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04/21/11 • [By Lee Mergner](#)

René Marie: Singing of her America

Singer connects her passion with her past in her new album, *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, for Motema

René Marie is talking about how her episodic and sometimes dramatic life has informed her music. “I don’t know how to do it except to draw from my life experience,” she says. “If not mine, whose life experiences would I draw from? If I don’t, it’s going to sound fake or contrived.” The Denver-based vocalist has recently released her seventh album, the aptly-titled *Voice of My Beautiful Country* on [Motema Records](#). It’s an album that has a little bit of everything—standard, folk song, rock and soul covers, and patriotic anthem—but Marie doesn’t hesitate to pinpoint the inner connection of the material. “It’s all based on music that really touched me as I grew up,” says the 55-year old singer. “For example, I picked ‘White Rabbit’ because of America’s relationship with mind-altering substances. It might seem like a stretch, but it doesn’t seem like it to me. At the time I wanted something to reflect the fascination with drugs and the drug era.” But there’s no psychedelia in Marie’s version of the Jefferson Airplane hit, which she bends and stretches to fit her dramatic yet highly musical approach. Instead the effect is poignancy, not alienation.



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René Marie



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René Marie

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Backed by her working band of Kevin Bales on piano, Rodney Jordan on bass and Quentin Baxter on drums, the rest of the material ranges from more hit songs of '60s and '70s FM radio ("Drift Away" and "Just My Imagination") to traditional folk ballads ("John Henry" and "O Shenandoah") to a Latin jazz ballad ("Angelitos Negros") and to even a jazz standard (Dave Brubeck's "Strange Meadowlark"). And capping it all off is Marie's 20-minute suite that links "My Country 'Tis of Thee," "America the Beautiful" and her version of "The Star Spangled Banner" to which she substitutes the words of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," a personal and creative choice that touched a nerve when she first performed it in 2008 and that garnered her considerable attention and feedback, much of it negative and some even qualifying as honest-to-God hate-mail. More on that later.

Her Americana

As a singer in search of a deep connection with her repertoire, Marie thoroughly researched the traditional material on her latest album in order to understand their backgrounds and origins. She's particularly proud of "O Shenandoah," in which the narrator wistfully recalls his/her homeland and talks about crossing the river, as strong an image and metaphor as there is in American culture. "Supposedly it was written by a young man in the Confederate army, who was just lonely and was missing his parents," Marie explains. "He wrote this poem and included it in a letter he sent to his parents. I thought that was lovely and I especially liked that he was from the Confederate Army. It's basically a poem about being away for too long. You want to come home and you have misgivings about the decision to leave home. And who can't identify with that, no matter what side you're on? I

just love the song. I learned that song even before I went to school, so it's been with me a long time. Interestingly, when we do it, I'm surprised at the number of people who know that song and who it resonates with."

Regardless of the politics, Marie really does make each song her own, in part because she does the basic arrangements herself and in part because she not only allows her band a certain leeway, she demands it. "That recording of 'Drift Away' was the first time we did it that way," Marie says. "I said, 'Let's just do it without tempo and free.' That was a first take."

The entire album indeed sounds like the musicians were playing live in the same room, yet at the same time it's not a tossed-off live project. Every tune seems meticulously crafted, like a studio record of yore. The drummer in Marie's band, Quentin Baxter, mixed and mastered the album. "He really knows what we want," Marie explains. "He knows exactly how to catch what we do."

Marie also gives her bandmates plenty of space for solos. Not many singers put a drum solo on their own album, as Marie does on her "Voice of My Beautiful Country Suite," in which the songs are connected at one point by lengthy solos by pianist Bales and drummer Baxter. Marie laughs about the rarity of singers putting extended drum solos on their albums, and says "Maybe, but can you imagine having that suite without that drum solo in there?" And she's right that the solo does connect the music in a very dramatic fashion. She credits her band with successfully bringing the suite together. "I did not intentionally do it that way, but the three guys I work with are just amazing. I'm so lucky. I can bring a skeletal idea to a song and they seem to intuit what I want to do with the song. There's lots of communication and I totally trust them and they totally trust me. It's a beautiful synergy that we have."

