



Madeleine Peyroux: From Street Singer to Pop Diva

BY LILY O'BRIEN *MAY 4, 2018*

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Madeleine Peyroux

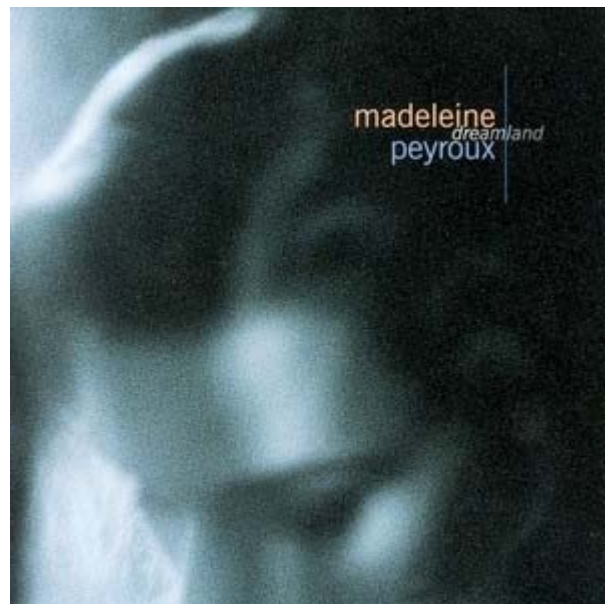
When vocalist Madeleine Peyroux began busking on the streets of Paris as a singer/guitarist at age 16, she didn't have a clear plan for her life. Eight recordings later, with her ninth, *Anthem*, due out in August, it's hard to pinpoint exactly what Peyroux's genre is. With influences from early jazz, blues, folk, funk, and pop, her music reflects her own, unusual personal journey.

When she broke into the spotlight in 1996 with her debut album, *Dreamland*, her sultry, smoky voice immediately drew comparisons to jazz legend Billie Holiday. She didn't release her second album, *Careless Love*, for another eight years: Unprepared for the physical strain of being a professional singer, she lost her

voice for a while. But her retro, French cabaret arrangement of Leonard Cohen’s song “Dance Me to the End of Love” put her back in the spotlight.

Born in Athens, Georgia and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Peyroux says she loved music from a very early age. Her mother sang and played ukulele and bought one for young Madeleine; the two liked to spend time singing and playing together. But her early years were stormy.

“We had a rough childhood,” says Peyroux by telephone from her home in New York, explaining that she grew up with a deeply troubled father. “Being an alcoholic and being kind of a tyrannical personality and authority around the house, he had control over everything,” says Peyroux. “But there was one area of our lives that he didn’t have authority in, and that was music — pretty much everything else was subject to criticism.”



Peyroux's first album, *Dreamland*

Her parents eventually split up when she was around 13, and Peyroux moved to Paris with her mother. “In retrospect, it was a wonderful thing,” says Peyroux, “but at the time I didn’t like being uprooted right after the divorce; I was not happy.” Without a clear plan for her life, Peyroux began busking on the streets of Paris, and at age 16, she dropped out of school to do it fulltime.

“Being given the opportunity to surround myself with people on the street who played music was the key. I could learn from them, and I saw an opportunity to sing,” says Peyroux. “It was Paris that created all this for me. If I had stayed in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, that would have never happened.” She eventually ended up touring around Europe with some of the musicians she had met.

Peyroux says that *Anthem* is her largest project yet, and one that she has been the most involved in, working on “every detail from the beginning to the end.” It is also a very personal project — all of the songs were co-written by her and the other musicians who play on the record, including producer/musician Larry Klein.



Peyroux and two of her collaborators

“I think it was August of 2016,” says Peyroux. “Larry Klein told me he was putting together a group of songwriters to hang out in a room together for a few hours. I was in L.A. doing another project for him and he asked if I’d like to try this, and I said, ‘that sounds like a blast.’”

Without a particular plan to make a record, they headed to pianist Patrick Warren’s studio and hung out there for a few days, coming up with ideas for songs she could sing. “I would go on tour and then come back and work on it for a few days,” says Peyroux, “and after about three or four of those sessions, I said, ‘You know Larry, we have some really good songs — I think we should make a record.’”

So they dove in, working on it much longer than any of Peyroux’s earlier recordings. “We spent a lot more time on this record in the editing room, adding and subtracting pieces — cutting it and adding and taking away, like a sculpture,” says Peyroux. “It’s different because it has more of a pop sensibility,” she adds. “I don’t think I’ve ever done anything like this.”

The songs that they wrote were a reflection of their personal lives and of the political climate brewing at that time, in the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election. “The record spans a bunch of characters’ stories of different aspects in society that I see, and that we saw, and that we thought we could talk about,” says Peyroux.

One of the first songs written was “Down on Me,” a rock ‘n’ roll lament about the financial hardship that many in the country are experiencing, while another song, “Honey Party,” is a lighthearted tune about nature, inspired when Peyroux “literally saw a bee dancing.” “Brand New Deal” is about someone who only loves money and material things, while “Lullaby” is about a refugee abandoned in the middle of an ocean.

The title track, “Anthem,” was penned by Leonard Cohen, a songwriter Peyroux deeply admires. “He’s such a professionally enlightened human being,” says Peyroux. “I agree with everything he says.”

Reflecting on her life, Peyroux has no regrets. “I have been doing it now for almost 30 years, and I am honored and blessed to share intimacy with people — to just share a moment. Music is an incredibly powerful medium — more so than we probably realize,” she says. “It’s also an opportunity to grow as a human being, and to continue being self-aware. It’s a form of spiritual searching and discovery and it’s a human interaction. Sometimes you can’t have that kind of interaction in any other context.”

And that is what has kept Peyroux on her path, despite the sacrifices. “I think that there are exchanges that you make,” says Peyroux. “For years I have been saying that I’ve had to relinquish the three p’s — plants, pets, and progeny. But I just bought a planter that will water a plant for three months — so I think I’m getting somewhere,” she adds with a laugh.

Event Information: Madeleine Peyroux at **Freight & Salvage**

(<https://www.thefreight.org/event/1593969-madeleine-peyroux-5-10-18-berkeley/>) in Berkeley, May 10-13.

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Leonard Cohen, "a professionally enlightened human being," in Peyroux's words