So I guess the thing I learned was how to be a musician.

S.Z.: *Switching topics a bit to the environmental: Fracking is an important issue in your ethos. Why is it important to you?*

N.M.: Well, New York has been trying to halt the progression of hydraulic fracturing in our state for four years through an amazing grassroots resistance. We have rich deposits of natural gas here because we are on the Marcellus Shale (a unit of marine sedimentary rock found in eastern North America that contains largely untapped natural gas reserves). We have seen what has happened in Ohio and in West Virginia and our nearest neighbors, Pennsylvania. We've seen the industrialization of rural regions and the introduction of toxic chemicals to water systems.

I've lived in rural New York for nearly 50 years — my entire life. This is my world. This is my home. So, I learned about hydraulic fracturing. It is such an extreme and dangerous form of extraction for natural gas. Look — half the country lives in severe drought right now. Failure of crops and all of the things that we've been warned about, are beginning to happen. Why would we get deeper into our addiction to fossil fuels when this is our last moment to make some effort to transition into some alternatives? It's madness.

Regions of Colorado have been devastated. Wells County has 18 thousand wells in one county. I did a benefit for a group of women called Erie Rising. They wrote me a letter, asking me if I would come and do a benefit for them. I had already

heard about them through the research that I am doing about fracking. Within a half mile of three schools, there were plans for eight fracking wells. They fought it desperately, for years.

The fracking began in August. They lost. These women were sobbing, they said, "Our kids are sick, we're sick, our properties are worthless." One woman said, "Even if I

orchestras. We've been approaching the orchestras of all cities in America about there being a program for children where I come in and take the songs apart, and take the poetry apart and reconstruct it with musicians in the room: a real harp player, a real bassoon player and a real string quartet. That's a pretty rare opportunity for children to be in a room with symphonic instruments

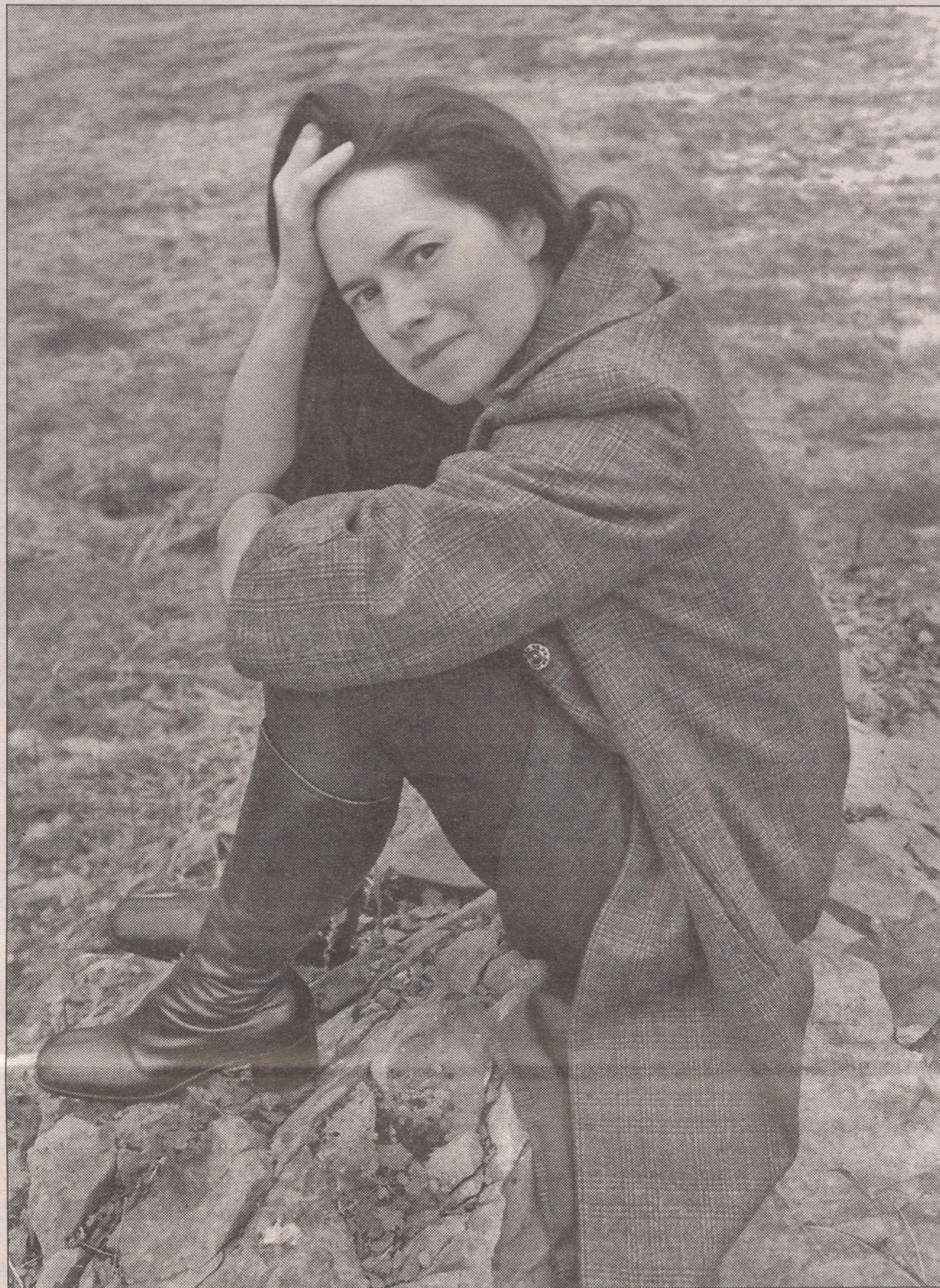


PHOTO BY MARION ETLINGER

could sell my home, it would be morally unjust." She didn't want anyone else to have to go through what they were going through. They are just trapped.

