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CATCHING UP WITH... MICHELLE MALONE

By Josh Jackson April 3, 2009

It's been 21 years since Michelle Malone released her first record *New Experience*. She got her start in the same Atlanta scene as The Indigo Girls, but where Amy Ray and Emily Saliers lived in the softer side of folk-rock, Malone and her bands—first Drag the River and later Band de Soleil—were just as home in the roadhouse. Bottleneck slide guitar and bluesy harmonica gave a little punch to the folk circuit she toured. After working with a range of labels, she opened up her own SBS Records to release records from herself and her friends, including *Debris*, which was released earlier this week.

Paste: What's going on in Alabama?

Malone: Absolutely nothing. That's why I'm here. I moved here about a year ago. There's no traffic. There's really affordable, beautiful historical homes, and I live

about four blocks off the Tennessee River. It's really good living. I'm in Atlanta constantly, but it's only about three and a half hours.

Paste: And you're a Southerner born and bred?

Malone: Yeah, I'm from Atlanta. I love Atlanta but it sort of got to a point where it was just too crazy for me. I really wanted to just have a little peace and quiet when I came home and not have to deal with chaos and traffic.

Paste: Are you ready for the tour?

Malone: We'll [tour] from April 1 until the end of the year. I have a new band that I'm really excited about, and we've been rehearsing. Lord knows they have a lot of material to learn. I'm putting the record out on my own label so there's definitely a lot of work to do in that respect. So I'm trying to keep up with that and sit at my desk and be record executive for a few months before I go out on tour.

Paste: So how does that work being your own label? Are you just doing work from the road in a traveling office?

Malone: Yeah, you've got your phone and your email and that's pretty much all you need at that point. But thank god technology has come so far so I can do it all from the road and not have to worry about it.

Paste: We've had Drag the River and Band de Soleil. Does the new band have a name?

Malone: It's the Michelle Malone Banned - They wanted to be the Taliband, but I said no. I thought it was funny, but I wasn't up for that.

Paste: And where are the new guys from?

Malone: They're from here in Alabama. They have their own three-piece band, and I kind of just hi-jacked them, and now they're learning my songs. But they're really great musicians and great people. Their band was called Trial By Jury—Katie Herron on drums and she's a badass. I'm very excited to be having a girl drummer again. Jason Rogers on bass and Ryan Keef on guitar. I'm really excited to be getting in the van with them. They're excited because they've never really toured before because they're young. That gives me new energy and new awareness for what we get to do for a living. It gives me a new appreciation for it.

Paste: You had a Drag the River reunion last fall. How'd that go?

Malone: It was really nice. It was really fun, really scary. It was exciting. It was so nice to me just to get together and play music again. We spent so much time together in some really formative years for me. They were like my brothers. It was just sweet and wonderful. We played the songs like we did back then. I think we were a great edgy rock band. We played maybe three shows. I'd love to play with them all the time, but they have lives. They've grown up while I stayed here doing this music thing.

Paste: *Debris* seems a little more electric than previous albums. How would you

describe it in relation to what you've already done.

Malone: *Sugarfoot* and *Stompin' Ground* and other albums I've done had electric guitar and had acoustic guitar. This album has both as well, but Nick [Da Dia] the producer chose to showcase the electric tracks more than acoustic. You have some blues tracks but they're more electrified. I write a bunch of songs and bring them in the studio, and the songs dictate how the record will sound. These songs were begging to get a little more dressed up and go to the party. Instead of sitting on the porch, they just really wanted to go out and have a big night on town. They were just asking to be slightly bigger produced. We got in some pretty powerful musicians on it. Peter Straub plays guitar on several songs. That was an honor. And Nick, of course, is pretty much a legend in his own right. You get those guys together, and it's just going to sound big. We brought the party and they just dressed it up.

Paste: The album ends on a much quiete note with "Candle For the Lonely." How did that song come about?

