

Jazz singer Rene Marie talks about the past and her future

By Jon Solomon

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Singer René Marie says her time in Denver has been life-changing.

Details:

René Marie CD-release show, 7 and 9 p.m., Friday, July 1, Dazzle, 930 Lincoln Street, \$25, 303-839-5100.

A few years ago, jazz singer René Marie was called an American during an interview in Russia. Marie, without even thinking, wanted to correct the journalist and say, "I'm not American," since she didn't feel like an American.

"I stopped myself," she recalls, "because I realized, 'Wait a minute. Why would I say that?' I was dismayed — and that's not a strong enough word. What's wrong with me? Why would I think that, that I'm not an American? Of course I am. But I thought, there's something deeper going on. What is it? Because when you're in America, most people don't say, 'So as an American...' They don't do that. It's like a given. But to be referred to as one outside of America made me feel really like, 'Nuh-uh, I'm definitely not that. I might be something, but I'm not American.'"

On the plane ride home, she started to think of her background and how for the first ten years of her life, growing up in Virginia, she lived under Jim Crow laws. She says she watched her father and her uncles, who were very proud men, how their personalities would change when they were in certain situations with white people.

"As a child, nobody sits you down and explains any of that to you," she says. "You just think that that's the way you're supposed to behave when you're in these circumstances. And you don't ask, 'Why do we have to sit over here and not over there?' You just don't ask it. You don't ask it in front of white people, and you don't ask it at home, because you're not going to get an answer. Not because your parents don't want to answer you, but it's too painful to for them to talk about it."

The Russian interview and the plane ride home planted the seeds of what would eventually become the five-part "Voice of My Beautiful Country Suite" from her most recent effort, *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, released this past March on the Motéma Music imprint. The suite includes her renditions of "America the Beautiful" and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," but Marie took the original melodies and put some blues, gospel and jazz into the mix. "That's *my* country," she says. "And it's your country, too, but maybe you didn't have that experience."

When Marie sang "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" to the melody of "The Star-Spangled Banner" a few years ago at the Denver State of the City address, she caused a bit of a stir. The words about "the land of the free" and "the home of the brave" weren't quite doing it for her. She says her father fought in World War II, and she knew he was very bitter when he came back home. He didn't want to talk about it. He put his uniform away and kept the American flag in a box. "There was no flag waving," she explains, "because he didn't have his civil rights."

Marie's father later told her about how he and her mother had taken part in desegregating the lunch counters in Warrenton, Virginia, and how he was blacklisted from getting another teaching job in the county afterward. "I think it was just the realization of all those things that I thought that there's got to be another way to express love for one's country, because, I gotta tell ya, singing the national anthem just didn't cut it for me. There would be too much irony in it. And then when I got older, I also found out that the national anthem was written by two slaveholders."

"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," in Marie's experience, was a song that was mainly sung by black people. "We sang it because after singing the national anthem, to sing 'Lift Ev'ry Voice' made us feel better. The lyrics of it were uplifting. After you finished, you felt better about yourself. You'd look around and go, 'We're in this together. We just gotta keep on.' That's the message of so many songs of African-Americans. Keep your eyes on the prize. Keep putting one foot in front of the other. Don't falter. We can make it."

Other songs on *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, which Marie calls her "love song to America," include Dave Brubeck's "Strange Meadow Lark"; Marie's arrangement of "John Henry," the traditional song that her father used to play all the time when she was a child; the Dobie Gray hit "Drift Away"; and a swinging take on Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit." The disc also includes Jimmy Van Heusen's ballad "Imagination," which segues into the Temptations' "Just My Imagination."

Marie also wanted to include "Angelitos Negros" on the album. The song, which she first heard Roberta Flack sing as a teenager, resonated, she says, "because of all the big kerfuffle about Hispanics coming into this country. All these protests and laws, and I'm thinking, 'How many of us are immigrants to this country?'"

The gist of the song, according to Marie, who sings the tune in Spanish, is that, "Of course painters have to paint the Virgin white, but do they have to paint all the angels white, too? Aren't there any beautiful black angels? When you paint with your paintbrushes, paint the black angels, the beautiful black angels."

Throughout *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, possibly her finest release, Marie sounds absolutely stunning and completely in command. She sounds like someone who's been singing for decades, not someone who only started professionally after she turned forty. Even more stunning, the now-55-year-old jazz singer says she grew up listening to everything *except* jazz. Her father played folk music by the likes of Burl Ives, Mitch Miller, Odetta and Peter, Paul & Mary. But when she was seventeen, she went to see *Lady Sings the*

Blues, and that set her on a path of discovery. She didn't know anything about Billie Holiday, but she loved Diana Ross.

"I just sat there in the theater and I was *blown away*," Marie recalls. "I mean, I was really blown away. I left the theater and went to the music store and bought the soundtrack. And then I found some sheet music, like a book of songs from the movie, and learned to play. That's when I learned about Billie Holiday."

A year later she was married, and by 23, she was a mother of two. By that time, she'd only occasionally sung in public. After some encouragement from her eldest son, Michael, in 1996, Marie gave professional singing a shot. Two years later, her husband at the time gave her an ultimatum: Either stop singing or move out. She moved out. "It was the best gift he ever gave me," she says with a laugh.

In October 1999, she released the first of four albums on MAXJAZZ, and in 2005 she came to Denver. "I felt like something called me here," she says. "I didn't know anybody here." The day she arrived, she says, she had the feeling that another part of herself was already here. "When I finally drove in, there was this other part of myself standing there, like, 'Where have you been? What took you so long?' It's that type of feeling. I can't even explain it, other than to say that."

During her six-year stint in the Mile High City, Marie has been more creatively prolific than at any other time in her life, having made four CDs and put on a one-woman show, *Slut Energy Theory*. She says she's never grown so much in such a short period of time that she's aware of.

"So many of my perceptions were challenged when I first moved here," she reveals, "because I lived in the South all my life. Everything was so different here. For me, another person coming from the South — I'm not speaking for everybody; just speaking for me — I was introduced to ideas and life philosophies that I'd never heard of."

Just the same, her time here is almost done. In August or September, Marie is moving back to Virginia to be near her mother.

"I want to be with my mom, and I know I'm doing the right thing," she says. "But that's the only reason that I'm leaving, because I love this place. This is the first place that I've lived — like when I'm on the road and I come home and the plane touches down — I'm not kidding, it's the first place I've lived where I've actually had the thought, 'I'm home.' Other places you say, 'I'm back.' But this is, 'I'm home.'"