I'm really not feeling "causey" in an ephemeral way. This really matters. This my life, it is my home that I'm trying to defend.

S.Z.: *Let's talk about motherhood. You have said that children have a much larger capacity for feeling than we give them credit for — a realization that came to you as you went through the process of creating "Leave Your Sleep," an album released in spring 2010 for your daughter who was born in 2003. What other revelations have you had in the role of mother?*

N.M.: That it is so important to speak to children as humans from the time that they are really young. I feel that people speak to children like they are objects or that they don't notice things. Children notice everything. They are so sensitive. They are so aware and very sophisticated. I don't mean that they know how to run an iPad. I mean sophisticated in an emotional and intellectual way. They are forming a vision of the world all the time.

S.Z.: *"Leave Your Sleep" was a project that included 27 songs, 130 musicians and took over five years to complete. Have you plans to tackle a project of this enormity again?*

N.M.: No. Well, actually I do have plans to tackle something that isn't quite as enormous. What I would like to make is a website that is a database for American balladry and folk craft.

Also, the "Leave Your Sleep" album was turned into a picture book and that has been really fun. That will come out in November.

I'm also doing these performances with

and pause and say, let's examine what the clarinet and the flute are doing here. We would also talk about the process of adaptation and have the poems turn into music before their eyes. I'm in the process of developing the presentation.

S.Z.: *How important is that oral tradition for you?*

N.M.: I did this amazing collaboration with the 92nd Street YMCA last year, and they had almost 4,000 schoolchildren in New York between the ages of five and nine. They studied a unit of poetry and music based on "Leave Your Sleep." Then I went and gave a free concert and the kids were all bused in over the course of a few days. It was astounding to have 800 New York City schoolkids in the audience at a time. And at least a quarter of them came from households where English was not their first language, a very multi-ethnic community. And they were screaming for Edward Lear (a British artist and poet who is featured on "Leave Your Sleep" and who familiarized the limerick and literary nonsense).

I shared a photograph of Edward Lear and I would say (Merchant speaks as though she is cheering over a crowd of 800 students), "Who's that?" They'd say, "Edward Lear." And I'd say, "What does Edward Lear have on his face?" And they'd scream, "A Beard!" And I'd say, "Edward Lear's beard!" And

they screamed the sentence back to me. And I screamed, "What did Edward Lear write?" And they all screamed back, "Calico Pie!" And we played "Calico Pie" and they all sang along. It was so moving. It was hard to stay focused on what I was doing. I couldn't believe the level of ecstasy in that room over a Victorian poet. If you go to my website, there is actually a film that shares the experience. And one of the girls says, "It was the best day of my life." I think my future is in music education.

S.Z.: *How does one age gracefully in the music industry? I don't mean on a physical level. I mean in terms of sustainability, endurance and presence, creatively.*

N.M.: Well, physically is part of it. You can't deny that we are a culture that really worships youth. We can't ignore that. Some people remain vital by doing the same thing over and over. And there is definitely a market for that. People want to see you — it's like they want to go to McDonalds and eat the same hamburger that they ate 40 years ago. But I would say that the only way you can remain vital is to keep learning and expanding and changing.

I acknowledge that I have contributed a little something to popular culture and it's pretty thrilling. I've written a couple of songs that when people hear them on the radio, they feel good and they sing along. I've become sort of woven into the fabric of the culture and into people's lives. When people tell me, "Kind and Generous" was played at my wedding when I danced with my father," it makes me want to cry. It's really beautiful. There is a type of endurance in that too.

S.Z.: *Your music has been influential to a wide range of people. Aileen Wuornos was the 10th woman to be executed in the United States. She requested that your song, Carnival, be played at her funeral. How did/do you feel about this?*

N.M.: I didn't find out that until there was a documentary being made about her life. To tell the truth, requests came in for several months for the use of the song in the movie, and I said no. I didn't really want to be connected to her. The director (of the documentary) wrote and said, "Well actually, it's not that I just want to use your song, it's that you were part of her life." It was a little mortifying. At the same time, I thought, she did lead a really tortured life and my music brought her some solace, or peace. She must have felt very strongly about it because she knew she was going to die and my song was what she wanted played at her funeral.

That's when I allowed him to use the song in his documentary. You make the music and because of the nature of the technology, it goes out there into the world and you don't have any control over it or who responds to it or how they respond to it.

S.Z.: *When you think about the future of the world, what hopes do you have specifically for your daughter and in general for humanity?*

N.M.: (Long pause) I hope there is some kind of spiritual revolution. I hope for that worldwide epiphany where people realize how precious their lives are. I think all the change will come from that. But until we really realize what a miracle it is that we even exist — all our petty disputes and all of our selfish pursuits — everything will perpetuate and we're going to kill ourselves off. I really believe that the arts, if not religion then the arts, are the second hope for reaching people — to appreciate the beauty that we can create and share.