Marie's four-part "Voice of My Beautiful Country Suite" was a particularly collaborative effort, even though the singer started with some very fixed ideas. "When I brought this idea of a suite to them, I knew what I wanted to do. I'd already written the music out. I'd written the music for 'My Country 'Tis of Thee' and I knew how I would do 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing/Star Spangled Banner' and then go back to the reprise. But I didn't know how to stitch them together. As we played it live, it gradually took shape. Last year, we were at Dizzy's and Quentin came up with the drum solo and we were all astounded. After that, he started incorporating that story part. Each time it's different, but he always brings in the Native American influence and the Cavalry sound. It totally adds to the story."

Marie has learned how important it is for a singer to trust her band to do the right thing even if sometimes it might seem like the wrong thing. "I would be a fool to try and squelch that freedom they have in expressing themselves," she says. "This is what happens when you totally trust the musicians you play with. If you can't trust them like that, what's the point in having musicians that you're going to put a strait jacket on? I don't want that. Then it challenges you and it challenges all the musicians on the stage. The same thing happens with Kevin's solo. Sometimes he goes into this stride piano and sometimes he incorporates Native American chords or blues or gospel. What you hear is the solo he happened to play that today."

The very raw rendition of "John Henry" is another example of an arrangement developed by musicians simply doing their thing. "That bass line that Rodney plays, where he sounds like he's sawing the bass in half?" says Marie. "I said, 'Rodney, that's it! I want you to use that in "John

Henry.” It was not the way we had originally rehearsed it. It was so crazy, man. It was off the wall. But to me it really captured the [spirit of the] back-breaking work. You’re talking about digging in rocks and building tunnels through mountains. It’s hard, it’s edgy. There’s sweat in it. There’s pain in it. I just love how Rodney came up with that.” The song is another one with deep roots in Marie’s own childhood. “My father used to listen to Harry Belafonte when I was a kid,” she explains. “It’s a fable. Here’s a man against machine. He’s doing his damndest not only to keep his job, but to prove a man ain’t nothin’ but a man. It’s probably a universal message.”

In “Angelitos Negros” Marie connects the struggle of African-Americans in the past with those of Hispanics in America today. “The only person I’ve ever heard sing it was Roberta Flack, when I was a teenager. I always loved it. Then later I found out what the lyrics meant, the gist of which are, ‘Painters, when you paint the angels, you’re already painting the virgin white, why are you painting all the angels white too? Why can’t you paint the black angels too? When you paint the virgin white, please paint the beautiful black angels.’ I included that because of all the ruckus that has been raised about Hispanics coming into this country. They are definitely a part of America and it’s not going to go away. I love the passion and frustration that’s infused in that song.”

Her National Anthem

One of the more interesting aspects of Marie’s approach is that even when the album is addressing difficult or potentially divisive topics, it retains a sense of optimism. In the case of her “Voice of My Beautiful Country Suite,” it’s the song itself or at least one of them that has evoked a good bit of controversy. That suite contains the surprisingly incendiary version of the National Anthem that caused such a stir when she did it at a political event in Denver, the mayor’s state of the city address. For those who may have missed the blowback from that performance in which she sang the words of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” to the music of “The Star Spangled Banner,” Marie was the subject of intense and often personal criticism for a creative choice with political overtones.

Here is a video of that performance, with Marie mistakenly introduced as Rene Martin:

In the face of a hailstorm of criticism, Marie did not back down from her belief in her arrangement and she's sticking to her guns today. "When I first came up with the idea, I thought, 'From now on, this is the way I want to sing "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing."' For me, I don't want to go back to the traditional melody or lyrics for either one. When I'm at a public function, and 'The Star Spangled Banner' is sung, I stand up and I'm singing the lyrics to 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing.' Not to drown out other people, but just for me. I made that decision in early spring of 2008."

