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## Madeleine Peyroux hits her stride on *Let's Walk*

By Paul Alexander

On a recent May evening, Madeleine Peyroux stood backstage in her dressing room at Sony Hall in Manhattan greeting friends and fans after a performance. The renowned jazz vocalist still wore her stage attire — black slacks, blue blouse, blue velvet jacket, a pink scarf tied around her neck — having just charged through a spirited 75-minute set that included most of the tracks from her upcoming album, “Let’s Walk.”

A fan pointed out how different her new songs are. “I was consumed by them,” the singer said quietly. “I began to dream about them.”

That’s true in part because Peyroux wrote the songs herself. While she has penned material for her previous eight albums, usually with a co-author, much of her past work has been covers of standards from the American Songbook or works by modern songwriters such as Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan. “She’s known as an interpreter of songs,” says Peyroux’s longtime guitarist Jon Herington. “I know she’s wanted to remedy that.”

And now she has. Collaborating with Herington — also Steely Dan’s musical director — Peyroux wrote all 10 songs on “Let’s Walk” and in the process found her voice as a songwriter. The result is a deeply personal album in the jazz and folk traditions that addresses some of the day’s most vital issues. Taking its place in the rich traditions of Americana and protest songs, the record represents a distinct departure for Peyroux, who is known as a master interpreter of the romantic ballad.

“This is Madeleine’s breakthrough album,” says Catherine Russell, one of the trio of singers who contribute gospel-infused background vocals to five of the album’s tracks. “I’ve known her for 10 years but never worked with her. Hands down, this is her best work. The album may have social overtones, but it is her most personal yet.” Elliot Scheiner, the album’s producer and engineer, is even more adamant. “My hope for this album,” he says, “is that the public realizes it’s a masterpiece.”

Music has been the defining element of Peyroux's life.

Born in Athens, Ga., in 1974, she was 2 when her family left for Portland, Ore., and then Hollywood before settling in Brooklyn when she was 6. Her father, a failed academic and struggling actor, suffered from alcoholism; her mother, a banker, divorced him and moved Peyroux and her younger brother to Paris. "I was 12," she says. "I had been through a lot. My father was a violent alcoholic. In Paris, where I did not yet speak the language, I was depressed and on the verge of my own dysfunction. Then I started busking on subway platforms. One day someone threw some coins in my guitar case. I was hooked. Music became my lifeline."

At 15, she found her first true musical influence in Danny Fitzgerald, a street musician who fronted the Lost Wandering Blues and Jazz Band, with whom she played for the next two years, touring France and the United States. At 18, she landed a solo gig at a Paris club that ended unexpectedly when she took a trip to America. "I was not doing well," she says. "I was drinking too much. I ended up taking too many pills — I had gone to New York with my mother and was admitted to St. Vincent's Hospital for three months. It was a breakdown."

After being released, she lived in a family friend's apartment in Chelsea. One day, she got a telephone call from Yves Beauvais, a record producer — and protégé of Atlantic Records co-founder Ahmet Ertegun — who had seen her perform at a club in New York with Fitzgerald's band. He wanted to make an album with her for Atlantic. That album was released in 1996. "The record was 'Dreamland,'" Peyroux says, "and it absolutely changed everything."

"Dreamland" was a surprise bestseller, and a second album was scheduled. But while she was recording it for producer Larry Klein in Nashville, Peyroux lost her voice. "Since I had no training," she explains, "I didn't know how to protect my voice." Because Atlantic Records then dissolved and she had to sign with a new label, "Careless Love" was not released until 2004. Its success led to a grueling routine of releasing an album and touring extensively both domestically and internationally, which lasted through six more albums over the next 16 years — until the pandemic hit.

Peyroux had been in relationships — "I'm straight right now, but I've been gay in the past," she says. "I have a relationship with a person, not a gender" — but during the pandemic she found herself alone. It was in this forced solitude, after so many years of maintaining an arduous schedule of recording and touring, that she had no choice but to reflect on her life and the world around her.

Then, two months into the pandemic, the nation was shocked by the death of George Floyd. The event affected Peyroux deeply. “Obviously,” she says, “I needed to do something. I joined the marches. I didn’t go to jail. I didn’t get into fights. I just marched every day. I reached out to Black Lives Matter to become a part of the movement. It was impossible for me not to say anything anymore. It can’t be acceptable to ignore it.”

She also began to write about what she was experiencing. “Music engenders so much of what is precious to me,” she says. “It transmits the messages I believe in.”

While she was writing, she realized she wanted a collaborator. When she approached Herington, he was flattered by the invitation. They began working on songs, but because of the pandemic they had to write separately and email recorded versions of the songs back and forth. As she became more confident, the reserved Peyroux was able to make bold statements about what she was feeling. She and Herington wrote most of what became “Let’s Walk,” from a point of view that unquestionably belongs to Peyroux.

The title track came to her in a dream. It’s a celebration of marching — walking — inspired by the BLM marches she attended, and it is in the storied tradition of other songs meant to be sung in protest, such as “We Shall Overcome,” “This Land Is Your Land” and “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” Written in the classic call-and-response style, the song, Peyroux says, envisions a time when “all types of people can come together from all around the world to join in peaceful protest and show themselves to be unified in a message.”

While some of the new album’s songs are more in line with Peyroux’s past work — “Showman Dan” is an homage to her mentor, Danny Fitzgerald — most concern social issues. “Nothing Personal” addresses sexual assault, including her own. “I knew I’d have to address it someday,” she says. “Take Care” is a partially spoken-word, darkly ironic meditation on the need to preserve the environment. “Please Come on Inside” is an invitation “to trust in the process of healing.”

“How I Wish” is a direct response to Floyd’s murder. “I’m trying to find a way to open a dialogue on race with the tools and skills available to me,” Peyroux says of the song. “After all, racially motivated police murders are continuing, even if they are just not in the news. There are so many of them, it’s hard to keep track without becoming immersed in despair.”

Even so, Peyroux believes the album’s abiding sentiment is hope. “It’s a call to recognize what is best about our country,” she says, “to not give up on the idea of America.”