

METROMIX GREENVILLE

Michelle Malone's badass pipes and guitar shine on new album

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The old Supro amplifier has an eight-inch speaker and just two knobs: "volume" and "tone." Yet this humble piece of gear plays a pivotal role in Michelle Malone's fantastic, grizzly guitar tone.

"Sometimes when I'm lucky and the moon is just right, it sounds like (former Rolling Stones guitarist) Mick Taylor," Malone says. "Like some great old Stones record from 1970."

That amp (paired with a Supro Dual-Tone guitar) is all over Malone's incendiary new album "Debris." The record, released March 31, calls to mind what would happen if Sheryl Crow spent more time listening to The Faces instead of Fleetwood Mac.

"Debris" opens with "Feather in a Hurricane" a tight-but-loose '70s shuffle with sexy slide breaks. "Yesterday's Make Up" is a walk-of-shame blaze mixing "Dead Flowers" acoustic guitar, sing-along chorus and contemporary rhythm track.

Lizard-crawl guitars highlight the title song. But the album's essential tune is definitely the sauntering "Undertow," which jumps with Malone's nasty bottleneck work and force-of-nature vocals.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention Malone possesses one of the finest bluesy, rock-chick voices you will ever hear. For most of "Debris," her 10th LP, she sang into a Sure SM58, the standard mic for onstage vocal performances. SM58s can usually be purchased for under \$100, a fraction of high-end studio condensers.

"You don't have to use a mic that costs \$10,000 to get a good sound. To me it's about getting good performances," Malone says.

Malone cut "Debris" at Atlanta's Lee King Studios with Nick Di Dia producing. Di Dia has been superstar knob twiddler Brendan O'Brien's (Bruce Springsteen, Pearl Jam) engineer for 15 years.

"Nick is an artistic genius in that he knows when to get the hell out of the way and when to step

in,” says Malone, who was stopped at a Kentucky rest area during this interview. “He lets the music dictate the sound and very much goes with his gut. If you could see him behind the board when he’s mixing, he’s sort of doing this dance—pushing faders, moving the whole time. It’s the coolest weirdest, thing. It’s like he’s playing a guitar or something.”

What was the first song you sang growing up where you realized, “Man, I have some electricity here?”

Honestly I don’t remember the first song that hit me that way. But my parents were musicians and had an immense record collection that covered all genres. When I got old enough to dig through it I discovered all this great music, from Bessie Smith to Led Zeppelin and The Stones and Billie Holliday. Classical music and opera and everything else in between. It’s hard to say what hit me first, but I do remember being hit several times. (Laughs)

On “Undertow” it sounds like you’re having a hoot.

I love “Undertow.” That’s probably, live, one of my favorite new songs to play. I just like singing those types of songs, and it’s really fun to play on too. I like those loose, mid-tempo kinds of songs. Little Feat-feeling, rocking, blues songs.

Mid-tempo songs are kind of a lost art. These days it’s mostly slow jams or rock-out fast things.

Well that’s because record labels always try to talk you out of a bunch of mid-tempo songs these days because they don’t get played on the radio.

Maybe they should listen to “Honky Tonk Women.”

Thank you very much.

Where did you find that cool Supro Duo-Tone guitar of yours?

I have a small collection of Supros. I play it through a matching amp I bought with it, oddly enough, on eBay. I find them in vintage guitar stores and online. They sound really great, but they sound even better through the Supro amps. It’s kind of like matching a Fender guitar with a Fender amp. It resonates with me and sounds down and dirty. It doesn’t sound like all the other guitars and amps I hear. Really warm and biting. It cuts through.

Your vocals on “Debris” show a lot of restraint. There are lots of powerful singers who never get past caterwauling.

Thank you for saying that. I can honestly say restraint is something that I’ve only come by in recent years. I definitely had to learn it in not only the way I sing but in every aspect of my life. I definitely used to be a caterwauler, and I think certain songs call for that still. I enjoy singing hard but don’t find it as necessary to over-sing anymore.

A lot of the new record has a very Stones feel to it without aping specific songs. That’s one of the hardest things to do: write a bluesy song that sounds different.

Yeah, I try to stay way from typically Chicago-style blues and that sort of thing. And quite frankly I learned the blues more from the rock era backwards. Because I have all these influences, I don’t feel the need to sound exactly like any one of them.

I have to ask about meeting (late blues great) Albert King.

That was a really long time ago, 1988 maybe. It was a really cool club in Atlanta called the Royal Peacock where all the greats used to play. Even James Brown played there back in the day. It was an amazing venue for music. Honestly at the time I was so young and crazy and understood I didn't understand the moment. I didn't appreciate how great a moment in my life that would be, like I do now.

Do you really cut studio vocal tracks with an SM58?

It's not always the mic; a lot of the times it's what you do with it. I think Bono has recorded on (SM)57s which are even more brutal than 58s.

Paul Rodgers, from Free, too.

Greatest rock singer ever, I think.

At the end of the day, who are your favorite singers?

Well, since you brought it up, I love Paul Rodgers. I think he's brilliant. I love Bonnie Raitt; she's very understated. She doesn't even think she's a good singer, which blows my mind. Talk about restraint. There's so many of them, I don't even know **where to go from there.**