

CITY NEWSPAPER

MUSIC PROFILE: René Marie & Experiment In Truth

By Ron Netsky on November 9, 2011

Listening to René Marie's "Voice of My Beautiful Country," you might be stirred by her gorgeous reinventions of American classics like "O Shenandoah" and "John Henry" or struck by her fresh take on pop songs like "Just My Imagination" and "Drift Away." But, toward the end of the album, your listening experience will be turned upside down.

Marie sings "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" (the so-called Negro National Anthem) and "The Star-Spangled Banner," but she sings the lyrics of each with the melody of the other. Beautiful, and subtly subversive, the musical inversion recalls the intensity of Nina Simone's mid-1960's "Mississippi Goddam."

The idea came to Marie as a result of an interview she did before a performance in Russia when the reporter referred to her as an American. "My immediate mental response was she made a mistake," says Marie, who performs in the Exodus to Jazz series Sunday. "I almost spoke up to correct her, but I caught myself. I'm thinking, Why would I think that?"

On the flight home she thought about her experience growing up. Had anybody called her an American in the United States? Growing up in the South under Jim Crow laws, she remembered walking past restaurants with signs saying, "No dogs or niggers." She remembered her parents' attempt to desegregate a lunch counter.

"I realized when we go through stuff like that, the majority of African Americans don't really process it because it's too painful to deal with," says Marie. "Once the Civil Rights Act was enacted in all 50 states and that kind of thing gradually went away, nobody sat down and said, 'Let's examine what happened here. How did it affect our psyches?' [It was] onward and upward, not time to look back."

When she sang patriotic songs like the "The Star-Spangled Banner" she welled up with emotion, but deep inside she realized something was wrong. "That phrase 'land of the free, home of the brave,' even musically speaking that's the highest note in the song. It's sustained. That's a beautiful sentiment, but it doesn't apply to me or people who look like me," Marie says. "I wanted to take those same songs, I wanted to retain the lyrics - that same beautiful thought and imagery - but I wanted to change the music to reflect something more like it was for me growing up in this land of the free and home of the brave."

Predictably, radio stations are not playing those tracks. "I've got to tell you, I'm not thinking about that shit when I'm writing," says Marie. "I'm not going to let radio playability effect what I do."

That defiance might be a result of achieving her dreams late in life. Marie was 42 when her son called her from a

restaurant. "He said, 'Mom there's a woman singing here. She's singing all the songs that you sing at home and she's terrible.' Out of curiosity I drove up to the restaurant," she says.

"I thought wow, I can't believe she's getting paid for this because, while her voice was pleasant, she was singing unconvincingly," says Marie. "My son said, 'Mom, you know you can do better than that.' I said I'm too old to get started singing."

But she had sung as a teenager and, encouraged by her son, she called a friend who had a jazz quintet. The group had a gig at the local Marriot and she asked if she could sit in. Within 18 months she had her own group and was ready to record her first CD.

"The night before we were going to record it, my ex-husband - my was-band - gave me an ultimatum: 'If you leave and go to that recording studio, don't come back home,'" says Marie.

They were Jehovah's Witnesses, which she calls "a perfect setting for women to be subservient. We had set up those conditions and this was a continuation of it," says Marie. "The night ended with violence. When he was finished I got up and I just left. I never did go back. I grew up with that kind of stuff and I knew, this is not going to happen to me."

Her mother helped her finance that first album, which Marie sent to clubs, radio stations, newspapers, and record labels. The strategy worked perfectly in Washington D.C. A Washington Times writer found it in a pile of rejects and liked it so much he wrote a positive review. Unbeknownst to her, Washington radio stations were playing it and, when she called a D.C. nightclub, she got a gig.

It got better. The critic called the president of the Max Jazz Record label, who happened to be in D.C. for a meeting. Not wanting to take a chance, she brought in two busloads of people from home - Richmond, Virginia - to support her.

"The president approached me during the break and asked me to record for his label," says Marie. "I thought this is probably some smooth-talking, fly-by-night, slick guy. But it turned out it was a legitimate offer.

Since then, she's switched to the Motema label, which recently did something highly unusual. In addition to the "Beautiful Country" album released last spring, another album by Marie, "Black Lace Freudian Slip," came out last month. "The president wanted it to be a one-two punch," says Marie.

The most meaningful tune for her on that album is "Deep In The Mountains." It was written by the same son, Michael Croan, who encouraged her to start singing 15 years ago. Croan is a singer and composer, and he accompanies her on the song, which is more gospel than jazz.

In fact, Marie takes this album into territories a long way from jazz. "There are two or three songs that people will say shouldn't have been on the album. They're more country & western or bluegrass," says Marie. "But that's my background, my primordial soup from which all this other stuff sprang. I'm not going to put these songs on the back burner just because

it's not somebody else's idea of what I should do. I would rather die thinking I'm glad I did than I wish I had, so here I go."

Ren✦ Marie & Experiment In Truth

Sunday, November 13

Lutheran Church of the Reformation, 111 N. Chestnut St.

4 p.m. | \$20-\$35 | ExodusToJazz.com