Marie says that she had intended to put the song on her next CD, but somehow it took much longer to record the album. "Everything else happened in between," she says of the period after the controversy. "And I'm glad it did. It gave me a taste of the emotional impact, especially in 2008 which was an election year. Emotions were running very high and hot in the country about patriotism and the American dream. I got lots of feedback from other Americans I never would have had a chance to interact with otherwise. Now when I sing it publicly, I realize that all those viewpoints are right there in the room with me. Sometimes we tend to think that people are there to hear what we're ready to do, that they're all onboard. But, no, not necessarily so. I'm still getting e-mails, calls and text messages from people. In fact, my latest text message was 'You are a worthless piece of trash.' And I responded to them that, 'Freedom of speech is a beautiful thing. It allows you to express yourself and it allows me to express myself. The only difference is that I'm not going to condemn you.'"

Given that people mangle the National Anthem all the time and that Marie is a jazz musician with a mandate to be creative, you have to wonder why the reaction to Marie's heartfelt and very musical version was so vitriolic. Marie has certainly had some time to ponder that question. "I think it's because the nickname for 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing' is the *Black National Anthem* and people see that phrase and they think the aim is to usurp. What they don't even think about is that it was written by two Americans. It's just the words *Black National Anthem* and off they go into the wild blue

yonder with their own fantasies. What are you going to do?”

The lyrics Marie sings were originally written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson, whose brother John Rosamond Johnson later put the words to music. The poem itself was recited publicly for the first time in connection with Abraham Lincoln’s 100th birthday on February 12, 1900. Marie describes the song as, “Two Americans writing about America.” The song became a fixture in hymnals and churches all over the country. Reverend Joseph Lowery (the former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s organization) recited the song’s third stanza to begin his benediction at the inauguration ceremony for President Obama on January 20, 2009.

For her part, Marie is especially struck by the lyrical and musical symmetry of the two songs. “One thing I also figured out when I was working on this suite was that I could either sing ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing’ to the music of ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ or I could sing the lyrics of ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ to ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.’ The highlights of the lyrics correspond with the highlights of the melody. At master classes and workshops, I’ve demonstrated how the two just happen to fit so perfectly together. That’s the beauty of it. They do meld. And it’s the whole point. Can’t we all just get along? The song ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing’ was created specifically to lift black people up during Jim Crow. Times were bad for black folk and singing the National Anthem just didn’t do it. You’d be singing it and you’d know it didn’t apply to you. I just know that when I sing it that way, everything falls into place. This is from someone who loves singing it and who gets a-flutter. I don’t have anything against it [the original song] or its great sentiments, but for the majority of black people growing up at my age, the ‘land of the free’ didn’t apply to us. But, it’s just one American’s viewpoint.”

Marie says that much of the commentary about her performance said that she was hired to do “The Star Spangled Banner” for this function and to do anything else was asking for trouble. “Yes, I heard that. If I had sung any other song like ‘America the Beautiful’ nobody would have said that you didn’t sing the song you were hired to sing. It’s not that. It was the choice of song. Let’s not tiptoe around it or be disingenuous. It was not that I didn’t sing the National Anthem, it’s that I chose to sing ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.’ I think if I had sung ‘This Land is Your Land’ you wouldn’t have heard a word about it.”

Marie also bemoans the fact that the National Anthem is rarely sung communally these days. Instead it has become a performance piece for one singer in an often unforgiving spotlight. “Look at what happened to Christine Aguilera,” she says. “You’re put under this terrible scrutiny. It’s almost like people are waiting to see if they’re going to screw it up, just to jump on them.”

Naturally, I wondered if Marie could ever do her version of “The Star Spangled Banner” at a sports event, which is the most ubiquitous practice of the song. “I seriously doubt it,” she says, with some resignation in her voice. “Maybe 50 years from now. Maybe we’ll be past all that [racial divisiveness].”

In the hopes of inspiring others to express their feelings about this country, Marie has organized an interesting promotion connected with the suite and album. According to the press release received at *JazzTimes*, she is “asking her fellow Americans to follow her lead, listen to their inner voice, pull

from their own experiences and creatively express to the world, what they love most love about their country.” Entrants can use poetry, photography, spoken word, video or music— whatever best displays their own “Voice of My Beautiful Country.” The contest runs through May 31, 2011. People can participate in the contest by visiting the [Voice of My Beautiful Country website](#) and uploading their entries. One grand prize winner will be awarded a trip for two, including airfare and hotel, to the Nation’s Capital - Washington, DC to see René Marie in concert on July 6, 2011 at Blues Alley. Two runners up will receive a signed gift set of four René Marie CDs plus tickets to a René Marie show in the city of their choice along the tour.

