

# FOLK Story

Natalie MacMaster,  
Boston Folk Festival  
headliner, has music  
in her blood

By **STEPHEN A. IDE**  
The Patriot Ledger

**N**atalie MacMaster bounds onto the stage with limitless energy, easily sawing the horsehair off her fiddle's bow as she carefully, swiftly navigates the intricacies of traditional tunes.

As she completes a fast, meticulous passage, the audience cheers – and MacMaster grins.

Her feet begin to move as she fiddles. Slowly at first, then faster. She adds kicks, all the while not missing a fiddle beat.

Eventually, she puts down the fiddle and step-dances, revealing a joy she has felt since she was little girl, learned from her mother and other family growing up on Cape Breton Island, north of Nova Scotia, Canada.

When MacMaster comes to Boston for the upcoming 7th annual Boston Folk Festival, she

will bring all that joy to the stage. Though she never has performed at the festival, she has played many times in the city. Boston, for her, is almost like a homecoming.

"I definitely feel at home in Boston. I've got a ton of relatives there," said MacMaster in a phone interview from her Ontario home. She said

she has about 100 relatives in the area.

MacMaster will be one of 30 featured acts at the festival, to be held at the University of Massachusetts-Boston Sept. 17-19.

At 32, the curly-locked, leggy blond is surfing a wave of popularity fed by her powerful connections to her traditional musical roots.

MacMaster's love of the fiddle – she says it's in her bloodline – began at age 9, in classes with other children.

The niece of fiddling great Buddy MacMaster, Natalie has earned recognition in her own right. She is the winner of many East Coast Music Awards, several JUNO awards and was nominated for a Grammy for her 1998 instrumental CD "My Roots Are Showing."

At the festival, MacMaster expects to perform with her band, consisting of Brad Davidge (guitar, vocals), John Chiasson (bass, vocals), Alan Dewar (keyboards, piano), Matt MacIsaac (bagpipes, whistles) and Miche Pouliot (drums).

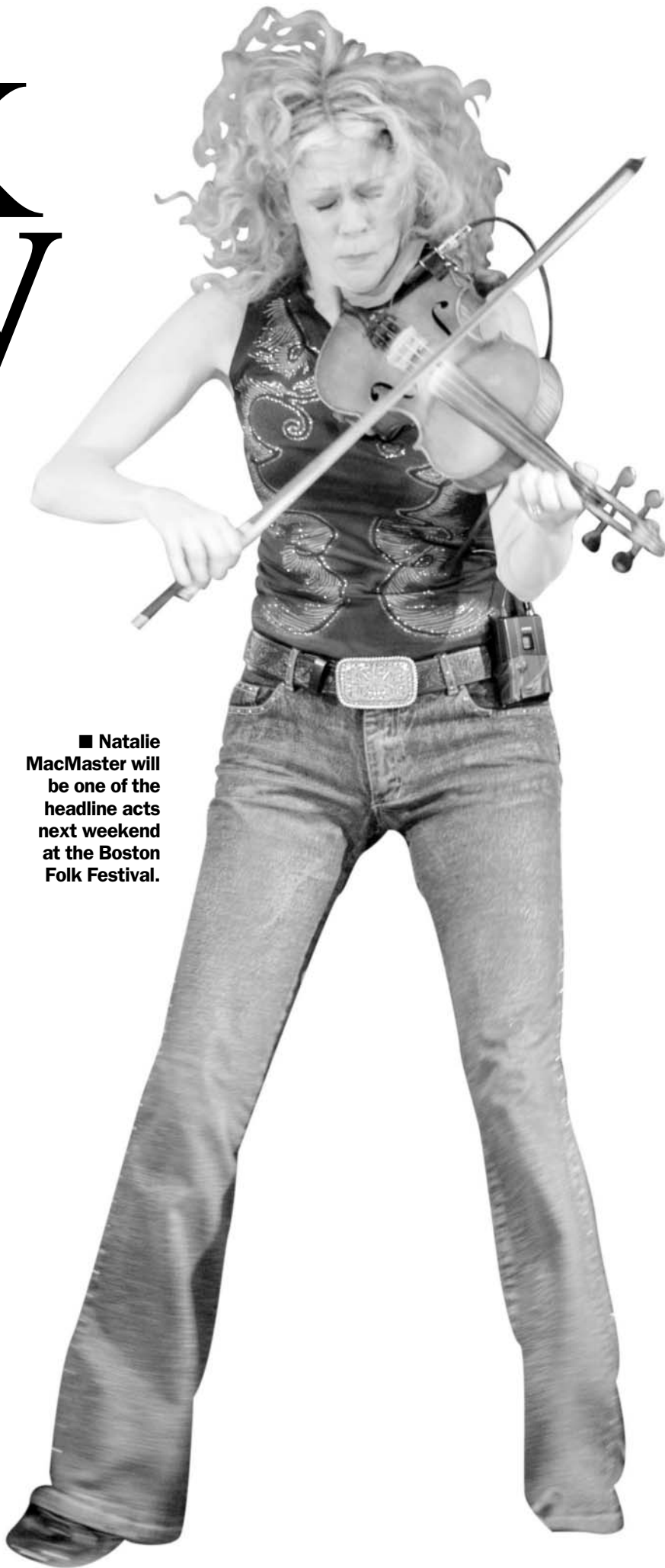
Her music offers a fusion of jazz, Latin, rock, and of course, Celtic styles. While she said she feels free to explore musically with her band, when it comes to the traditional tunes she loves, there is no improvising.

