

Marcia Ball: A Songwriter's Sojourn

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Tuesday, 05 January 2010 10:42

A good gig makes you feel on top of the world. A bad gig makes you think about getting a day job.

– Marcia Ball



Although she's been recognized for her ability to sing the blues, Texas-born, Louisiana raised songwriter Marcia Ball's music is infused with a Cajun kick and a lot of joy.

“Music is my joy,” Ball said in a telephone interview from her Austin home prior to an appearance in Greenville in April of last year. “Whatever else there is going on in life, I get to sit down and make music. I try to bring that joy to our audiences.”

She was inducted into the Austin Music Hall of Fame in 1990.

In 1998, she was nominated for a Grammy and a Blues Music Award for her album “Sing It!” which featured her idol “Sweet” Irma Thomas on vocals. That same year, she was named “Contemporary Female Vocalist of the Year” and “Best Blues Instrumentalist - Keyboards” by the Memphis-based Blues Foundation.

From 2005-2009, she was again named “Best Blues Instrumentalist - Keyboards.” She was nominated for a Grammy again in 2004 for “So Many Rivers,” in 2005 for “Live! Down the Road” and again in 2009 for her latest release, “Peace, Love and BBQ.”



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She's played with Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle and Leon Russell. She worked with Clint Eastwood on a 2003 episode of "The Blues." She's a regular on the PBS program "Austin City Limits."

Ball counts New Orleans' legends Allen Toussaint, "Sweet" Irma Thomas and Dr. John among her musical influences.

She says that Austin musicians the late Walter Hyatt, of "Uncle Walt's Band," and Butch Hancock, who has played solo and with Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore in "The Flatliners," have also inspired her.

When asked to describe her songwriting process, Ball said, "It's never the same way twice."

Sometimes, "a line or a phrase or a word comes out of the blue or somebody's mouth or out of some conversation I'm eavesdropping on or something I read – and that's the seed."

She's learned the hard way to write her ideas down immediately.

"Write it down," Ball said. "You always have to write it down because you will not remember – I don't care what you think. Write it down immediately."

Then, Ball says, save what you write down, "even if it doesn't make sense at the time."

Once the seed is written down, the whole process begins.

"A line comes with a rhythm and a rhythm comes with a verse and the verse forms itself; and sometimes a whole song gets written in the front seat of a car or while sitting at a table."

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When she can, Ball uses the piano when composing.

“Sometimes, I just sit down at the piano and start making music,” she explains. “That music becomes humming and then mumbling and then finding a word. I try to make it a song rather than a poem. I'm pretty pleased when I manage to get anything written.”

Ball piles up songs prior to releasing a CD. And she relies on the members of her band to help her decide which songs are right.

“I let my band hear them,” she says with a laugh. “They're not harsh, but I can look at their faces and tell if they like a song or not.”

Ball stays busy touring, playing solo and with others - and she enjoys every minute.

“I played with Leon Russell recently,” she explains. “It [playing onstage with Russell] was more fun. On the third song, I told my band that I've had more fun than I thought I'd have all night.”

When the performance is good, it's validation for Ball.

“Every musician is only as good as their last gig,” she says. “A good gig makes you feel on top of the world. A bad gig makes you think about getting a day job.”

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To order "Peace, Love & BBQ," visit: www.marciaball.com.