



Always Lancaster

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Bluegrass singer/songwriter Claire Lynch, who will perform with her band tonight at [Tellus360](#), was recently nominated for the International Bluegrass Music Association's Female Vocalist of the Year Award — for the 15th time. If she wins, it will mark the fourth time she has taken home the trophy.

“It’s a wonder every time it happens,” Lynch says of again being nominated. “There are a lot of young, beautiful, exciting bluegrass singers coming up in the world. I’m really surprised they’re not ready to vote in the fresh blood yet.”

Don’t let the self-deprecation fool you. Lynch began singing bluegrass in the early ’70s, before women generally did such things. And except for a couple of short breaks, she’s never stopped.

Her resume includes two Grammy Award nominations and numerous TV appearances. She has toured with or sung backup vocals for everyone from Dolly Parton to Ralph Stanley. And she has lots of fans.

Emmylou Harris says Lynch “has the voice of an angel.” Mary Chapin Carpenter calls her “a jewel.” Parton says she has the “one of the sweetest, purest and best lead voices in the music business today.”

Lynch has released 15 albums over the last 35 years and has a new one on the horizon. “North By South,” scheduled to be released Sept. 16, features songs written by Canadian songwriters. Because the album includes guest artists like Bela Fleck on banjo and Stuart Duncan on fiddle, the band had to do some practicing to perform songs from the album live.

With a busy touring schedule, finding the time has been a challenge, Lynch says. “We have three (songs) but hope to have at least two more” off the new album ready to play at tonight’s show.

Lynch was inspired to record “North By South” after meeting and later marrying Canadian Ian Gray, a retired schoolteacher, amateur musician and avid music lover. “One of the first things he hit me with when we first started dating was there’s such a divide between Canadian music and U.S. music, but we’re all North Americans,” she says. He gave her an iPod Nano filled with music by Canadian songwriters, and the seed was planted.

Lynch usually pens at least four songs on any given album. This time, she couldn't resist adding one. "I did write one about a Canadian; you can guess who that might be," she says. While she has written or co-written many of the songs on her albums, she never shies away from covering songs by other writers. "To me, a good song is paramount. I try to write good ones and sometimes I do. But when singers insist on having only their own songs on an album, I think they miss out. If they had tapped into the community of songwriters at their fingertips, they could've made a better album."

Tonight's show at Tellus marks the first time Lynch has been to Lancaster, and after recently performing at a series of festivals in record-breaking heat, she's looking forward to a show in air conditioning. "It's our first time there. We just want to get the word out to let people know we're going to be there," she says.

Lynch is known not only for her crystalline voice and poignant songwriting but also as a pioneer in the bluegrass world and role model for other female bluegrass musicians. She didn't grow up with the genre. In fact, she didn't discover it until she was 19, when she attended Springfest at the University of Alabama. The McLain Family Band was performing a teaser on the sidewalk.

"They stopped me in my tracks and I immediately sat down. I was amazed," she says. She attended the concert and found out that she knew some members of the opening band. They talked after the show and decided to join forces, taking the name Hickory Wind, which later changed to the Front Porch String Band.

Not being familiar with bluegrass turned into an advantage, allowing her to blend the sounds of her New York upbringing with her newfound love. "I innocently did that because I was born in New York and moved to Alabama when I was 12," she says. "I had showtunes in my blood. It was just a fusion for me. We've always pushed boundaries in bluegrass."