"That whole improv thing is not part of the Cape Breton tradition. In fact, it's very shunned," she said. "It's an unwritten rule: You play the tunes the way they were written. . . . and that's largely why the tunes have survived so many years. People keep them the same."

MacMaster explains that she takes comfort in the traditional Cape Breton tunes.

"I can play the same way every time and fall

■ **Natalie MacMaster will be one of the headline acts next weekend at the Boston Folk Festival.**



STEPHEN A. IDE photos/The Patriot Ledger



■ **Greg Greenway, top, Tom Paxton, center, and Lucy Kaplansky will perform at the Boston Folk Festival.**

## Monteith is a pioneer at WUMB

**I**f you're at this year's seventh annual Boston Folk Festival when the first act kicks off on the main stage at 11 a.m. Saturday and notice a woman with a headset "grinning like a fool," meet Pat Monteith of Randolph.

Monteith, 54, is general manager of WUMB-FM, the UMass-Boston public radio station that runs the musically diverse event. She's also executive director of the festival, Sept. 17-19, which draws an audience from around the world, including Japan and New Zealand. They come to hear performers, both "big name" and up-and-coming.

The lineup of performers is special because of



LISA BUL/The Patriot Ledger

■ **Pat Monteith of Randolph is the General Manager of WUMB and is the executive director of the Boston Folk Festival.**

# Dar Williams, Tom Paxton to play U-Mass festival

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deeper and deeper into it, and I don't know what it is.

"I find beauty in it every time. It's like a prayer. It's the same prayer you've been praying all your life, but if you reach into the prayer, there's always beauty in it. If you think about it, you learn something new from it every time you say it. And it's the same with this music. It puts me in a trance. It really does. I just go into another place."

Her seventh CD, "Blueprint," blends Cape Breton traditional fiddling with bluegrass. Joining her are dobro great Jerry Douglas, along with Sam Bush, John Cowan and Bela Fleck, members of the '80s supergroup New Grass Revival, from which an entire bluegrass subgenre emerged blending bluegrass with rock.

MacMaster said she had never performed with them before, but recording with them was easy: Her Cape Breton rhythms blended perfectly with theirs. It all just worked.

In the past couple of years, MacMaster has slowed her touring from 250 to 100 shows a year. It enabled her to have a personal life. She will be celebrating her second anniversary next month with fiddler Donnell Leahy of the band Leahy.

MacMaster recently has been in the studio, writing new material. She has recorded five tracks and hopes to release a new CD by year's end.

"This is the first recording I am doing with my band," said MacMaster. "With all my CDs, we really tried to let the music happen first, let it breathe and go where it needs to go."

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The festival will take place from 7 to 10 p.m. Friday, Sept. 17, and from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 18 and 19.

Acts will include on Friday: songwriting contest finals, including performances by judges Tom Paxton, Rod MacDonald and Jack Hardy.

