



Joel Benjamin

MELISSA FERRICK

Teaching opens creative doors for the veteran singer-songwriter

TEACHING LYRIC WRITING AT Boston's Berklee College of Music has fostered a career renaissance for folk-rocker Melissa Ferrick. "I'm surrounded by all these jazz musicians, classical composers and theater professionals," she says. "There's such an intensity—and it's a good thing. It's

made me into a happier live performer. I've been exhausted but completely fulfilled."

The academic gig came at the right time. After releasing a dozen albums with varying degrees of success, the Massachusetts native nearly quit music. "I was having a hint of bitterness about music

and wondering if I wanted to do it anymore," she says. "This reignited my desire and allowed me to discover music again."

Ferrick's new album, *The Truth Is*, examines the aftermath of a long-term relationship that came to a "crashing, horrific halt." She didn't realize the depths of her pain until the tail end of a creative dry spell. "The writing of this record was different from any other album I've made," she admits. "The breakup was a complete life-changing moment. What you're reduced to—it's scary when that happens, but very relieving." Eventually she staged an emotional recovery by applying what she learned in the classroom. "The students turned me on to music they were listening to. It gave me new energy. I saw in my head what I wanted the record to sound like."

From the first single, "Wreck Me," which features harmony vocals from friend Paula Cole, Ferrick's sound is polished but not overproduced. "This is an arranged show with a rehearsed band," she says of upcoming performances. "I've done the out-of-control and unorganized, both musically and emotionally. I understand the beauty of that. Now that I'm teaching I find myself thinking about melody and technique. The question is: 'Am I giving my audience something to sing along to?'"

Ferrick has also traded in the angry tirades of her earlier days for more mature, reflective material. "Your talent is a vessel," she muses. "I'm honoring that by making sure I've dressed it up and gotten it ready to be shown. I used to be a stream-of-consciousness writer. What interests me more now is the process. I used to live for the initial receiving, and felt like I had to create havoc and pain to write, which isn't the case."

—Blake Boldt

McFerrin learned this powerful message from his father, Robert McFerrin, who was the first African-American to sing with the Metropolitan Opera Company. "My father was incredibly disciplined and rigorous," he says. "He felt he was the custodian of a gift—a gift that God had given him a responsibility to develop. I could never sing the way he did, but I think a lot about what my job as an artist is—to bring joy."

The singer also views music as a therapeutic tool, and looks forward to engaging audiences with a performance that considers the frailty of life. "Everybody hopes to be released from something," says McFerrin, 63. "Everybody needs to connect to the spirit, to the strength within themselves, to the faith to persevere or transform, whatever it takes. I want people to feel hooked up to the spirit and to their fellow human beings here on Earth."

Given his fluid improvisational skills, it's no wonder McFerrin basks in the glow of spontaneous invention. "I get inspired when

I'm surprised," he says. "That's why years ago my manager started arranging for guests to appear out of nowhere on tour, like the time Robin Williams jumped onstage and we improvised 'Beverly Hills Blues.'" The vocal chameleon has developed a tradition that celebrates musical and cultural diversity. "These days we do a program called 'Bobby Meets' where I get to improvise with local musicians in different countries. My ears get happy when I hear something new."

Still, McFerrin continues to streamline the various musical strands of his past when starting a new project. "It's natural for me to incorporate different influences," he says. "Over the course of my career, it's become clear that's part of what I'm about musically, bringing together everything I hear and love. This album reflects that, too. We discussed it in the planning stages, it happened naturally in the recording process, and it's still evolving as we perform on tour."

—Blake Boldt

Carol Friedman