

Sydney-based journalist, *Elise Coroneos*, has not long returned from an extended stay in the US. While there, she rubbed shoulders with many faithful people, including successful singer/songwriter *Maria Christensen* . . .

MARIA CHRISTENSEN

Beautiful Now

When she was a little girl growing up in Pittsburg, Maria Christensen could not help eyeing the guitar given to her brother for his birthday. Not allowed to touch it, Maria would sneak into her brother's room to play the instrument that had her so intrigued.

"I remember the very first thing I did was pick up the guitar only to realise that I didn't know how to play any songs, so I made one up. I thought that was very normal. I thought that everyone did that," she says.

From this early stage, Maria knew that music was all she wanted to pursue. Today Maria lives in New York City, where she writes songs and leads worship for Christian City Church Manhattan.

Reflection

Maria's musical abilities do not end there. Maria is an in-demand songwriter having penned songs for international calibre artists such as Ricky Martin, N'Sync, Celine Dion and Jennifer Lopez. In fact Maria wrote Lopez's Top 10 song *Waiting for Tonight*. In addition to writing for her church and international superstars, Maria has also found time to record an album of songs about her own life—called *Beautiful Now*.

When determining whether to record a song herself, or give it to another artist, the deciding factor, says Maria, is soul. "It has to have a certain amount of soul in it for me to want to sing it and it has to have a personal experience inside of it. I think that all the songs on *Beautiful Now* sincerely reflect my life," says Maria.

"My favourite song on the album is called *Someone to Someone* because I really felt like I captured what I was feeling when I wrote it right then at that moment," says Maria. A brooding ballad, *Someone to Someone*, like many of the songs on her album, tells of Maria's personal journey towards God and a deeper understanding of the person he made her to be.

"I knew I wanted to be a songwriter from the first time I wrote my mum a song for her birthday and she cried. I thought it was so amazing that I could make people cry," says Maria.

Significant milestones

Between Pittsburg and New York, Maria's journey took her to Atlanta and Florida. Having spent years in and out of bands as a teenager in Florida, eventually, at the age of 19, what Maria always dreamed would happen, happened.

"A producer came in and said 'would you like to make a record,' and my song got on the local radio," says Maria. One thing led to another, and Maria found herself with a record deal with Capital Records. While this was a great stepping-stone, Maria became frustrated because the songs she recorded were not her own.

Then an opportunity arose to move to New York where she landed another record deal with Atlantic Records. However, unfortunately, after doing one solo album, the president of Atlantic Records got fired and her project fell through the cracks. "This was a really hard time for me because I didn't know what I was going to do," says Maria.

