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Rene Marie reveals, returns to Roanoke for Jefferson Center concert

The jazz singer explains how she disrobes -- musically - onstage, and how she expects her audience to get involved.

By [Tad Dickens](#)

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Being on stage is about letting go so completely that an audience will let go, too, jazz singer Rene Marie says.

It's not just something she says in interviews. It's right there, in her music.

"Music is my clothing; slowly I undress. I don't mind disrobing to reveal my nakedness," former Roanoker turned international jazz artist Marie sings on the title cut of her latest record, "Black Lace Freudian Slip."

Marie wrote both the music and lyrics for that number. With upright bass loping and brushes sizzling a snare drum on the mid-tempo opening cut, Marie lets go with what might as well be a statement of purpose.

"I'm taking aim, and shooting straight from the hip 'cause I got on my black lace Freudian slip," she sings after firing shots at critics and prudes. "Oh, I've sat out there, but have you ever stood up here?"

"I think what's missing often in music and specifically in the jazz genre is people being revealing and letting loose," she said in a phone interview this past Thursday. "I just find that missing, and when I go listen to singers or musicians, it's almost as though what they're doing is trying to be a musician or be a singer, instead of just singing. You know what I mean? There's a difference.

"So for me, and what I encourage the band members to do, is please give it your all. You don't know that this might be our last gig, so what are you holding back for? You don't know what's going to happen to you when you walk out the door. So give what you got, you know. Let me see that. Let me feel it. Don't have these people pay money for nothing."

When Marie returns to Roanoke for a Friday night performance at Jefferson Center, she aims as usual to get figuratively naked onstage.

"I undress, removing one layer after another after another," she said. "And I think the people in the audience want that, because when I do that, I think it allows them to do it also, and to really get involved and enmeshed in the music, which is the goal after all, for me, anyway. You know, to see that look on somebody's face when they finally relinquish everything and surrender — it's a beautiful thing."

Mother and son

Last time Marie played Roanoke, March 2009, she brought her older son, Michael Croan, onstage with her. Together, they performed a funky version of the traditional "John Henry," and one of Marie's originals, "Stronger Than You Think."

It was Michael who had persuaded Marie in the early 1990s to get out there and sing, after years of regular jobs around Roanoke. "Stronger Than You Think" was written as a way to give good advice to Michael and his brother, Desmond Croan.

On "Black Lace," Michael Croan contributed one of his own tunes, "Deep in the Mountains." The slowly swinging 12/8 number is haunting, and Marie thinks it's the best song on the disc.

She first heard her son sing this song when he was in prison years ago.

"Anybody that knows Michael well will have to be aware that he was in prison for a while," she said, declining to discuss specifics. "He wrote a lot of songs when he was in prison.

"But this song in particular, I remember going to see him, and we were all sitting in the visiting room, inmates and their families, and he starts singing this song, a cappella. I got chill bumps, and I noticed the room got quiet. And I said to him after he finished singing, 'Why did the inmates stop talking?' He says, real nonchalant, 'Oh, I sing this song to them all the time. They've heard it many times. They always ask me to sing it.'

"I thought to myself, I guess they do, because this is an amazing song."

After Marie signed with the Motema label, she brought in Croan to sing it with her as a duet.

"When he sings it live with the group, he takes the lead and I'm just singing harmony â€ because he is such an amazing singer that I just kind of stand there with my mouth open sometimes, or grinning like, you know, the proud mother that I am," she said. "I think it's the best song on the CD. I hate to say that, because I worked hard on my own songs.

"But there's something that happens to me, some type of physical thing, when I first hear the beginning of 'Deep In The Mountains.' It grabs me. Oof!"

Croan will be flying in from his home in Denver, Colo., where he is a musician and bartender/server, to join his mother onstage again in Roanoke.

Back to Virginia

Marie and her husband also lived in Denver for several years, but last month, the couple moved back to Virginia - the Fredericksburg area, to be more precise. They want to be near their mothers while both parents "are still healthy and enjoying life," she said.

"I couldn't have moved at a better time," she said. "[It is] my favorite time of year, with the trees in all their autumn glory. It's just gorgeous here, so I'm starting to feel at home again."

Marie, who moved to Roanoke with her family at age 10 from her native Warrenton, comes back to Roanoke only for shows and finds herself "completely enveloped by all the emotions of having grown

up there."

"And I just feel very nostalgic," she said.

But there's some embarrassment, too, she said. Marie, who turned 56 on Nov. 7, said that she forgets names, even the names of those she grew up with or knew well later on.

"And so, when that happens, a lot of times I've actually overheard people that I grew up with or knew when I was in Roanoke say as an aside to someone else when I've forgotten their name: 'Oh, now that she's done this and such-and-such, she don't remember me no more,'" she said.

"And it's not that. It's just that I'm getting older. And I meet so many people and have to remember so many names. And I know it sounds crazy or like I'm giving an excuse, but it's difficult for me to remember people's names.  Same thing in Warrenton, and that's where I spent my first 10 years. It's the same thing, but what are you going to do? Just say I'm sorry, and that's the best I can do."

So hey, Roanokers - if you know her and say hi, give her a break if she doesn't call you by name.

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