

# Michele Pillar

## I HEAR ANGELS CALLING

From the opening moments of *I Hear Angels Calling*, you know that this album is destined for the short list of Christmas classics.

It's not only due to the singing of **Michele Pillar**, which has been compared to the sound of an angel. And it isn't only the arrangements of these tunes, the familiar as well as Michele's originals, as conceived by the artist and performed by an all-star assembly that includes her husband, virtuoso guitarist **Larry Carlton**.

There's another reason why *I Hear Angels Calling* will endure through the years.

This is, you see, not just a Christmas album for all who savor the holiday.

More than that, it celebrates the Christmas of Michele's soul – the end of a journey through the shock of loss, past the long trudge toward recovery, and up to resolution achieved through faith, strength, and love.

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This story begins, in a sense, before the beginning of these trials. Michele Pillar has been involved with music since her childhood in L.A., approaching it not only with the innocence of youth but also with the premature wisdom that comes from growing in unsettled surroundings. In part to escape from the effects of her parents' alcohol abuse, she found refuge in music, listening to Top 40, The Beatles, Motown and even Broadway Musicals – anything that told a story in song and could carry her somewhere far away.

Michele didn't just listen. Her talent was evident early, to the extent that she began performing at 16, though that meant lying about her age in order to work in nightclubs. She found to be a way of escape, a way to move out. A friend, Alf Clausen, cast her in a rock opera he wrote when she was 17. Later Alf would hire her again to play the voice of Karen Carpenter on the TV show, *The Simpsons*.

While in college Michele began recording. She sang on TV commercials for Bank of America, Toyota, Levi Strauss, Lexus and helped define the direction of Christian popular music. She received **three Grammy nominations** and was on the road 200 days each year as a solo artist when she met and soon wed Carlton. It was a marriage filled with the promise of sustaining two successful careers, each enhancing the other.

But just a little more than four months into their union, plans were shattered when Carlton was shot in the neck during a random gang related shooting. His near-fatal injury changed his and Michele's lives for the next decade. Larry struggled through physical and emotional recovery and Michele stood by his side, supporting his children and his efforts through every step.

Only now, when looking back at this tribulation, can Michele put the experience into perspective. Surprisingly – or maybe not, to those who know her well – she has found a positive side to it all, as one might find light in darkness, given enough time and patience.

“When you’ve spent your life singing, touring and recording, and something like this happens, it’s like turning a light switch off,” she says. “It was time to stamp out the fire of my wants, needs and even my music. I had to put everything into the hand we’d been dealt. The whole family had to pull together; otherwise the situation would have taken us all out. For me that meant not allowing myself to think, ‘I want to continue to sing.’ Singing wasn’t an option I afforded myself.”

So what’s the positive side of this lesson? “Larry taught himself to play guitar again, from scratch – he couldn’t lift his left arm for months – but because of what he’d been through and because of who he is, he became a much better player than before. More aggressive, more beautiful.” Michele explains. “That comes from finding the truth that before you’re a musician, before you’re a singer, you are who you are and *nothing* can take that away from you. Through faith, knowing that God had pulled Larry through, serving my family, loving Larry and allowing him to love me, I came through this stronger than I was before, as well.”

And so the time arrived when Michele knew it was time to sing again. “It felt right to return with a collection of Christmas material. Christmas music has always been my favorite.” Michele states.

It was a natural move because AC radio has been kind to Michele. Her versions of Mel Tormé’s “The Christmas Song” and her own “Ringing the Bells of Christmas,” from Carlton’s ‘89 *Christmas at My House* have been played in high rotation nationally, every year since she recorded them. But there was a deeper reason to begin again in this spirit, as she has recently come to realize.

“I began thinking about what I would have wanted to hear, the Christmas Larry was recovering. I thought of the one who is missing someone away at war or missing one who has passed,” she says. “I know that the sting of loss and loneliness hurts more during the holidays. It felt good to write a lyric that could comfort someone out driving alone, lying in a hospital bed or even sitting at home, feeling alone. I know that angels come to comfort us. And faith gives us wings to grow past the sadness, take stock, heal and move on to what’s ahead for us. That’s what led me to *I Hear Angels Calling*.”

Empowered by her return to song, encouraged by her husband having recovered his musical voice, supported by family and the great musicians that she has known as friends for years – **Nathan East, Greg Bissonette, Harvey Mason, Jeff Babko – Michele redefines herself on *I Hear Angels Calling* as a singer for all audiences.** Like all great interpreters, she finds new dimensions in familiar material, transforming “O Holy Night” from a bravura testament into a whispered profession of belief, reconfiguring “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” into jazzy but intimate communions with keyboard master **Greg Phillinganes**, and manifesting the Virgin’s trust and acceptance on an original tune, the riveting and dramatic “Song of Mary (Holy Is the Lord).” The CD is **produced by Larry Carlton** and mixed by the great **Csaba Petocz**.

Test-released initially to limited local distribution in Nashville last year, *I Hear Angels Calling* stimulated strong response with local radio and retail and made it clear that this is no exclusionary effort. This is music that reaches toward all listeners, regardless of what they do or do not believe. No matter what she accomplished earlier in her career, Michele Pillar is reborn as an artist through these performances. Listen ... and if you think *you* hear angels calling, listen again – it might be Michele, bathed at last in light, her dark journey over, her new one about to begin.