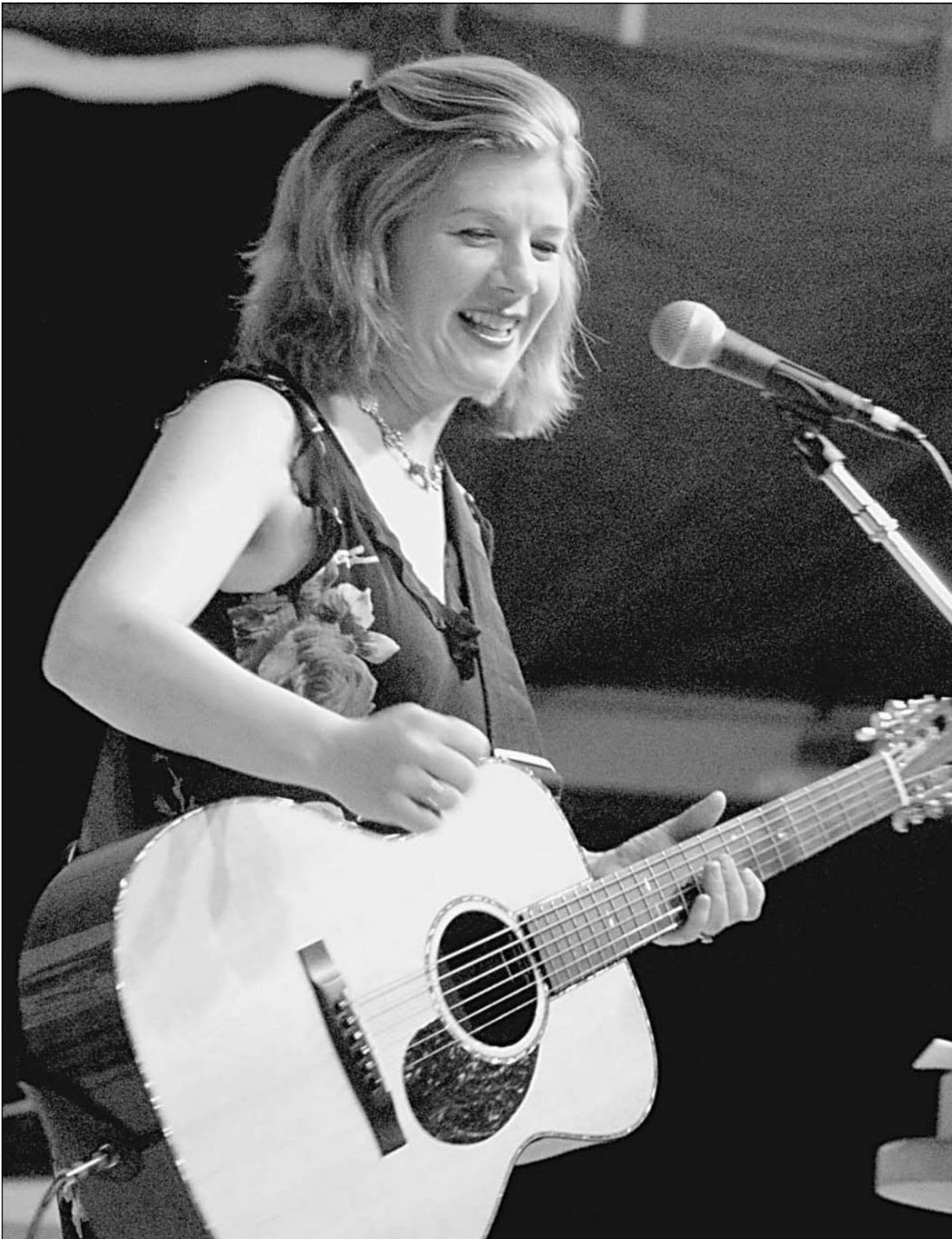
On Saturday: Dar Williams, Rani Arbo and Daisy Mayhem; Erin McKeown; Ollabelle; Deb Pasternak, Paxton, The Sprigs, Adrienne Young and Little Sadie; John Flynn; Johnsmith; The Resophonics; Cosy Sheridan with Kent Allyn; Diane Ziegler; The VariAsians; Ross Harris, and chantey singing with Lynn Noel and friends.

On Sunday: Natalie MacMaster; Dave Bromberg; Sam Bush Band; Cephas and Wiggins; Mark Erelli; Kim and Reggie Harris; Lucy Kaplansky; Geoff Muldaur Band; Stephanie Corby; Bob Franke; Girlyman; Robin Greenstein; Greg Greenway; T.J. Wheeler and Hatrack Gallagher; Yankee Ingenuity; chantey singing on the Harbor Cruise with Lynn Noel and friends.

