



Michelle Malone

Debris

By Andrew Gilstrap

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There's a directness to Michelle Malone's music that's very easy to like. It's a trait that's always been there, since her early days fronting groups like Drag the River and Band de Soleil, and especially in her recent solo work. Armed with a powerhouse belter's voice, Malone blends rock, folk, blues, and twang in equal measures. On top of that, there doesn't seem to be an ounce of "shrinking violet" in Malone's entire body.

Debris follows in that tradition, opening with "Feather in a Hurricane", a boisterous track that rumbles on idle during the verses and hits the gas on the choruses with a roar of ferocious slide guitar. Coming in with a nimble, bluesy feel—of the type that Bob Dylan's been so fond of on his last few albums—it isn't long before "Feather in a Hurricane" announces itself as a trademark Malone song with authority. The same goes for "Undertow", which may be one of the best Led Zeppelin tributes since, well, something off of Malone's last record or two. Wallowing in Jimmy Page-style slide guitar and drums that sound like they were recorded in the same cavernous foyer as Zeppelin's version of "When the Levee Breaks", the song is pure muscle as Malone sings, "I can't stand wondering if you're out with that whore / I can't stand drinking an ocean of liquor in your undertow". For this listener, Malone's at her memorable peak on songs like this, but it's hard to ignore her skill in other styles on *Debris*.

"Yesterday's Make Up", for example, begs to be a hit. A spiritual cousin to songs like Joan Osborne's "Right Hand Man"—songs that reject the shame in an early morning "walk of shame"—"Yesterday's Make Up" revels in walking into church on a Sunday morning while still wearing Saturday night's clothes and makeup. It's a soaring, dynamic song. "Chattahoochee Boogaloo", for its part, kicks off with a ramshackle opening reminiscent of the Rolling Stones' "Let it Bleed" before taking flight. "Candle for the Lonely" is dominated by piano and acoustic guitar.

If there's one downside to Malone's directness, it's that you get the occasional cringeworthy lyric. "Chattahoochee Boogaloo" kicks things into overdrive with memories of sneaking out of bedroom windows, toolin' around in Gran Torinos, and gettin' some back in the day. Sounding like a cross between Alan Jackson's "Chattahoochee" and Bob Seger's "Night Moves", the song repeatedly hits a false note—at least to these ears—with a chorus of "Chattahoochee Cootchie Boogaloo". That's a small price to pay, though, when Malone repeatedly hits the mark. Even the disc's ballads, such as "Marked" and "Candle for the Lonely", possess a quiet insistence.

On her [web page](#), Malone states that the album focuses on the end of a counterproductive relationship, and that if the album had a theme, it would be "Don't you think it's time to let your childhood go?" (although, as "Chattahoochee Boogaloo" and "Weed and Wine" prove, there's no harm in looking back just a little bit). If nothing else, that synopsis explains why this disc presents the different sides of Malone's personality—bawdy, sensitive, exultant, regretful—so well. Coming out of a decade-long relationship takes a bit of everything you have, and as we've come to expect from Malone, she's not going to shrink away from attacking those feelings in her songs.