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Writer of the Week: Madeleine Peyroux

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Later this month jazz singer Madeleine Peyroux will release her first “best of” album, titled *Keep Me In Your Heart While*. We recently chatted with the peripatetic chanteuse about her many influences, the differences in writing songs in French versus English, and what she considers to be the “perfect” song.



How do you decide which songs are most fitting on a “Best Of” album?

Well, if you’re so lucky as to have more than one album and you can take a step back and look at what it is you may or may not have accomplished, I guess it’s like making coffee. You strain the contents and chuck the coffee grounds that made it all stick together. That’s what you do. And it’s quite a satisfying feeling too say that all of this can be looked at from another angle.

You’ve listed singers like Serge Gainsbourg and Edith Piaf as among your influences. Are there things you’ve learned from French songwriters that appear in your English songs?

What an interesting question! Actually, French is much more monotone as a spoken language than English, so the consonants of words, therefore, get more attention. I have found songwriters like Gainsbourg are able to use alliteration to make an idea come across more powerfully. And I don’t really find that we have used English that way in songwriting. So it has helped me think about consonants when singing. I’m sure that Spanish or Portuguese songs are even more focused on the vowels than we are in English. And all that affects the rhythm too. There’s a different sort of pause that is necessary in each. Also, I think that in French songs, if written in a formal tone, the lyric could go on for days, but the slang or more informal speech gets interesting because it can say more in less time. That is the most difficult

way to write for me, I think, to make a conversation sound like a lyric, and the most rewarding. Then there are things that can be said more efficiently in each language, and I find that it is impossible to ever really say the same thing in a translation. So I guess above all, one can learn how much influence the music itself has on a song by studying other languages, because that is where the unspoken side of the song lives.

How did you learn to play guitar?

Well, I had a very small ukulele when I was about four years old, and my mother and I played the chords from the songbooks together, especially songs we knew by ear so that I could accompany myself singing. And that was really the reason I wanted to play guitar. A Beatles songbook and early jazz standard books gave me opportunities to try to understand more complex harmonies than the folk songs. Then the most striking basic training I had was being instructed by a jazz guitar teacher named Cris Monen, of Holland, who taught me to play rhythm guitar arrangements in the style of Freddy Green. That became very important for me to get into the elementary playground of understanding chords on the guitar, because it is so different from the instrument we use to understand harmony, which is the piano. And I was shocked to find out that masters like Freddy Green were content with very simplified parts within a big band. It gave me a sense that I could learn this! Once I had the epiphany that I could play with three notes at a time, or less, and hear a chord, I thought I could start to build on that and learn to accompany myself, just enough so that things made sense.

Who are your songwriting heroes?

I believe that I am a singer first, and always have been. So lyrics are incredibly important to the way that I approach any song. Therefore, I cannot deny that my songwriting heroes are the great lyricists. Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Carole King, Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel, Jerome Kern, Dorothy Fields, Woody Guthrie, all remain at the heart of why I like to do what I do, I think. But I know nothing exists in a vacuum, and neither would they without say Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, Fats Waller, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Billy Strayhorn, Thelonious Monk, and the three B's.

What was the first song you ever wrote? Tell us about it.

The first song I ever wrote was about Brooklyn, where we lived. It was probably the length of a haiku, and as deep as varnish, but it felt really good!

How do you go about writing songs?

Well, the first thing about a song, I think, is that you don't write it down. At least, the song does not exist in silence, the way that a written page does. And if you're a singer, you try to feel the lyric, or the idea, the mood, and the vibrations of a melody in your body, your whole body. I think you meditate on something that is important to you until it is a simple act to open your mouth and express it. What comes out then is anybody's guess, and you have to put it away, forget it, and then try again to say that same thing, the way you want to feel it said. So you rewrite, or re-create it, over and over again. And I guess if you're lucky, you make sense, and then you have a song. But what do I know?

What is your approach to writing lyrics?

Sometimes a poem feels like both a poem and a song, to me at least. And I do struggle with knowing if there is a difference or what that difference may be. Perhaps it is not a question of right or wrong. Perhaps it is only a question of perspective. For example, Linton Kwesi Johnson, a wonderful poet, and a brilliant dub poetry artist. Which is he? I don't know if there is a right answer. I would like to sing the lyrics to his dub poetry, which he recites so perfectly, not to expand on what he does, but to share in it in my own way. So I suppose that for me, song lyrics are poetry, and need to be regarded as highly and as importantly as words that stand alone.

What sort of things inspire you to write?

I don't know if this is really a good thing to say. I believe that you write or sing, or whatever you do, in order to say what you feel no one has heard you say, whatever that may be. I think it is just that simple. So the things that inspire me to write a song are things that I believe I would like to talk about, or argue about, or fight about, or just think about, enjoy thinking about. And then, I think, a good song helps write itself, because whatever inspired you to start writing, if you really think about it, will bring you back to a very central part of yourself, something close to truth. And if you can write about truth, then you're saying something that people will either want to hear or at least that they should hear. Did I answer your question?

What's a song on your album you're particularly proud of and why?

I guess that one of my favorite self-penned songs is called 'Ophelia' and it is on a record called 'Standing On the Rooftop.' It's kind of about nature, womanhood, and the depression that comes from the distance between them in today's world. I really worked hard on that song, and I felt that I got to the bottom of the story when it was done. I felt that I was writing about something important, and it seemed to me that the song was a success. Then again, I think my favorite song is always the one I have not written yet. That one's really the best.

What's a lyric or verse that you're a great fan of?

This was hard. I'm going with two instead of one, OK? Leonard Cohen's song "Everybody Knows" from the album *I'm Your Man* and Randy Newman's song Political Science from the album *Sail Away*

Everybody wants a box of chocolates

And a long stem rose

Everybody knows

—Leonard Cohen

They all hate us anyhow

So let's drop the big one now

Let's drop the big one now

—Randy Newman (Political Science) *Sail Away*

Are there any words you love or hate?

I love funny sounding words like sassafrass, hootenanny, Chattanooga. I don't like words that are mean, like c*nt or pr*ck.

What's a song of yours that's really touched people?

Perhaps the most well-known song I've written is "Don't Wait Too Long," which is a very simple song, as it was meant to be, but has taken on some momentum in this day and age because surprising as it is to me, love songs have quite the power to be political when those ideas are clammering for a voice. I believe that we are witnessing a great change of social awareness in regards to gay marriage rights in this country and around the world, and I am proud to dedicate the song to that awareness when I introduce it at shows.

If you could co-write with anyone living or dead, who would it be?

I guess you can't get better than Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson. If it has to be a songwriter in the popular sense I'd say Kate Bush!

Who do you consider an underrated songwriter?

There are probably millions of underrated songwriters. Here are a few I can think of. Richard Julian, Jenny Scheinman, Andy Rosen, Rob Morsberger.

What do you consider to be the perfect song (written by somebody else), and why?

At this point in my life, I couldn't think of a better song than "Blowing in the Wind." Perhaps it doesn't have the most modern sound, but that is all a question of fad. The staying power in the song comes from the simplicity of its every aspect: melody, harmony, form, common word usage ("my friend"), its universal poetic imagery, and of course, its eternally important subject matter: humanism.