

Michelle Branch Reinvents Her Music



AP
Michelle Branch
performing in 2009

MARIO RITTER: Welcome to EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English. I'm Mario Ritter. Today, we look at ways women are reinventing themselves and some of the things they do. We will learn about women who compete in the hard-hitting sport of American football. We hear about a different kind of store for girls.

But first, we tell about award-winning singer Michelle Branch. She has reinvented her musical style not once, but two times in the past ten years. Michelle Branch recently returned to the sound that made her famous. Christopher Cruise tells us more.

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Michelle Branch

(MUSIC)

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Michelle Branch has been writing music since she was 14 years old. That was the same year she received a guitar for her birthday. Her big break came a year later when her best friend called with an urgent request.

MICHELLE BRANCH: "She called me, said 'you have to get down here and bring a tape or meet this guy because he's going to be leaving soon.' [I] said, well I can't get down there. She said, 'do you have... just walk, ride your bike, anything.' My neighbors had left their golf cart out in the driveway with the key in it. And so I took the golf cart and I went down and I was waiting as this guy was leaving. I was like 'excuse me Mister, will you listen to my tape?' And he was just horrified. But he - on the long drive home back from Arizona to L.A., he put it [the tape on] in the car and he ended up calling me."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Maverick Records released her first compact disc, "The Spirit Room," in 2001. The CD produced three hit singles, including the Top 20 Hit "Everywhere."

A short time later, Michelle won a Grammy award for her work with Carlos Santana in the song "The Game of Love." In 2005 she successfully made the move to country music, teaming up with Jessica Harp as The Wreckers.

Now Michelle has returned to pop music. But she still sings about her country experience in her new CD, "West Coast Time".

MICHELLE BRANCH: "I had a country band called The Wreckers for a while and I moved to Nashville, and it's, it's sort of a song about my time spent there and how I always felt kind of a little bit different because, you know, everyone had their southern upbringing there and I was raised on the west coast and had an upbringing of a little bit of country music but a lot of rock and roll."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Michelle had established herself as a star with her first two albums. So the big question was, "why do a country album at all?"

MICHELLE BRANCH: "I grew up listening to older country music - Patsy Cline, and Johnny Cash and those greats. And I just always loved the storytelling aspect and where the lyrics came from. And so that was, that was something that I was really drawn to and it just felt too special to turn our back on."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Michelle's life has changed a lot since then, and so has her music.

MICHELLE BRANCH: "The writing has changed a lot because my last pop album was released almost eight years ago and I'm married and a mother now and I think a lot has changed. I've seen a lot of the world so my perspective lyrically has changed a lot. I think the songwriting is classic Michelle but there is some definitely new modern sounds."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Michelle is a simple, yet creative young woman. One example is her choice of tattoos.

MICHELLE BRANCH: "Well I thought because most people get something really meaningful written in cursive on their wrists and I thought from far away it just looks like something meaningful, beautiful. And I have a little bit of a goofy sense of humor so I thought well it'd be funny if people ask me what it is. But, yeah I had Kellie Pickler walk up to me and she said 'oh, I love your tattoos! Look at mine. Mine say, peace and love or hope and faith or something.' And she goes 'what do yours say?' I said ... right and left... and it just was awkward."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: When Michelle is not making music or performing, she likes to use social media to communicate.

MICHELLE BRANCH: "I tweet, kind of - it's kind of a problem. My daughter is like 'mom, are you on Twitter again?' I really have a great relationship with a lot of people on Twitter so it's a fun way to request songs or you know, reach out."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Michelle says she is looking forward to hearing from fans about her new CD and sharing her new sound and ideas with people around the world. I'm Christopher Cruise.

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MARIO RITTER: You are listening to the VOA Special English program EXPLORATIONS.

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Women and American Football

MARIO RITTER: American football is often compared to war. Relatively few women play the sport. But Faith Lapidus tells us about some women who have been playing football for years.

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FAITH LAPIDUS: American Football has replaced baseball as America's favorite sport. Football has traditionally been played by men - big men who like to hit. However, in the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of women's football leagues. The women play by the same rules and with the same level of physical contact as the men's sport. Tarsha Fain is team captain of the Baltimore Nighthawks.

TARSHA FAIN: "I feel women can do anything a man can do. The same way they get out there and hit, we get out there and hit too."

FAITH LAPIDUS: Fain and team owner Tanya Bryan were part of the first ever women's World Championship last year. The American team -- with Fain playing and Bryan serving as team manager -- won the gold medal.

