

René Marie

René Marie, the award winning singer whose style incorporates elements of jazz, soul, blues and gospel, has quickly become a heroine to many; a woman of great strength exuding stamina and compassion; often explaining how finding her voice and self through singing gave her the courage to leave an abusive marriage. But since the release of her recording debut, *Renaissance*, this Colorado based heroine has also evolved into one of the greatest and most sensuous vocalists of our time. Unmistakably honest and unpretentious while transforming audiences worldwide with her powerful interpretations, electrifying deliveries and impassioned vocals - René Marie has drawn a legion of fans and music critics who find themselves not only entertained, but encouraged and even changed by her performances.

With her latest release *Voice of My Beautiful Country* (Motema Music), listeners will hear her trademark vocals but will also be struck by the wide variety of songs that she interprets. During the course of the album, Marie brings her personal touch to everything from Motown to Tin Pan Alley to "America the Beautiful." But *Voice of My Beautiful Country* is much more than a demonstration of Marie's eclectic musical tastes; it is an ambitious celebration of Americana and the cultural diversity of these United States.

Although most of *Voice of My Beautiful Country* is performed in English, Marie sings in Spanish on the Latin standard "Angelitos Negros," After falling in love with Roberta Flack's version of "Angelitos Negros" when she was a teenager, Marie included the song to acknowledge the importance of Hispanic culture as a basic building block of America.

It is hard to believe that Marie didn't sing professionally until after she turned 40. But in fact, the Virginia native, married at 18, mother of two by 23 and a member of a strict religious group with her then husband only occasionally sang in public while she was focused on raising a family. It was in 1996 that Marie's eldest son Michael urged her to take the plunge to pursue a career. "He told me that was exactly what I needed to do" she explains. Two years later following an ultimatum by her husband to either stop singing or leave their home, she chose to leave after 23 years of marriage.

What followed was a whirlwind of success and great critical acclaim rarely seen in the jazz world, from *The LA Times* to the *Washington Post*, from the *Miami Herald* to the *Chicago Tribune*. She has received several awards throughout her career including Best International Jazz Vocal CD (besting Cassandra Wilson and Joni Mitchell) by the Academie Du Jazz (Paris, France) and has graced the Billboard Charts multiple times propelling her to headliner status at major festivals in the US & abroad including the prestigious *Women In Jazz* festival at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the *Spoleto* festival in Charleston, SC, the *Edinburgh Jazz Festival* (Scotland) *Shanghai Jazz Festival* (China) among many others.

In 2007 René Marie released *Experiment in Truth* as well as the single "This Is (Not) A Protest Song," a fund-raiser for the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. And in 2009 she released the sound track for her touring one-woman play, *Slut Energy Theory*

(which follows the protagonist U'Dean Morgan, on a journey from sexual abuse to self esteem, imparting some very down home and hilarious wisdom along the way). Marie also released a digital single, "Three Nooses Hanging," which musically embodied her shock and reaction to the Jena Six case in Louisiana.

Almost 15 years after the debut of *Renaissance*, René Marie's creativity, boldness and exuberance take hold on *Voice of My Beautiful Country*. Documenting material that Marie has been performing to great effect for several years, it also follows up a nationally publicized incident where Marie was invited to sing The Star Spangled Banner in Denver at the Mayor's State of the City address. Instead Marie sang the lyrics to 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing' with the melody of the Star Spangled Banner. The event touched off a firestorm of press and right wing criticism, and even death threats.

Often used to describe the classic Tin Pan Alley songs that Gershwin, Porter, Berlin and others composed during the first half of the 20th Century, The Great American Songbook for Marie also includes jazz, R&B, gospel, folk, rock and the blues — with her "Imagination Medley" she unites Tin Pan Alley, Motor City soul and rock by marrying Jimmy Van Heusen's "Imagination" and Norman Whitfield & Barrett Strong's "Just My Imagination" (a major hit for the Temptations in 1971 that was also covered by the Rolling Stones in 1978). Marie celebrates other aspects of Americana with interpretations of material that range from Dave Brubeck's jazz jaunt, "Strange Meadow Lark" to the Dobie Gray hit "Drift Away" (a soul/soft rock favorite from the early 1970s) to the traditional folk standards "John Henry" and an anthemic version of "O Shenandoah."

One of the most intriguing choices on *Voice of My Beautiful Country* is Jefferson Airplane's psychedelic rock favorite "White Rabbit," which was inspired by the drug counterculture of the late 1960s. Marie notes: "I picked Jefferson Airplane because of the affection that Americans have for mind-altering substances — not that it's unique to this country, but it is an American personality trait. When I perform 'White Rabbit' live, I don't like to tell audiences what we're getting ready to do. I just like to see the expressions on their faces when they realize that we're doing 'White Rabbit.'"

The center and title piece of the album is Marie's extraordinary *Voice of My Beautiful Country Suite*, an ambitious jazz and soul tinged medley of the patriotic anthems "America the Beautiful," "My Country 'Tis of Thee," "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." On "America the Beautiful" and "My Country 'Tis of Thee," Marie takes a radical departure by performing these exalted lyrics, familiar to us all, over fresh melodies that she has composed and over which she improvises. "The whole idea was to take the most popular forms of American music — jazz, blues and gospel — and use it to underscore the power and universality of these lyrics," Marie points out. "I love the original melodies for 'America the Beautiful' and 'My Country 'Tis of Thee'; my eyes get teary when I hear them, but there is another emotion altogether that gets touched when I sing over these new melodies, and I have found that audiences really get moved by bringing this new context, this new way to love our country."