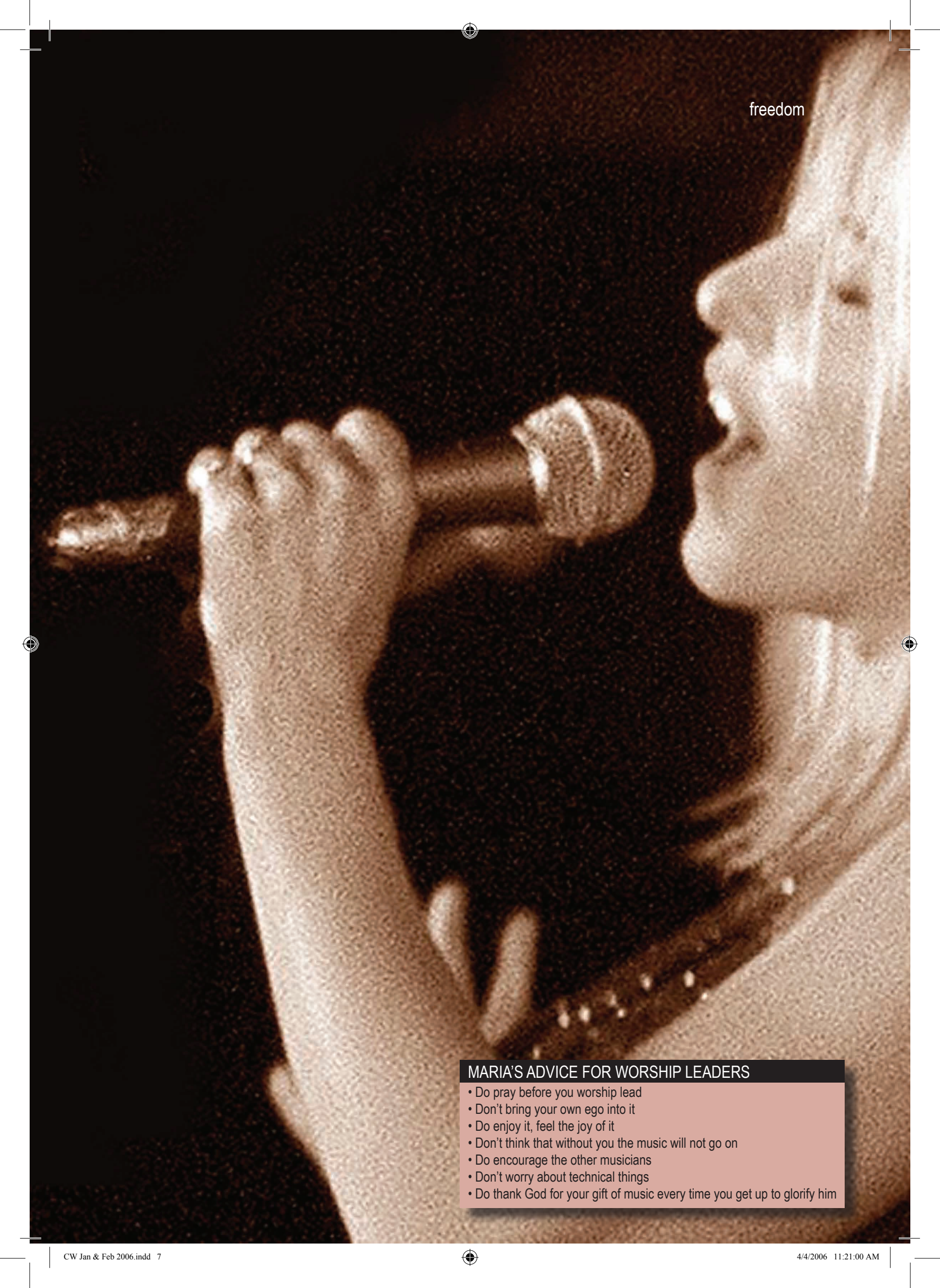
It was around this time that Maria began attending Christian City Church in Long Island, New York. It was not long before she was writing songs for the church and leading worship.

"It was an important time because I began to realise that even if I wasn't a famous recording artist, I was still a person and my life didn't count for nothing," says Maria.

Favour

Maria's favourite Bible verse is "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Rom 8:28) "I love that verse because it reminds me that God is always orchestrating things in my favour and also lets me know that even what seems like a bad thing today could turn out to be a blessing in disguise tomorrow," says Maria.

And orchestrate things in Maria's favour he did. When she least expected it, a third recording deal came her way. As part of a three-woman band called *Third Party*, Maria wrote and recorded her own songs, as well as travelled extensively throughout the US.



freedom

MARIA'S ADVICE FOR WORSHIP LEADERS

- Do pray before you worship lead
- Don't bring your own ego into it
- Do enjoy it, feel the joy of it
- Don't think that without you the music will not go on
- Do encourage the other musicians
- Don't worry about technical things
- Do thank God for your gift of music every time you get up to glorify him



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Christensen's music combines elements of rock, pop and R&B. Billboard magazine remarked "This petite young woman vamps and belts with the bravado and earthy soul of a seasoned old-school diva." Available from www.mariachristensen.com

"Being in *3rd Party* was really fun and I enjoyed it, partly because I didn't make it my entire life. It was really just a blessing because I really felt like I had died to that dream only to have it given back to me again," says Maria. One of Maria's songs recorded by *3rd Party* was *Waiting For Tonight*.

The right direction

The success from this breakthrough enabled Maria to live a more comfortable life in New York and to pursue her long-held dream to record her own songs as a solo artist. The result is of course, *Beautiful Now*.

"I feel my music is like Christian music for non-Christians because I am singing about God whether they know it or not. I feel like my music can go into a bar and out of a bar and into a

church, which is the way I want to keep it and I feel like it is the right direction for me," says Maria.

Talking to Maria, you begin to understand she has a heart to reach young women like she used to be, for God. "In the beginning I didn't want to sing Christian music because I had it in my mind that I wanted to wear tight outfits on stage without any constrictions and I didn't think that went with God at all. But slowly over time I figured out that I didn't really have to give up one thing for the other because deep down I knew I wanted to be a more serious artist anyway," she says.

"Lately in church I have been getting a lot of young girls coming up saying they love my music," says Maria. "These girls could give my album to one of their friends. That is what makes me want to keep going."CW