



Madeleine Peyroux - *Let's Walk*

*"Let us advance our mortal bodies up
Where hearts and minds will go
Let's walk, let's roll."*

So sings Madeleine Peyroux on the upbeat title track of her captivating ninth album, *Let's Walk*, the acclaimed singer-songwriter's most assured, courageous work to date. Powered by the distinctive, honeyed croon that delivered her from the Paris streets to concert halls, these ten unabashedly personal songs, all co-written by the versatile Peyroux, deftly interweave jazz, folk, and chamber pop, with themes ranging from the confessional to the political, from whimsy to yearning. In every note, Peyroux digs deep, rendering this exquisite work with the disarming grace and gravitas of an artist in peak form.

For the ardently civic-minded Peyroux, *Let's Walk* continues the scintillating conversation with her audience – and with the world at large. "This music is part of a dialogue," she says. "That's what art is. It's engagement, community. I believe more than anything in getting together with people and listening to music and conversing. Music is the only way I've ever built community."

Let's Walk was a long time coming, but well worth the wait. Following Peyroux's 2018 album, *Anthem*, the enforced isolation of the global pandemic made any real-time community gathering impossible. From a creative standpoint, however, Covid offered Peyroux a silver lining: she seized the opportunity to hunker down with longtime collaborator, multi-instrumentalist Jon Herington (Steely Dan, Lucy Kaplansky). The pair reflected on the seismic era at hand and wrote and re-wrote in what Peyroux calls "a shadow of reckoning." When multi-E Emmy-and-Grammy-winning producer Elliott Scheiner (Fleetwood Mac, The Eagles) heard a sampling of the new material, he mandated "no covers" for the album. The longtime studio veteran knew the time was ripe to highlight Peyroux's incisive, often topical lyrics meshed with Herington's ear for melody and arrangements.

Album opener "Find True Love" came to Peyroux during the George Floyd murder trial. Like "Let's Walk," "Find True Love" is an irresistible entreaty to join a journey. First stop: New Orleans. "I was searching for solace in the American landscape," Peyroux says. "I was imagining the first step toward healing, if there could be a future worth living for." Herington's pulsing, finger-picked acoustic guitar, interwoven with Andy Ezrin's shimmering keys, propel Peyroux's message of steadfast hope in the face of encroaching darkness. Says Peyroux: "The ideas in this song let me imagine a place where I can become a better me."

An astonished Peyroux says the title track came to her in a dream – including "the words, the rhythm, and the form" – a rarity for her. "The lyric refers to mass mobilization of marchers for civil rights around the world," Peyroux says. "A voluntarily unified action in support of a humanitarian ideology." Herington fleshed out "Let's Walk" with gospel textures, organ, and a steady, infectious beat, enlisting buoyant harmonies from Grammy-winning artist Catherine Russell (David Bowie, Rosanne Cash), along with vocalists supreme Cindy Mizelle (Bruce Springsteen) and Keith Fluitt (Patti LaBelle, Michael Jackson). Their

churchy call-and-response with Peyroux's burnished lead elevate "Please Come On Inside" and "Blues for Heaven" into a revival of emotion.

"How I Wish" is Peyroux's response to the horrific murders – over a period of three months in 2020 – of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. This melancholy, minor key waltz acknowledges her privilege, and her anguish. "2020 was the year I woke up," she says. Immersing herself in the work of such writers as Cornel West, she was struck by West's repeated references to Black musicians as "Love Warriors," responding to oppression with game-changing music: Nina Simone, Louis Armstrong, Marian Anderson, to name a few. "These are my teachers and my heroes," Peyroux says. "African American music has been the one constant, true path in my life."

One such mentor was Dan William Fitzgerald, aka "Showman Dan," for whom Peyroux wrote a rollicking ode after her longtime friend passed away in 2017. As leader of the Lost Wandering Blues and Jazz Band, the American-born expat took a very young, inexperienced Peyroux under his wing to perform across Europe, as she says, "on the street, in the underground, the public square, jazz clubs, restaurants, and private homes of dukes and duchesses." Like many Black artists before him, Fitzgerald found he could get more artistic traction in France than he could in his homeland and conveyed his love of street theater to Peyroux, who'd moved with her mother to Paris at age 12.

While in Paris, Peyroux noticed the custom of bourgeois parents buying an apartment for their grown children. For the satirical "Et Puis," the bilingual singer assumes the role of that young adult as one "both blissfully ignorant of their privilege and consciously disgusted by its injustice."

For "Nothing Personal," Peyroux bravely grapples head-on with sexual assault – both her own, and others. She reflects that the perpetrator should "learn every aspect of the consequence of their actions and be party to recovery in whatever way is welcome by the victim." Herington's mournful, insistent piano and acoustic guitar recall the intensity of "Plastic Ono Band," with Peyroux's painful-yet-resolved vocals intimate and beautifully unadorned.

Peyroux changes gears with the playful, Caribbean-flavored "Me and the Mosquito," and rapid-fire spoken-word album closer, "Take Care." The former, inspired by Hank Williams' hilarious classic "Fly Trouble," offers perhaps the most humanist treatise ever on what Peyroux calls "the elusive singular mosquito which can ruin a night's sleep." For the latter, Peyroux "prayed to the spoken-word genius of Linton Kwesi Johnson" to deliver a heartfelt advisory re: avoiding the pervasive toxins in food, clothing, and modern culture in general. "I don't recommend a morose existence," she recites over Herington's ska-flavored guitar and sampled marimba, "life is an art and perspective needs distance / But ya gotta get lean and scrappy and fight / If you're gonna begin to get livin' right."

When the road beckons this spring, Peyroux's community of loyal fans is in for a treat. Thanks to serendipitous delay, her collaborators Herington and Scheiner, and the very perspective she shares in "Take Care," the spare, slow burning *Let's Walk* material will be set free in venues around the world, effortlessly dovetailing with Peyroux's beloved versions of Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, and Tom Waits (to name a few) classics. As she learned in her busking years, a great song can wield powerful magic, and inspire the best in any type of crowd. With *Let's Walk*, Madeleine Peyroux takes full ownership of that magic.

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