Malone: Co-write with a friend of mine, Angela Kasset. More than anything, we're just good friends. We get together and hang out and drink wine and occasionally write a song. So it wasn't like our intention was to get together a writing appointment at 2 p.m. and write for three hours on a hit. That stuff doesn't sit well with me. We were just discussing different aspects of love and life and relationships. We were talking about a person in particular, and how we wished they had what we had. She had just gotten married and was really happy. And I'm really happy. When you feel that good about it, you want everyone to feel it. And you also know the difference because you've also felt really crappy about it and felt lonely. Having been there, we just kind of took the song to that place. But I love how the record does have that polarization between songs like "Feather in a Hurricane" and "Candle For the Lonely." I try not to get too worried about genre hopping or having the same subject matter 10 times on a CD. I think the songs come out as they come out for a reason, and I think the songs will just dictate how they should sound. I always just go with it. And I always have. And now more than ever it's more accepted—because maybe iPod Shuffle has gotten people into this groove where they listen to so many different styles of music every four minutes. I think that's great for me. I listen to all kinds of stuff, and I express that through writing.

Paste: What, in sort of the world of bluesy roots-rock has gotten you excited these days?

Malone: Quite frankly I've been so wrapped up that I honestly haven't had a lot of time to go out and find good music. I always default to the same old stuff, frankly. I'm a classic-rock-dinosaur-music-listener. I love Exile on Main Street and old '70s Bonnie Raitt.

Paste: Do you see your music as keeping that classic rock flame alive at all?

Malone: I don't know if I would compare my music in classic rock, but I do think that people like to hear new music that feels honest and organic and that isn't solely produced to sell a million records and get played on *Gray's Anatomy*. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's not what I do, and it's not what appeals to me. I do believe

there's beauty in all things, but it's just not what I do. I do think people in my demographic—we do like guitar rock and some edgier stuff. I think fans of Lucinda Williams would enjoy this record. I think fans of Bonnie Raitt would enjoy this record. I think fans of the Rolling Stones would enjoy this record. That covers an awful lot of ground. Frankly I don't know what else is out there because I've just had my head up my ass this year making a record.

Paste: Are there cities you particularly look forward to playing when you're on tour?

Malone: Obviously I love playing at home in Atlanta. We'll be there in April. And we'll head up to the Northeast in April. It's always exciting to play in New York. I have lots of friends there. And that'll be fun because my band has never been there. That's just going to put a whole new spin on it for me. We're going to head out West in May and I love the West Coast, especially Portland and Seattle, and I have really great friends that I look forward to seeing every few years when we tour out there. It's fortunate that gas prices have come down so that we can actually make the trip and not have to sell our gear when we get there. For a while there I just decided to take some time off because financially it was just getting silly because the majority of the money I was making on the road was just going into the gas tank. It seemed like I would OK staying home for a while, picking and choosing a few shows. It also created a lot of space and time for me to work on this record, which was a godsend. Since I'm putting it out myself, there's just a lot of legwork to do, and I don't think I would have had time to do it if I was touring.

Paste: Are there other artists you've looked to who've done this model, who've said, "You know, I don't need a label, I can do this myself"? And do you put your heads together with other artists and see what people are doing right, and what's working and what's not?

Malone: I probably should, but I don't really. I've been putting out my own records off and on since the '80s. It's just that when we did it back then we did it as a stepping stone to get a major deal. And after a few major deals, I went back to other independent labels until I realized, you know, I can do this myself. I then I started putting them out exclusively as a means to an end. I guess since I basically grew up with Amy [Ray] and Emily [Saliers] of the Indigo Girls, that I've always called them for advice. We're like family, we're toured together and recorded together, so I'll call them and say, "Hey, what do you think of this tour promoter?" or "What do you think of this agent?" or "What do you think of this distributor?" I guess I do default to Amy more than anyone in this business.

Paste: And now they've stepped off the major label and are doing it a little more your way.

Malone: There's a lot to be said for that. I won't go into it, but major labels have their place and indie labels have their place. Once you get to a certain point into your career, you pretty much have to change partners. Major labels will just put you in the backseat once get to a certain place in your career. And rightfully so—they want to put their energy into the next Britney Spears or the next 20-year-old. I understand that. And I have an answer to that: Go to an indie or do it yourself. It's not rocket science, that's for sure.