

MARIA MULDAUR INTERVIEW

By

John DeBellis

In 1974 just about every guy I knew wanted to spend “Midnight At The Oasis” with Maria Muldaur. When she sang, “I’m A Woman,” we all wanted to be her man. Then when she teased us with the lyric “You can feel my leg,” our knees wobbled like we were standing on the deck of an old Mississippi barge. She romanced and flirted with our hormones and when Maria’s voice rose, in her unique way, we were hers way past midnight, and our record players became an Oasis. Today, Maria is just as sassy, her sound richer, wiser, and even more alluring, soaked in country, jazz, and blues swooning us toward the heart and soul of our American musical roots.

JOHN: You’re career has been an amazing musical journey. You were present for the birth and rebirth of several music scenes. Folk music, Jug bands...Blues...Woodstock...

MARIA: Well, it was really a blessing to be born in Greenwich Village which is the epicenter of culture and artistic expression even before the folk scene, with all the jazz musicians, all the artists and painters. I came up in that. I was a young teenager during, what I jokingly refer to the folk scare of the early sixties. I remember walking by a club with my books in junior high school where Billy Holliday was playing. I was too young to go in. The Village Vanguard was down there and a lot of great jazz clubs. It was just a wonderful place to grow up. I just did what Joseph Camble calls following your bliss. I

just followed my bliss, which was music and led me to paraphrase my old buddy Dr. John. “I was in the right place at the right time.”

JOHN: It shows in the range of music that you’ve made.

MARIA: Well, my career could be described as a long and rambling odyssey though every sort of American roots music. And even though I had a happy unexpected blessing of a huge international pop hit in 74, my life has pretty much has been dedicated to various kinds of American roots music, you know that includes, blues, jazz, gospel, Old-timey, Appalachian, blue grass, I love most kinds of music and I’ve learned to express myself in those various idioms.

JOHN: I love your last album. It’s unique concept, which to my surprise, works wonderfully.

MARIA: Thank you. It’s called “Heart Of Mine,” love songs of Bob Dylan. I got the idea to do that three years ago. I’m an old friend of Bob Dylan and also a life long appreciator of his work. I think the last three he has done have been among his absolute best. