



## Etheridge, Melissa (b. 1961)

by Linda Rapp

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Melissa Etheridge.  
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Award-winning rock singer and songwriter Melissa Etheridge has not only managed to carve out a spectacularly successful career as a popular mainstream performer, but she has also become a lesbian icon and activist for gay and lesbian causes. With a style characterized by intense emotion and unbridled energy, Etheridge has become one of the most distinctive artists in rock music.

### Early Years

She was born in Leavenworth, Kansas, on May 29, 1961. Her father, John Etheridge, was a math teacher and athletic director at the local high school, and her mother, Elizabeth Williamson Etheridge, worked as a computer specialist for the U.S. Army at Fort Leavenworth.

Etheridge's fascination with music began early. When she was eight, her father bought her her first real guitar, a six-string Harmony Stella, and arranged for her to take lessons with Don Raymond, who had been a big-band jazz guitarist. By the age of ten, Etheridge was beginning to write songs.

When she was eleven "Missy" Etheridge gave her first public performance, singing with two friends at a talent show in Leavenworth. By the age of twelve, she was playing and singing with adult musical groups, doing mostly country and western material. She was also learning to play more instruments--piano, drums, saxophone and clarinet.

### Coming Out and Launching a Career

After high school Etheridge attended Berklee College of Music in Boston. Her roommate in the dormitory was a lesbian who introduced her to women's bars and afforded her the opportunity to talk freely about her sexuality. Etheridge had realized that she was a lesbian at the age of seventeen but, coming from a family in which emotional matters were not much discussed, had never broached the subject with her parents or publicly acknowledged her homosexuality.

Etheridge did not remain long at Berklee. She began singing in bars and eventually dropped out of college. Realizing that Boston was not the ideal place to launch a career in rock-and-roll, she resolved to go to Los Angeles. First, however, she returned home to Kansas to earn money for the trip to California.

Etheridge got a job as music assistant at the Army chapel at Fort Leavenworth. She also began meeting and dating other lesbians in town, on one occasion inviting a woman home to spend the night. The following morning Etheridge found a note from her mother that referred to her "psychological illness" and warned her "not [to] bring that girl over here anymore" if she wanted to continue to live in the house.

Neither Etheridge nor her mother ever mentioned the letter, but Etheridge was deeply disturbed by it and turned to the Army chaplain for guidance. He cautioned her that some people would condemn her but said that he could not believe "that God would have invented a love that could be wrong" and urged her to be

true to herself, which she called "one of the most valuable lessons of my life."

By the eve of her twenty-first birthday she had saved enough money for the planned move to Los Angeles. Before leaving for California, she came out to her father, who had already guessed and who expressed his support.

In Los Angeles Etheridge initially stayed with an aunt. She also made contact with two paternal uncles and learned that they were gay. Etheridge's uncles introduced her to the gay community in Los Angeles.

Etheridge soon found a job playing at a women's bar in Long Beach, where she developed an appreciative following. She worked in other bars as well, including Vermie's in Pasadena, where some loyal fans brought a soccer teammate, Karla Leopold, to a show in hopes that she would persuade her husband, Bill Leopold, a manager in the music business, to represent Etheridge. Bill Leopold was indeed impressed when he heard Etheridge perform, became her manager, and began attempting to secure a recording contract.

Although several companies expressed some interest, no record deal was immediately forthcoming, but Leopold did get Etheridge a song-writing contract with Almo/Irving Music. Songs by Etheridge eventually became part of the sound-track of four movies: *Scenes from the Goldmine* (1987, directed by Mark Rocco), *Weeds* (1987, directed by John Hancock), *Welcome Home, Roxy Carmichael* (1990, directed by Jim Abrahams), and *Boys on the Side* (1995, directed by Herbert Ross).

### **A Record Contract and Success**

In 1986 Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island Records, heard Etheridge perform and was eager to sign her for his label. He was less than pleased, however, when he heard the initial version of her first album. Producers had added keyboard tracks that yielded a pop sound completely uncharacteristic of Etheridge.

In hopes of salvaging the project, Etheridge, drummer Craig Krampf, bassist Kevin McCormick, and engineer Niko Bolas re-recorded all the material in just four days. The second version, which captured the energy and spontaneity of Etheridge's live performances, met with Blackwell's approval.

While awaiting the release of the album, Etheridge went on tour in Britain and Europe. In Germany she visited Dachau and was moved by the sight of the uniforms with pink triangles that had been worn by prisoners there. She was dismayed that there was no memorial to the homosexual victims of the Holocaust.

In 1988 Etheridge's self-titled debut album was greeted with favorable reviews. Critics praised the vitality of her music and compared her to Janis Joplin, a performer whom Etheridge acknowledges as an important influence on her work.

### **Love and Honors**

While on tour promoting the album, Etheridge made a video of the song "Bring Me Some Water." The associate director of the project was Julie Cypher, who would become Etheridge's first long-time partner.

At the time, however, Cypher was married to actor Lou Diamond Phillips. Etheridge and Cypher felt an immediate attraction to each other, but Cypher was still trying to maintain her troubled marriage. Not until January 1990 did she leave Phillips and move in with Etheridge.

Meanwhile, there were important developments in Etheridge's career. "Bring Me Some Water" was nominated for a Grammy in 1989, and that same year Etheridge's second album, *Brave and Crazy*, was released. Etheridge's songs received increasing play on the radio, and her videos appeared frequently on the cable music network VH-1. Both of the first two albums eventually earned platinum records for selling a million copies.

## Coming Out Publicly

In January 1993 Etheridge, who had performed at some campaign events for Bill Clinton, and Cypher were invited to the President's inauguration. They attended the Triangle Ball, the first inaugural celebration for gay men and lesbians. After her friend k.d. lang introduced her to the crowd, Etheridge declared, "I'm real proud to say I'm a lesbian."

Etheridge's spontaneous decision to come out publicly received press coverage but had no adverse effect on her career. Two months after the announcement she won her first Grammy for "Ain't It Heavy" from her album *Never Enough*. Her fourth album, *Yes I Am*, released later in the year, was enormously successful. It included the hit song "Come to My Window," which would bring her another Grammy in 1994.

Etheridge was named *The Advocate's* Person of the Year for 1995. Her fifth album, *Your Little Secret*, debuted in the top ten on the charts. She began publicly addressing social issues such as same-sex marriage, saying that as soon as any state legalized it, she and Cypher would be "first in line."

## Motherhood and Activism

In November 1996 Etheridge and Cypher appeared on the cover of an issue of *Newsweek* devoted to gay families. Cypher gave birth to the couple's first child in February 1997 and to their second in November 1998. Etheridge adopted the children in order to secure full parental rights.

Etheridge had not used her music as a political vehicle, but the murder of gay student Matthew Shepard in October 1998 led her to write "Scarecrow," a song that decried the homophobia that had caused his death.

In 1999 Etheridge became the host and narrator of a reality series on the Lifetime network, *Beyond Chance*, a show about improbable reunions, rescues, and paranormal events. Although a rock star seemed an unusual choice for the role, producers felt that the story-telling ability that Etheridge had shown as a songwriter suited her well for the job.

In 2000 Etheridge and Cypher broke up. In a creative approach to child custody, they bought houses on back-to-back lots so that their children could go from one to the other at will.

## Lesbian Icon

Etheridge has had an extremely successful career as a musician, selling over twenty-five million records worldwide, performing in concert to enthusiastic audiences, and appearing in videos and on shows such as MTV's *Unplugged*, where she sang duets with Bruce Springsteen, whose music influenced hers.

The passion, intensity, and emotion of Etheridge's performances and the sincerity of her lyrics have won her the admiration of many fans, but lesbians have especially responded to her fearless expression of raw emotion.

Even since coming out publicly, however, Etheridge has not written a specifically lesbian love song. Although her songs have sometimes been interpreted as referring to her lesbianism (as in the title of her album *Yes I Am*), she disavows such interpretations, which she sees as limiting. In her songs, she prefers to use a genderless *you* when referring to her beloved. Explaining this choice in an interview in *The Advocate*, Etheridge said, "I don't want to cut anybody out. I don't want to alienate anyone."

In this aim she has succeeded. As music journalist and Etheridge biographer Chris Nickson notes, "[h]er songs speak to everybody, showing that whether heterosexual or gay, we share the same emotions--that at the heart of it all, it's passion and love that matter, not sexual orientation."

## **New Work, New Relationship**

In 2002, Etheridge released a DVD entitled *Live . . . and Alone*. The title refers to the artist's summer 2001 concert tour, on which she performed without any backup musicians.

Happily, however, she was no longer alone in her personal life, having entered into a relationship with Tammy Lynn Michaels, an actress who appeared on the WB television series *Popular*. Together since 2002, the couple exchanged wedding vows on September 20, 2003 in Malibu, California.

A minister from the non-denominational Agape Church presided at the ceremony. Etheridge and Michaels consider themselves married, though they were not able to get a marriage license in California at the time. Both women were attended by their mothers, who lit candles and held the wedding rings until it was time for the couple to exchange them.

Etheridge released a new album, *Lucky*, in early 2004. Like her 2001 album, *Skin*, written in the wake of her break-up with Cypher, *Lucky* is a mirror of her life, but this time reflecting her newfound joy.

## **Medical Challenge**

In October 2004, Etheridge announced that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Because she had to undergo surgery and chemotherapy, she canceled a concert tour to promote her album *Lucky*.

Etheridge's first public appearance after beginning cancer treatment was at the Grammy Awards ceremony in February 2005. Chemotherapy had caused her to lose her hair, but nothing could stop her indomitable spirit: standing bald, courageous, and determined, she teamed with British rocker Joss Stone in an exuberant rendition of "Piece of My Heart" in tribute to Janis Joplin. She received a much deserved standing ovation.

## **Great Expectations**

In April 2006, Etheridge received the Stephen F. Kolzak Award at the annual GLAAD Media Awards. The honor is given to "an openly gay member of the entertainment or media community for his or her work toward eliminating homophobia."

In the same month Etheridge and Michaels announced that Michaels was pregnant, having conceived twins through artificial insemination, using an anonymous donor from a sperm bank. The couple's daughter, Johnnie Rose, and son, Miller Steven, were born on October 17, 2006.

Calling themselves "a blessed family," the couple requested that well-wishers not send gifts and stated that they would donate any received to a women's shelter.

At the Academy Awards presentation in February 2007, Etheridge won the Oscar for Best Song for her composition "I Need to Wake Up," which she wrote for and performed in the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, directed by Davis Guggenheim), featuring former Vice President Al Gore. In accepting the award, she thanked her wife for her support and expressed the hope that "we can be the generation that woke up and changed" to become better stewards of the environment.

In response to a question about where she would be keeping her statuette, Etheridge quipped, "This is the only naked man that will be in my bedroom."

On April 15, 2010 Etheridge and Michaels announced they had separated. The break-up was acrimonious and

was played out in public. In May 2012, the couple announced that their two-year child custody battle had been settled.

In September 2011, Etheridge was honored with a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame."

In June 2012, Etheridge played her first Pride event, at Pittsburgh Pride's "Pride in the Street," a block party that takes place on the street made famous by the television series, *Queer as Folk*, Liberty Avenue between 9th and 10th Streets.

Etheridge released a new CD, *4th Street Feeling*, in September 2012.

### **New Activism, New Marriage**

In June 2013, in the wake of the Supreme Court's historic rulings in *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, which resulted in the end of Proposition 8, and in *Windsor v. U.S.*, which invalidated the Defense of Marriage Act, Etheridge both celebrated the extension of civil rights to gay and lesbian couples and announced her engagement to actor, producer, writer Linda Wallem, who is best known as the creator of the television series *Nurse Jackie*. The couple had been dating since 2010, but had been friends for more than a decade.

In December 2013, Etheridge launched a non-profit organization, the Uprising of Love Coalition, in order to support the glbtq communities in Russia and other areas where gay people are endangered and persecuted. The organization has attracted the support of such celebrities as Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, Jake Shears, Lance Bass, Lily Tomlin, Jim Parsons, James Franco, Julianne Moore, Judith Light, George Takei, Alec Mapa, and Sigourney Weaver, among many others. On March 25, 2014, Etheridge released the official video of her song from which the organization takes its name.

On May 31, 2014, two days after they both turned 53, Etheridge and Linda Wallem married at the San Ysidro Ranch in Montecito, California, at the foot of the Santa Ynez Mountain range.

At the intimate outdoor ceremony, Etheridge sang Wallem a song she wrote especially for her.

All four of Etheridge's children participated in the wedding, which was attended by Jane Lynch, Rosie O'Donnell, and Chelsea Handler, among other celebrities.

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### **About the Author**

**Linda Rapp** teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of [www.glbtq.com](http://www.glbtq.com).