

“ I'M NEUROTIC,  
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**L**aura Barrett was trolling eBay, looking for a MIDI controller, when the Toronto musician stumbled upon a listing for an instrument that would set her on an entirely new creative path. The kalimba, also known as the thumb piano, is an African instrument that has metal reeds that are plucked with the thumbs. Its uniqueness and simplicity—not to mention the \$75 price tag!—piqued Barrett's curiosity.

“I bought it on a whim,” she says, laughing. “I've been playing the piano since I was a child, but there's no formal training or sheet music for the kalimba.” Still new to the indie scene, the 26-year-old decided to debut her new toy at a whimsical “Weird Al” Yankovic-themed cover night at Bagel, a now-defunct Toronto bar. The crowd went nuts over her sci-folk version of “Smells Like Nirvana.”

The club's next theme was ponies, which inspired Barrett, who has a background in linguistics, to pen what has become one of her cult hits: “Robot Ponies.” (One delightful lyric reads: “Christmas Eve, 2053 / Underneath every little girl's tree / A robot pony / Comb their soft and luscious nylon fur / >”

## THUMB ROLE

Quirky indie rocker Laura Barrett's hypnotic take on life. TEXT: BRIONY SMITH



Listen close / Hear their clockwork hearts whir.") Barrett—who also tours with The Hidden Cameras, playing keyboards and glockenspiel—has put out a couple of EPs of her kalimba compositions, but she's set to release her first full-length studio album, *Victory Garden* (Paper Bag Records/Universal), later this summer. "I've gone back to my first love: the piano," she explains. "The



kalimba is in there too, along with another dozen instruments. The sound is like a weird, orchestral stage musical crossed with an acoustic trance."

The music is the perfect backdrop to Barrett's throaty, hypnotic voice and lyrics that are sweet and funny yet contain subtle social commentary on everything from border crossings to drought to downsizing. "I'm neurotic, so I have no shortage of concerns to sing about," she says, with a laugh. "And if a message sneaks in there, all the better!" □



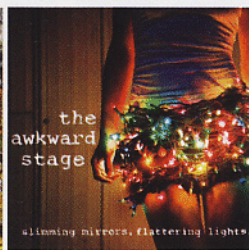
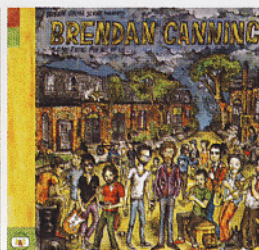
**S**abrina Matthews was just a child when she made her ballet debut as Clara in The National Ballet of Canada's production of Celia Franca's *The Nutcracker* in 1989. For nearly two decades, dancing was her life. "It's something you've trained for—the blood, sweat and tears shed since you were little," explains Matthews, now 30.

The former Alberta Ballet principal dancer hung up her pointes in 2005. Since then, she has transformed herself into a hot new contemporary choreographer. Her highly acclaimed works are performed by Stuttgart Ballet and Boston Ballet, to name just two prominent companies now clamouring for her attention.

"It would have been hard to leave dance and feel secure and whole," she explains. One of only a handful of women in her field—and one of the few Canadians to command international attention—Matthews will create a new abstract work for her alma mater, The National Ballet of Canada, for its upcoming spring season.

Presently, she's working on two solos for London's Royal Academy of Dance, whose prestigious Genée International Ballet Competition takes place this August in Toronto. The as-yet-untitled works constitute the contemporary portion of this judged event.

Matthews never competed, but she is approaching the solos with an awareness of how hard it is for artists to find their own creative voice in such a disciplined art form. "As a dancer, you are limited to interpreting the works of others," she recalls, which, she adds, is why she turned to choreography. "It empowers me. I'm glad I made the change to pursue my own work." DEIRDRE KELLY



music

- On *Exit Strategy of the Soul* (Warner Music Canada), producer Martin Terefe surrounds Ron Sexsmith's fragile vocals with soulful horns and piano instead of the simple acoustic guitar we're used to. It's an audacious and initially startling move but an inspired one, as Sexsmith's voice and achingly beautiful melodies and lyrics get a solid background to shine against.
- *Something for All of Us* (Arts & Crafts/EMI) is a Broken Social Scene album in the guise of a Brendan Canning solo album, which seems to be a reasonable way for the large collective's bassist to deal with too-many-cooks syndrome. It's nice to see the unassuming Canning show off the breadth of his talent, with funky and noisy numbers alongside the sweeping, melodic guitar pop we know and love. His whispery voice is balanced by guests such as Lisa Lobsinger and, naturally, most of BSS.
- **The Awkward Stage** keeps revealing more musical depths on its addictive, far-from-awkward second album, *Slimming Mirrors, Flattering Lights* (Mint Records). Front man Shane Nelken has a remarkably sharp melodic sense that recalls not only The New Pornographers' Carl Newman, on whose solo album he played, but also The Kinks' Ray Davies. Nelken's wonderfully varied songs are filled with the band's both delicate and pounding guitars, strings, horns and percussion. MARY DICKIE