



## Mary Gauthier sees it as her job to forge personal experience into powerfully resonant songs

In and out of Trouble

BY JEWELY HIGHT — JUN 19, 2014 4 AM

Lest there be any question, Mary Gauthier has never been viewed as the next hot, young, malleable, marketable thing. When she arrived in town more than 12 years ago, she built buzz of a more low-pitched variety, partly with a colorful back story — that of an adopted Louisiana kid who turned delinquent, burned through rehabs until sobriety stuck, and mortgaged her chef career to launch her singer-songwriter one — but mostly with a laconically riveting song, "I Drink." She's credited that song with landing her a publishing deal with Harlan Howard Songs and a record deal with now-shuttered Mercury Nashville imprint Lost Highway (fittingly, the same label that Lucinda Williams and Willie Nelson called home at the time), in addition to the fact that the song wound up as an album cut on *Blake Shelton's Barn & Grill*.

"I Drink" was on Gauthier's *Drag Queens in Limousines*, one of the albums she released when she was still living up north, and it reappeared on her 2005 Lost Highway debut *Mercy Now*, a collection that transported her to the vanguard of serious roots songwriters on a path paved by year-end lists and a New Artist of the Year award from the Americana Music Association. Her music had a cultivated art and craft to it; strong instincts shaped by her consciousness of country and folk songwriting lineage and her self-scrutinizing recovery work. The power of her work lay in the unwavering intensity and measured grace with which she magnified her characters' ingrained impulses and refracted her inner dialogue outward. She gained a respect not unlike that of Townes Van Zandt — only with Gauthier, self-destruction for the sake of the songs wasn't part of the equation.

A second Lost Highway album followed, then a song cycle for *Razor & Tie* — on which Gauthier explored primal feelings of abandonment by her mother — and a self-released live set. She's toured a ton, taught many a songwriting workshop, changed managers and set up her own label, In the Black. But up until she got advance copies of her new album *Trouble & Love* into journalists' hands, nothing else she's done had provoked quite the gut-level response of *Mercy Now* nearly a decade ago.

"It feels like I'm going on that ride again," Gauthier says on the phone a week before her album's June 3 release date. "It sure does. I mean, I'm talking to Terry Gross."

Next to *Fresh Air*, the bookings Gauthier's been most excited about are ostensibly clear across the sociocultural spectrum, over on the *Grand Ole Opry*. In all the time she's lived in Nashville, she'd never been invited to perform as a standalone artist.

"It's a nod from an institution that means a lot to a lot of people," Gauthier offers. "It's as if your grandfather came to the show and gave you a standing ovation. It's got the



institutional aspect, it's historical, and it's being allowed into a club that has members that you admire so, so deeply."

Her image of a gratified grandpa proves to be prescient — and not just because it nails the age of many Opry attendees. When Gauthier took the stage May 30, resplendent in a sparkling suit jacket and starched white shirt, and sang her new song "Another Train" with Kathy Mattea and Radney Foster supplying harmonies and Marty Stuart playing guitar solos, she couldn't keep from flashing goofy grins at familiar faces onstage, and the audience gave her a standing ovation. Regardless of whether the more masculine aspects of her self-presentation align with what folks in the crowd traditionally expect of women stepping up to those triangular WSM microphone stands, there's no missing the fact that they're moved by the song and the grit of her delivery.

"Another Train" is the resilient conclusion to *Trouble & Love*. But the starting point of Gauthier's eight-song journey through shattered intimacy and trust is the despondent folk rocker "When a Woman Goes Cold," the rare relationship song in her catalog to specify a character's gender.

"I'm really aware that I did do that," Gauthier says. "There's just something, I think, unique to women. When a woman has reached her wits' end, and has gone cold and is done, utterly done, there's no way to say that.

"You know, I wrote that with a heterosexual woman — with Gretchen Peters," she continues. "She described the phenomenon clearly, having experienced it herself. And we both went, 'Goddamn. Waylon Jennings should still be alive. He would sing this song.' It's got that thing, like when a man has been rendered utterly powerless. And in my case, a woman. I've been rendered utterly powerless in the face of this complete and total indifference."

This is the sort of post-breakup album you get only from an artist who finds insular personal expression to be self-indulgent, and who works at sculpting the insights of her particular experience into broadly meaningful, salving music.

"The beauty of grief," says Gauthier, "is that it's transformative, and at the end of grieving, we're different people — oftentimes different in a way that's good. [We develop] deeper empathy and sense of compassion for people who are hurting, a deeper awareness of other people's suffering, having gone through it ourselves.

"So moving through it, I think, enlarges us, best case scenario — unless we get stuck in one of those phases and just can't move through it. And that happens a lot, but it didn't happen to me this time, and I didn't want to make a record about that."