

NIC
HARCOURT

TURN IT UP



TÊTE-à-TÊTE

Who programs Air Force One?
Why, L.A.'s own **TENA CLARK**

Tena Clark is a rarity in the music industry. She has written and produced hits for the likes of Patti LaBelle, LeAnn Rimes, Dionne Warwick and Aretha Franklin; composed music for memorable ad campaigns, like "Have You Had Your Break Today?" for McDonald's; and amassed a slew of film and television credits. In 1997, she brought her interests under one umbrella when she launched DMI Music & Media Solutions. The business, which specializes in nontraditional distribution, is housed in Pasadena's original Firehouse and includes a recording studio, an online branding division and a library of prerecorded music for television and film. And her company programs the in-flight music for Air Force One, a role she's filled since the days of Bill Clinton.

Nic Harcourt: How did music come into your life?

Tena Clark: My mother said even when I was little I was beating on the crib. When I got to junior high, the band director said, "Tena, I'm so tired of hearing you beg me about playing the drums—if you can march 100 yards down and 100 yards back playing the theme from *The Pink Panther*, I'll talk your parents into letting you." So I did exactly what he said, and sure enough, he went to my parents and said, "You gotta let this kid follow her passion." And they said okay.

NH: How did you begin writing songs?

TC: One of the most brilliant lyricists I ever heard was Hal David. So one day—I was really young—I just called his office and said, "May I speak with Hal David?" When he got on the phone, I almost had a heart attack. I said, "I'm Tena Clark. I'm a drummer and a writer from Mississippi," and he said, "Well, send me a tape." I sent him my tape, and he would write and encourage me. Then we kind of lost touch, but years later, I was at a party in Nashville, and all of a sudden this entourage walks in. Everybody was like, "Oh, my God, that's Hal David." So I went up to him and said, "Mr. David, I know you won't remember

FACE the MUSIC

Lila Downs

From Oaxaca, Mexico, and raised in Minnesota and California, Lila shows her musical roots are from both sides of the border, with performances that reflect this unique blend and include everything from brass-band arrangements to Scottish folk songs.

April 9, Los Angeles
Royce Hall

Leonard Cohen

There are plenty of legends who bore us to death with their relentless touring (you know who they are)—Leonard Cohen is not one of them. The inimitable poet and songwriter returns to Los Angeles and will no doubt enthrall the audience with his unique style.

April 10–11, Los Angeles
Nokia Theatre, L.A. Live

Ladytron/The Faint

Two indie faves are hitting the road together for what promises to be one sweaty night out. The glam electronica of Liverpool's Ladytron will surely get you dancing, and from Omaha comes the lo-fi punk pop of the Faint. An impressive pairing for the times.

April 26–27, Los Angeles
Henry Fonda Theater

me," and I started to tell him who I was, and tears started running down his face. And he went, "Oh, my God!" and explained to his entourage how this little girl tracked him down and started sending him tapes. After that, he would listen to what I was writing, and after about six months, he said, "You're like a duck outta water here in Nashville. I'll do anything in the world for you. I want you to come to L.A."

NH: What was your first big break in L.A.?

TC: My first break out here was to produce the title song for *Police Academy 2*. From that, I became the music supervisor and wrote most of the original music for *Police Academy 3* with Paul Maslansky. Then I started doing a ton of film and television work, like for *Twins* and *Youngblood*.

NH: So, obviously, being involved with a couple of hit TV shows and movies opens more doors. How did you start to spread your wings?

TC: Well, after three or four years of television and film, I realized I had these golden handcuffs. I was making a ridiculous amount of money but creatively starving to death. I started pursuing my writing career in the record industry, and then I had my first hit, "Reservations for Two," with Dionne Warwick and Kashif. And that's what kind of catapulted me into that end of the business.

NH: How did you make the transition to producer?

TC: The artist Vesta was on A&M. I had used her in a lot of TV and film and commercials, so when she got ready to do her second album on A&M, she came to me and said, "Tena, I want you to produce at least three songs for my new record." And I just laughed and said, "That's so sweet, but they'll never let me." "Why?" she asked. "They won't let a woman produce." She thought that was just ridiculous, so she brought it up with our guy at A&M, who said, "Oh, no, we've already got a guy to produce this record." So she told him, "I'm not doing this record without her—I know this woman can produce a hit for me!" Finally, he called her and said, "Okay, you're really serious, aren't you?" And then it was basically, like, "You girls, go—do your little girlie thing and have a little fun."

NH: So he wasn't expecting much, thinking, I'll let her do her thing—she'll come back, and then we'll do it right.

TC: Yeah. Our neck was really on the chopping block. We wrote, and I produced, "Congratulations," which was a big hit, and all of a sudden I was getting calls to produce.

NH: Your company, DMI—when did the idea of starting it come about?

TC: I had this little germ of an idea that I wanted to connect consumers to brands through music. And I wanted to sell music everywhere it had not been sold—which was 99 percent of the world—because I didn't care about Tower Records or Blockbuster. I wanted people to be able to purchase music wherever they were—the Gap, Starbucks, Sears, United Airlines, everywhere. So that was kind of my whole concept when starting the company about 12 years ago. And since then, maybe the platform has changed, but the philosophy has stayed the same. We're not selling millions of CDs like we were to reach consumers. We're hitting everything from online promotions to downloads to mobile to the in-store experience. What is critical to us with every one of our brands is to create a music strategy.

NH: Tell me about how you got to program music for Air Force One. You've done it for three presidents now.

TC: We got the contract to do the in-flight stuff for United Airlines. I didn't want to do it at first, and then I thought, *Hang on, there's 100 million people flying around in these cans that I can market to—trapped. Maybe that's a good thing!* And then we got this phone call: "And by the way, you're also doing the music for the president's plane."

NH: And this started with President Clinton?

TC: Yeah. We had to know what Clinton's likes and dislikes were—the president doesn't just pick up the phone to tell us. So, we programmed from doing a lot of research. With President Clinton being a saxophone player, we had a specific channel on the plane that was just great sax players. Then, unlike Clinton, Bush never gave *Rolling Stone* interviews relating to his musical tastes. Later on, we learned someone on his staff did program an iPod for him, where I recall there was some Creedence Clearwater on it—so we got bits and pieces, and we mostly programmed country and classic rock from then on.

NH: With Barack Obama, I'm guessing you just changed it up entirely?

TC: He's been so vocal about his music and musical tastes and saying things like, "The kids love the Jonas Brothers." He talks about how he loves Stevie Wonder, he loves Aretha Franklin. It's been really special to me, because I wanted President Obama to win so badly. I just produced Aretha, and then to have Aretha at the inauguration and me programming the presidential plane—it's all just kind of full circle. Knowing that he likes old-school music helps a lot. I think, personally—and I'm not just saying this to pat ourselves on the back—he couldn't have anybody better than us programming his plane. ♦