

BIO



“Damn the words. Said too much again. You’d think I would have learned by now.”

— MARIA McKEE, “Turn Away”

The truth is, MARIA McKEE is only beginning to tap into what she has to say. On *Peddlin’ Dreams* (Eleven Thirty Records), her sixth solo album, she draws not only from her own songs but also from those of her bassist, producer, frequent co-writer, and husband, Jim Akin. Their distinctive styles, brought into focus by an approach to recording unlike any that McKee had followed before, make *Peddlin’ Dreams* one of her most urgent and eloquent works.

That, of course, is saying a lot. From her early performances at sixteen, singing with her brother, Bryan MacLean of the epochal group Love, through her run with Americana pioneers Lone Justice and on to the career she has established on her own, McKee has maintained an uncommon honesty and excellence as a writer and singer, as those who have written with her (Steve Earle), recorded her material (Dixie Chicks), or added her songs to high-profile film soundtracks (“Pulp Fiction”) can attest.

Her last studio album, *High Dive* (2002), epitomizes her work up to that point: Meticulously produced, finely polished, it fit McKee’s pattern of spending as much time as necessary to come up with an album that met the high standards she sets for herself. Fans learned to be patient, knowing that the payoff would be worth the wait. It always was, especially *High Dive*, which earned vast praise. *Mojo* magazine, in a four-star review, called the album “an organic, risk-taking record oozing rich details” (James McNair, 5/03) while *USA Today* declared that Maria “has one of the strongest and most versatile voices in pop music” (Elysa Gardner, 4/22/03). In addition to dates in the U.S., Maria toured across the U.K. and Europe on a 10-country tour in support of the album.

Peddlin’ Dreams is a departure, conceived with the same self-imposed expectations yet reflective of her evolving ambitions. On this project, McKee and Akin emphasize emotion over seamless craftsmanship; the production quality is as strong as ever, but its intention is to invest each track with a live feel. On “My One True Love” she whispers her vocal, as if standing inches away from the listener in some quiet room of the heart; on “Everyone’s Got a Story” she’s fronting her band in a raucous jam, ripping licks on her guitar over a thrashing beat. The other songs settle between these extremes, each with its own balance of intimacy and abandon — and all of it feels totally alive.

“The truth is, *High Dive* was a labor of love,” Maria explains. “It was also incredibly demanding — a lot of hard work for both Jim and me. We wanted to make *Peddlin’ Dreams* more direct and spontaneous. We didn’t think about it too much; we just went in and did it. The process was much more natural.”



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More than that: Their approach on *Peddlin' Dreams* signals a shift in Maria's thoughts about recording, her relationship with the public, and deeper issues as well. "In the past I haven't been the most prolific artist," she admits. "It's taken me as much as six years to go from one album to the next. I've had to sit with songs and ideas a long time until I've felt satisfied with them. I want to make better use of my talent now. If I'm honest with my songs, I can put albums out more frequently; that's become important to me because of how incredible my fans have been and how important it is for me to connect with them as often as I can."

Her first step was to surrender the reins of production. She had her reasons: to concentrate more fully on performance, to expedite the process. Most crucial, though, is her respect for Jim's insight and skills. "*High Dive* was very collaborative," Jim says. "We shared production credit. This time, she said, 'Go ahead. You make it.' She came into the studio to sing and play her parts. I'd hear the chord progression, the lyrics, or maybe just the melodies — the skeleton of the song — and then flesh it out. It was effortless, immediate, a production based on intuition."

Jim's expanded role made it easier for MARIA to find the heart of each song. "With this album, I wanted a more open, almost stark recording," he explains. "It's all about emotion in the vocal. Where the voice cracks and reveals something that's almost beyond what the artist intends."

Sessions began with Jim and the drummer, Tom Dunne, who drove out to a warehouse in Costa Mesa. There, they cut the drum tracks, without a click or even any demos for reference. "Tom was just playing to the music in his head," Jim says. "We'd do three, four, or five complete takes, and I'd choose the best one. The idea was to go for a John Bonham sound — very open, big, and natural, with minimal, mainly distant miking. I was very happy with what we got."

These tracks were the foundation for Maria and the musicians as they cut the songs that featured the full band. Everything fed off the drums; you can hear it in "Everyone's Got a Story," "Sullen Soul," and "Peddlin' Dreams," where Dunne's sound, raw and punchy, defines the live feel. Each of these performances, like the ones cut solo or with a scaled-down lineup, were captured at Maria's and Jim's home studio, which they'd completed just in time for the *High Dive* sessions a little more than two years ago.

This, too, served the goal of going for the emotional gold. "Jim loves having a home studio because he can capture me in different moods," Maria says. "I'm sort of mercurial, so he'll observe and say, 'Hmm, Maria would really handle this song especially well right now.'"

Clearly Maria had her reflective, introspective days, as reflected on the plaintive "Appalachian Boy" and the wistful "My One True Love." Other times she must have been feeling playful ("The Horse Life"). And her gritty, snarling guitar solo on the jam that ends "Everyone's Got a Story" just might have come from what she describes as "a melancholy frame of mind."

Maria also turns in a moving rendition of Neil Young's "Barstool Blues." "After going over the Americana terrain for years and years, the worst thing anybody can say to me about my music would be, 'Oh, it's like American barroom rock!'" She continues: "So it's ironic for me to do 'Barstool Blues,' which is the greatest song ever written with that sort of imagery yet it totally transcends any genre because it's such a great piece of art. To Jim and me, Neil Young is a god — but I have to do something risky on every album, and for me that meant recording this song because his original version is perfect."

The point is that every moment of *Peddlin' Dreams* is real. Every note reflects the new immediacy in her music. In its details and taken as a whole, *Peddlin' Dreams* is a message to McKee devotees: Expect more exceptional work, covering more bases, more often from this extraordinary artist. For all that she's achieved, *Peddlin' Dreams* points the way toward greater things just over the horizon.

"Who knows how the next record will sound? I certainly don't. I just know that I'm staying in the moment now. And I believe that's going to bring everyone who's enjoyed my music — the Lone Justice people, the High Dive people, and everyone else — together like nothing I've ever done before."

