



The cover of René Marie's most recent album; she appears at Mayne Stage on Wednesday
Credits: Motéma Records

The brilliant audacity of vocalist René Marie, on disc and onstage Wednesday

By [Neil Tesser](#), Chicago Jazz Music Examiner

René Marie arrives at [Mayne Stage](#) on Wednesday night.

For anyone who's heard her sing, that's all you need to know: see you at the gig.

For everyone else, do yourself a favor, cancel your existing plans, and be on time for her shows (7:30 and 9:30). You can thank me later. **[NOTE: THE SECOND SHOW HAS BEEN CANCELLED; MARIE WILL PERFORM AT 7:30 ONLY.]**

[Marie](#) arrives on the heels of her latest album, *Voice Of My Beautiful Country* (Motéma) – a big, bold, exquisite, and inventive program of other people's songs, from traditional folk songs ("O Shenandoah," "John Henry") to Dave Brubeck's "Strange Meadow Lark" to the Jefferson Airplane classic "White Rabbit."

And those aren't even the most ambitious choices. She concludes the album with the title "suite," drawn from national anthems both black and white (including "America The Beautiful" and "My Country 'Tis Of Thee"), and closes by wedding "Lift Every Voice And Sing" to "The Star-Spangled Banner."

For an artist as rebellious and ambitious as Marie – who has written in recent years about such themes as broken homes, the culture war between north and south, and sexual victimization, and whose last album documented her one-woman show entitled *Slut Energy Theory* – the choice of such relatively conventional material provides the album's biggest charge. (Of course, it helps that she shifts "America The Beautiful" into 5/4 time, and turns "My Country," improbably, into a siren soul song worthy of Aretha.)

I freely admit that I've been smitten with Marie and her music since the arrival of her first album on a national label in 2000 (*How Can I Keep From Singing?* on [MAXJAZZ](#)), and not only because she has proved so adventurous in exploring subjects not often tackled in jazz.

Like her idol Ella Fitzgerald – whose recordings she used to study and imitate after she'd put the children to sleep – Marie has spectacular intonation. On the new disc, as usual, she nails every note, and this gives her music an effortless authority that validates her sometimes audacious note choices. (On

occasion, her unforced melodic leaps and paraphrasings even eclipse the written melody.)

Her timbre balances evenly between womanly desire and the girlish delight that characterized Ella even in old age. It has a lovely translucency – slightly sunny with a hint of sweetness – that catches and lifts the optimistic swing of an up-tempo tune, but can turn a breathy ballad into a not-so-mild aphrodisiac.

I once described Marie's onstage demeanor as that of "a commoner queen," and the more I've thought about that appellation, the better I like it. Her talent allows her to claim jazz royalty; her boundless joy, and her skill at communicating with even a large audience – [as seen at the 2010 Chicago Jazz Festival](#) – makes an audience feel as if they had joined her band.

So just imagine the sorcery she'll likely weave in the considerably more intimate confines of Mayne Stage (1328 W. Morse). On *The Voice Of My Beautiful Country*, you hear a beautiful voice claiming her place in the nation we share.

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