

Billboard

North Star Release 'Mother' Is A Labor Of Love For Creators

by Moira McCormick

PUT 'EM ALL TOGETHER, AND THEY SPELL...: When Montclair, N.J.-based new age pianist/composer **Robin Spielberg** began working on the just-released North Star Music album "Mother" along with singer/songwriters **Susan McKeown** and **Cathie Ryan**, little did she know the enormous significance the project would take on before its completion.

"Mother" is being carried by major chains, including Borders Books & Music, Barnes & Noble, Hastings, the Museum Store, and Natural Wonders, as well as by gift stores around the country.

The three women were introduced by fiddler/producer **Johnny Cunningham** (of the contemporary Celtic group **Nightnoise**), who had brought them on board a holiday music project called "The Soul Of Christmas: A Celtic Music Celebration With Thomas Moore," which was released in 1997 as a CD and PBS-TV special.

"We had a lot in common," says Spielberg, who says her six instrumental piano albums on East Greenwich, R.I.-based North Star Music have collectively sold 250,000 copies. "We were booking ourselves, touring on our own; our husbands sold our CDs in venue lobbies." It seemed natural, then, that she and the Dublin-born McKeown (who's toured with **Natalie Merchant**) and Ryan (former lead singer of the all-female Irish ensemble **Cherish The Ladies**) should work on a project together.

"Doing something dedicated to our own mothers was Susan's brainchild," says Spielberg of the Celtic-influenced "Mother." The album was pitched to a select few labels, one of which was interested—provided the three women brought in **Barbra Streisand**- or **Madonna**-type celebrities for guest appearances. Of course, says Spielberg, the trio had no intention of turning "Mother" into a star-studded compilation.

Spielberg ended up pitching the album to North Star president **Richard Waterman**, even though the label's output, from sea chanteys to classical music, was 100% instrumental. "North Star sells to the gift market, and I gave [Waterman] 10 reasons why 'Mother' was the perfect gift item," she says. "This project belonged in gift stores. You don't go to a Sam Goody when you're looking for a Mother's Day present." North Star took it on.

Spielberg, McKeown, and Ryan began recording "Mother" in January 1998. Several months later, Spielberg learned she was pregnant with twins, who were due the following January. "Suddenly, these motherhood songs held new meaning," she says.

But she went into premature labor in September and underwent debilitating drug therapy to forestall childbirth; she became temporarily blind and paralyzed and needed an oxygen tank to breathe. The delivery couldn't be held off for long, though, and the twins were delivered on Sept. 22, four months early. One did not survive. The other—whom she and her husband, photographer **Larry Kosson**, named **Valerie**—was a mere 17 ounces at birth and was given a 10% chance of survival. The first thing

Valerie heard coming into the world, says Spielberg, was the "Mother" track "Baby's Lullaby," which had been completed the day before her birth and which was played throughout the delivery. (Spielberg's friend **Aine Minogue**, another noted North Star artist, played harp on it.)

Valerie spent her first four months of life in a neonatal intensive care unit (NIC-U), undergoing 13 blood transfusions, heart surgery, and pneumonia treatments. She was so tiny, says Spielberg, that on Halloween, the nurses dressed her up in Beanie Baby clothes.

During the infant's stay in NIC-U, Spielberg says, "we played my CDs



Pictured, from left, are Susan McKeown, Robin Spielberg, and Cathie Ryan.

for her on a continuous loop. We found that all the babies in earshot did better when the music was on. Their blood pressure, heart rate,

oxygen saturation, and breaths per minute all improved." North Star ended up donating 50 CDs for parents with babies in NIC-U.

Spielberg and Kosson finally got to bring Valerie home, though the baby will remain quarantined from anyone outside the immediate family until May. She is now nearly 7 months old, weighing 8 pounds and 4 ounces, and she still loves to hear her mom's songs.

In early May, Spielberg, McKeown, and Ryan will perform three dates in New York state (backed by a full band) to support the release of "Mother." The three will appear May 1 in Norwich, May 8 in Albany, and May 9 (Mother's Day) in Peekskill. Also on May 9, Bronx, N.Y.-based National Public Radio affiliate WFUV will air an interview/performance feature on the three, says Spielberg. The TV show "CBS This Morning" will spotlight "Mother" as well.

"We've gotten a lot of support in different places," she says, adding, "What we need is an agent or promoter to hook in to the appeal of this project."

Songs on "Mother" include Spielberg's own "Real Pretty Mama," a composition she wrote (and sings on the record) for her mother; McKeown's rendition of the traditional Irish lullaby "Seothín Seo h-Ó," which begins with a recording of her singing it as a child; and "Rock Me To Sleep, Mother," a 19th-century American song for which Ryan wrote a new melody.