TANYA BRYAN: "To be the first, the first time it was done, and be part of it, you know, no one else can ever say that. So it's just a wonderful feeling and I'm so proud of that."

FAITH LAPIDUS: About ten women's professional football leagues have been formed in the United States in recent years. Many have either joined with other leagues or failed. But the sport continues to grow.

Ghoncheh Mossanen is an offensive specialist for the Nighthawks. She has played football for 28 years. Mossanen says the sport is her therapy. It is what she looks forward to the most.

GHONCHEH MOSSANEN: "I feel there's a transformation when I go from putting on my gear and stepping on this football field. It's a huge mental transformation."

FAITH LAPIDUS: Mossanen moved to America from Iran as a child. She remembers the first time she ever played football – at a game in her neighborhood.

GHONCHEH MOSSANEN: "I remember getting the phone call from my cousin saying 'come on out, we need one more person to play.' I didn't know what it was. I had never played the game and I remember going out there and just fell in love with it."

FAITH LAPIDUS: Most of the other players on the Nighthawks have also played since they were children. Most played unofficially or in non-contact leagues. But for team owner Tanya Bryan, women's football was a completely new experience.

TANYA BRYAN: "It's funny, I didn't even realize the sport existed for women. And I got a phone call from a friend of mine and she said there was an opportunity to own a team in Baltimore. And I thought it sounded really exciting and I said yes, and four years later here I am."

FAITH LAPIDUS: When Bryan bought the team she did not expect to make money right away. After four years, she is no longer losing money. But Bryan says what was most important to her was giving young women a chance to play ball.

TANYA BRYAN: "Most of the time as women growing up we're told, you know - not to be aggressive, and you know not to be assertive. And it's nice to have an outlet where you can come somewhere and let all of that out. You know you can be loud. You can hit somebody. You can just let it all go. And you know I think it's really, it's really healthy, you know. Great athleticism is required for football and the team camaraderie is just fantastic."

FAITH LAPIDUS: The teamwork was great in the team's recent game against the Philadelphia Firebirds. After a slow first half, the Nighthawks score ... and hang on for an 8-0 win.

GHONCHEH MOSSANEN: "Its elation! I mean the team deserves it. We've been playing hard. It's amazing. Now it's our chance to make the championship."

FAITH LAPIDUS: The Nighthawks did not win the championship. But, they say having a chance to play this traditionally men's sport against other women is itself a victory. I'm Faith Lapidus.

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American Girl Dolls

Some businesses are doing very well in the current economy. An example is American Girl, which appeals to girls and their parents. As we hear from Christopher Cruise, an American Girl store might change your idea of what a doll can do.

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CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: American Girl dolls are costly for most Americans. But sales of the dolls are strong, even at a time when many people are concerned about the economy. Kaeli Chang has several American Girl dolls, including one that looks just like her. She and the doll wear the same kind of clothing.

KAELI CHANG: "We got matching outfits and I love to match with my doll. And it makes me feel kinda cool because I have a friend just like me."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: We spoke with Kaeli and her mother Liane Whalen-Chang at the American Girl store in Tysons Corner, Virginia.

KAELI CHANG: "I have nine American Girl dolls all together 'cause my mom's an awesome shopper."

LIANE WHALEN-CHANG: "What I like about it is that it kind of brings back the innocence of the kids. They grow up too fast. And so the American Girl allows her to just be a little girl a little bit longer."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Kaeli got her first American Girl doll just after she was born. That was the beginning of her collection.

A single American Girl doll sells for one hundred dollars. Extra clothing can increase the cost. Valerie Tripp has written more than thirty American Girl books. She loves writing for eight-year-old girls.

VALERIE TRIPP: "We wanted to speak to girls who were eight, nine, ten years old and say whatever your passion is whatever you're interested in right now, you know, hang onto that."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: She says, most of them are reading by themselves for the first time.

VALERIE TRIPP: "The ability to walk in somebody else's shoes is a wonderful life skill. And if you can read about someone who lived in a different time and kind of walk into her world, isn't that a wonderful way of, you know, learning?"

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: I'm Christopher Cruise.

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MARIO RITTER: This program was written by June Simms and Christopher Cruise. He and Faith Lapidus read our reports. Find transcripts, MP3s and captioned video of each part of our program at voaspecialenglish.com.

And visit The Classroom to find activities for English learning and teaching at VOA Learning English. I'm Mario Ritter. Join us again next week for EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English.