



Michelle Malone on love and loss

By Scott Kearnan
Bay Windows
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"I hope you don't mind, but I'm eating Rice Krispies," says **Michelle Malone**, still enjoying her morning breakfast when I call her Atlanta, Georgia, home for a phone chat. She might have her mouth full of cereal, but there's no mistaking the steady, languid drawl that has helped Malone carve a comfortable niche in American blues music, and most especially as one of the genre's few out female singer-songwriters.

Her 10th studio album might be named *Debris*, but Michelle Malone has constructed a storied music career since her 1988 debut. "It depends on the day," says Malone, when asked whether she feels like her career has sped by fast as a New York City minute, or crawled on as slowly as a hot southern summer. "In general, it feels like time has flown by," she decides. Almost.

"On the other hand, some days are really rough. You caught me at a good time!" she chuckles.

On first listen, *Debris* might not sound like music produced during one's most glorious hours. It's a post-breakup record, exploring the anger, sadness, frustration and, on its exceptionally haunting closing track, "Candle for the Lonely," hopeful acceptance that one finds after a long held love is over. Malone will bring her latest to Boston audiences on April 8, at Johnny Dee's in Somerville, and on April 10 at Sunset Bar & Grille in Providence.

Bay Windows spoke with Malone about the wreckage of a relationship, growing up gay, and leaving the past behind.

o Michelle, are you looking forward to coming to Boston?

I'm pretty excited for it. I love it there, especially when it's warm. I don't know how you all do it [get through winters]. You must come from hearty stock.

Your career has been a hearty one. Ten studio albums later, what are some of the personal highlights from your career?

Last year I was on the Grammy ballot [Best Contemporary Blues Album], and that was kind of a big deal. There have been other little things along the way, but what's made more of a difference is being able to meet all the nice, different people along the way that are kind, love music, and are really supportive of independent music. ... I played this house concert the other night for the most amazing people. They built

me a little three by four foot platform. It was covered in white faux fur, with Christmas lights wrapped around the bottom. It was hilarious. I meet the best people.

When you listen to your earlier work, do you hear a difference? Ever cringe?

"I've gotten to the point in my life where I want to live and let live, including with my parents. I no longer question or judge their actions or their belief system." The difference is monumental! The difference between what a 20-year-old thinks and feels and how they express themselves, and the way a 40-year-old does, there's a chasm there that you can only fill with experience, right? I listen back to my first album, and I sound like a child. My voice is so high. I don't really enjoy it. The songwriting is fine and the recording is fine but it sounds dated to me 'cause it was so long ago. Up until my last few records I tended to write more about my grievances and my angst of youth. Basically, I don't really have that much angst in me anymore. I write about fun things. They still have attitude.

You may have less angst in you, but Debris is still a break-up album.

The vast majority of the album is about a break-up that I had several years ago and I just got around to writing about it. There are songs of hope, songs of regret and anger... and party songs, quite frankly. There's a little bit of everything. There's even the walk of shame! But the record ends in this lovely song, "Candle for the Lonely," that's more or less [saying] that there is someone out there for everyone. You just have to get up and wipe yourself off and start all over. This record is very personal to me, though I would have to say that all my records come from personal experience.

I do feel like I hear glimpses of humor throughout the album, too. Am I wrong?

I have to say, I do have a healthy sense of humor. I get it out there in a tongue and cheek way. Not like I'm trying to tell a joke. ... You can take a good story and make it fun and sassy. "Restraining Order Blues," for example. There isn't a ton of truth in that song, but the overall feel and emotion of the song is very damn true. That's what I wanted to do, what I felt like doing! Ironically, I had to exercise restraint not to do all that!

I would imagine writing about your experiences is what helps you get through the hard times.

Definitely. Writing for me, and I'd venture to say for most songwriters, it's kept me out of therapy for a long time. That's how I work things out. I did go to therapy [in the past] and it's great to use the necessary tools, I recommend it for everyone at least once or twice. But going over and over, you go in and keep whining about the past, what it did to me. It kept me stuck in the past. Eventually I said, "I don't want to be stuck in the past. I'm going to leave this baggage."

Where does your sexuality fit into the baggage of that past?

Gosh, you know, I grew up with really strict, fundamentalist Christian parents and I have had to really work with that over the years and write about that because it was very difficult. ... A lot of things I write about, I've found some resolve for. Debris is probably thematic in that sense. It's about healing the inner child that was probably

scared by the whole upbringing and the way people are scared by their parents. My parents didn't intend for that to happen, they did the best they could.

Have you found resolution with your parents on that front?

I've gotten to the point in my life where I want to live and let live, including with my parents. I no longer question or judge their actions or their belief system. I see them as other independent adults like I would anyone else. We don't always see eye to eye, but I try to have mutual respect for everyone and meet on that level. That takes me out of this feeling of being a child, and then I become accountable for my words, thoughts and feelings. And then I don't feel the need to ponder other people's feelings. Frankly, it's been amazing to get to that place finally, so I don't have all that anger. I really love it all. I see it all for what it is.

Michelle Malone will perform on April 8 at Johnny Dee's in Somerville (17 Holland St., Davis Square; johnnydsuptown.com) and April 10 at Sunset Bar & Grille in Providence (888 Charles St., North Providence; 401.726.8889). Her album *Debris* is available now. For more information, visit michellemalone.com.