Her Life in the Theater

In the last few years, Marie has developed a one-woman show called “Slut Energy Theory,” which she premiered in 2009. “It’s supposed be four parts, but I’ve only done one part so far. There’s maybe 20 minutes worth of music. The rest is monologue and spoken word.” You might think that a jazz singer as open as Marie would prefer improvisation when working in a theatrical situation, but she says that the production is very much a scripted thing, at least to a point. “The only thing I change is the monologue and that’s quite by accident. I know the gist of what I’m doing.” The production deals with the very intense issue of domestic and sexual abuse, told from the perspective of an old black woman named U’Dean who has died and gone to heaven. “I love the character. It’s a lot of fun to do. Her impression of heaven is that she’s pretty much disgusted with it, because it doesn’t fit her preconception of it. She’s angry at God and has no qualms about saying so. Her viewpoint is that she’s experienced Hell already. [In an old woman voice] ‘Gimme your best shot. What are you going to do to me now?’ She’s able to speak quite freely and say all the things we cannot say. I love that freedom.”

Speaking freely was very much the theme of the play from the beginning. Marie says when she started writing the play, she tried to write about the character, but it sounded fake. “I knew I had a lot to say, but I didn’t know how to write it,” she says. “So I asked my husband to interview me as if I were the character. Then I’m speaking in the character’s voice and we’re taping it and I find myself really going deep and understanding the character. And the more I talked, the less I worried about what I was saying. All this stuff was coming out. As I was listening to it later and writing what I had said, I thought, ‘I can’t put this in the play.’ But it was as if the character was saying [speaks in the old woman’s voice], ‘Yes, you can, you just write down what I tell you. Just let me worry about that.’ As long as I did that it would flow. When I would clean it up, it just didn’t work. I don’t what that means. I guess I don’t hold anything back as that character.”

Because of the potentially traumatic nature of the material, Marie hosts a “talk back” with the audience after the show is over. During that post-show session, Marie includes two mental health care professionals— those who advocate for victims of sexual violence—to be onstage to answer questions and talk about this. “It’s heavy,” Marie explains. “I don’t like to just say, ‘OK, we’re done, goodbye, good luck.’ When I do the talk back I stay in character, because I feel that U’Dean can answer the questions better than anything I can say. It is her story and she speaks from the heart.”

Sexual abuse and violence is indeed a powerful subject that really can touch a nerve with people. Marie acknowledges that for many people, it’s a terrible combination of being both shameful and painful. “The thing about it is that it’s not unusual for people to approach me privately afterwards and whisper in my ear. Even after all that, they have to whisper in my ear. I always ask the health care

professionals to bring literature, because there are people who stay and won't say anything and it's happened to them. And they don't want to talk with these professionals. It's heartbreaking."

Before developing her show, Marie had limited experience doing theater, having done two musicals. "I played the role of Ella in a musical — *Ella and her Fella Frank* — no acting in that, just singing," she says. "In 2008 I played the role of Dinah Washington in a play called *Dinah Was*. There was lots of acting in that."

With such immersion in the worlds of jazz and theater, you might imagine that Marie feels some pressure to relocate to New York City. A resident of the Denver area for over six years, Marie says she doesn't buy the notion that she needs to relocate to New York City to further her career professionally or creatively. "I've never let that idea that New York City is the 'IT place to be' affect my viewpoint," she says. For Marie the more significant change was going off the road and doing the show, but recently she's resumed her heavy touring schedule.

Marie has also developed a show called "Two Skirts and a Shirt," which features Marie and fellow jazz singers Carla Cook and Allan Harris. Marie came up with the concept, produced it, composed the theme song and arranged all the group tunes, including the vocal arrangements. The show, which opened in Denver in 2008, was premiered at the Kennedy Center in November 2010 and recently had an extended engagement at Dizzy's in New York City. And, of course, she'll be performing material from her new album and she figures to retain its organic quality. "I don't like antiseptic music," she says. "If it's not real, it doesn't move me." René Marie is, above all things, very real.

Here is a promotional video for the Motema album, in which Marie discusses the project:

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