

MADELEINE PEYROUX

Madeleine Peyroux is in the midst of her journey. Renowned for her interpretive song skills, the vocalist followed her creative muse on 2009's "Bare Bones" by challenging herself to write a full album of her own compositions.

Now with "Standing On the Rooftop" (Emarcy/Decca), she delves deeper into her reinvention, not only writing the bulk of the songs, but pushing past any preconceived notions about her music and daring herself to expand her sonic template.

"I wanted to explore some new sounds," says Peyroux, best known for her stunning, gold-certified 2004 album, "Careless Love." "That would be the most exciting thing that I could think of as a musician. I've been recording my voice and my guitar together long enough to know this was not the limit."

Peyroux, who was named Best International Jazz Artist at the 2007 BBC Jazz Awards, has lost none of her compelling ability to reinvent a lyric and give it soul-shaking meaning through her intricately nuanced vocal shadings. But she's broadened her musical palette here, embracing an organic, American roots sound.

Listeners need look no further than the title track to hear the metamorphosis. "Standing On the Rooftop" opens with a hypnotic pulse that runs through the song like a jagged heartbeat. "I thought, 'This is an interesting arrangement, something more like Steve Reich,' but it's harmonically interesting. The space around the lyrics, the time it takes to get from one phrase to another, it felt like a natural evolution," Peyroux says.

Or take the haunting, spectral tones on an exquisite cover of Robert Johnson's "Love in Vain," a song she was initially hesitant to approach. "I'd grown up listening to Robert Johnson songs and I thought it was tricky to cover," she says. "We did all kinds of renditions; we wanted to bring out the perspective."

"Standing On the Rooftop," her fifth solo album, encompasses a wide spectrum from the lulling, gentle "Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love" (adapted from the W.H. Auden poem of the same name) and the stunning, spare "Super Hero" to the clever, whimsical "Don't Pick a Fight With a Poet."

Peyroux, who took much of 2010 off from touring in order to compose, found it easier to flex her writing muscles this go-round. "I felt like 'Bare Bones' was a first crack," she says. "I was very intent on what it was supposed to mean and I wasn't always sure that I got the meaning across. I think on these songs I made a conscious effort to pay attention to simplicity in the songwriting."

She also played around with her methods. "On 'Fickle Dove' I started off with the music instead of the lyrics. It's the only time I can think of that I've done that."

Peyroux wrote solo as well as with a number of collaborators, including former Rolling Stone Bill Wyman. The two met when he approached Peyroux at a jazz festival in Nice. “He was at the festival to see B.B. King,” she recalls. “He said ‘I’m a fan of yours. I have all the records.’ And I was actually quite stunned.”

That meeting turned into their writing together in London for a week. “I went to see him every day. We worked on a big handful on songs. There were moments that were like, ‘I’m sitting here with a former Rolling Stone!’ when he was telling me stories, but he’s incredibly down to earth and humble and so very kind. He had a lot of tea, I had a lot of coffee.”

Their caffeine-fueled writing sessions yielded the deliciously funky “The Kind You Can’t Afford.”

Her originals stand shoulder to shoulder with a handful of cannily selected covers: in addition to “Love in Vain,” the album includes a wistful take on Bob Dylan’s “I Threw It All Away,” and a banjo-laden twist on The Beatles’ “Martha My Dear.”

Earlier this year, Peyroux entered a New York studio with producer Craig Street, best known for his work with k.d. lang, Norah Jones and Cassandra Wilson.

The pair had been briefly introduced to each other several years prior. Street reached out to Peyroux as she wrapped up her writing. “We met again and it felt like we could converse in the same context,” she says.

That “context” meant stripping away how she had been conceived of in the past and pushing the limits of her sound. “I had the desire to really explore and see just how far I could take these new songs and hopefully do something sonically, experimental on some level.”

To realize her vision, she and Street brought in musicians renowned in their own right as artists, including guitarist Mark Ribot and bassist Meshell Ndegeocello.

“Mark is just a bundle of youth and energy. It’s pretty impossible to imagine where it all comes from,” Peyroux says, who had recorded with Ribot on her first album. “When he comes to the studio, he can’t stop coming up with new ideas and sounds. Because of that energy, that bright light, there’s also something very easygoing and enjoyable.”

“Meshell was more about just locking in. She’s happy to play a root for two hours and I found that stunning for someone with the same amount of energy as Marc,” Peyroux says. “She’s also willing to step out.”

The core unit also included drummer Charley Drayton, keyboardist John Kirby and guitarist Christopher Bruce. “Everyone was feeling pretty driven to see what we could come up with as a unit, as opposed to people having specific jobs,” Peyroux says. They

brought in additional musicians as desired, including legendary New Orleans pianist Allen Toussaint.

Now, Peyroux is eager to take the songs from the studio to the street, fully aware from her past experience that this new bundle passes her stringent litmus test.

“Because I was a cover artist first and foremost for a long time, the main job was finding a repertoire that really does need to answer some of these personal characteristics: Can you inhabit this character in this song? Can you be part of it? And can you be on stage and live this song no matter when or where?,” she says.

With “Standing On the Rooftop,” it’s clear the answer is a resounding yes.

-end-