Tickets are \$10 for Friday; \$35 each for Saturday and Sunday or \$60 for both days. Ages 6-14, \$5 per day. Under 6, free.

For more information and tickets, visit [www.bostonfolkfestival.org](http://www.bostonfolkfestival.org) or call 617-287-6911.

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STEPHEN IDE photos/The Patriot Ledger

**Dar Williams will perform next weekend at the Boston Folk Festival University of Massachusetts at Boston.**



**Rod MacDonald, left, and Bob Franke will play the Boston Folk Festival festival in Dorchester.**

## Monteith has long relationship with folk

### ■ MONTEITH

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the range in musical styles – Celtic, rhythm and blues, country bluegrass and coffeehouse folk – and the choice of five stages.

"When I'm standing there Saturday morning and I hear through my headphones that the first act has started, I start grinning like a fool and think, 'We did it!'" Monteith said. "It's still incredible to me how everything falls into place after that first main act and we have 50 performers, 300 volunteers and all the vendors. Everyone is in their place doing what they need to do to make it a success. And we even have a folk boat for harbor cruising with performers. It really is a huge undertaking."

Monteith, who has been associated with WUMB for more than 35 years, and her staff start lining up the talent the December before the September festival. This year they had 400 applications for 50 performer slots. The main stage is usually booked by the end of January and then all the other side venues and details have to be settled, down to food and crafts vendors.

The first festival in 1998 drew several thousand to Boston Common and a few other venues with help from a grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. This year, WUMB is aiming for 9,000 in ticket sales. The festival costs \$170,000 and is self-supporting. Over time, it has built a national reputation as a positive family experience with an audience that truly knows and appreciates folk and other types of music. Last year, Emmylou Harris was the headliner; this year it is Natalie MacMaster.

"Now when we contact performers about appearing, it's usually a matter of when it is and whether they can fit this into their schedule," Monteith said. "We no longer have to define what the festival is."

She has been with the festival from the start and was one of the founders of WUMB, before it became a public radio station, when she was a University of Massachusetts at Boston student in 1968. "Starting a radio station was meant to be a diversion from playing whist in the cafeteria," she said. The group of card-playing students talked the school officials into letting them rig up a closed circuit radio station in a small area off the cafeteria, then expanded upstairs on the former Park Square campus in Boston and applied for a public FM license.

Some 14 years later in 1982, the Federal Communications Commission granted a license to the University of Massachusetts for WUMB-FM (91.9). The station had moved to the UMass Harbor Campus in 1974; it became a public radio affiliate in 1986 and can also be heard at in Falmouth, Orleans, Worcester and Newburyport.

"We had no idea at the start what

we were getting into or trying to do," Monteith said. "The station has gone from a dream to a \$1.5 million operation."

Outgoing and described by staff as unflappable, she has always kept a hand in the station at least part time. She graduated from UMass as a math major in 1974, then worked a potpourri of jobs while pursuing her master's in mass communication from Emerson College. She has driven an ice cream truck, done consulting work and taught mass communication at Salem State College and community colleges. She began working full time at the station in 1977 as general manager.

"It's different every single day," she said.

Monteith has always marched to a different drummer – quite literally her own. She played the drums in the school marching band in junior high



LISA BUL/The Patriot Ledger

**Pat Monteith of Randolph helped found the Boston Folk Festival in 1998.**

and high school in Watertown where she grew up.

"I went to a wedding when I was 12 and was fascinated by the drummer," she recalled. She announced to her mother, who loved musical theater, that she wanted to take up the drums and was not discouraged from taking lessons at school, she said.

"I practiced on a drum pad at home, so I didn't bother the neighbors, and at school I got to hang out with the two cute boys who also played the drums," she said. "Sometimes I think about how the whole scene was different then. I couldn't play boys' sports, but I could play drums in a marching band."

At UMass-Boston, her math professors were women and they encouraged her in that major – not common at that time among females. "UMass-Boston was so far ahead of its time in many ways," she said.

She had taken piano lessons as a child and enjoyed hanging out in the music department in high school.

"I enjoyed classical music and show tunes, not rock 'n' roll, not the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, so I was odd man out," she recalled. In the 1960s and early 1970s, folk music was a thriving local scene and she enjoyed listening to WCAS, a Cambridge FM station. "It was different from what else was around, and my interest in music has always been all over the map."

As is the audience for the Boston Folk Festival she now leads.

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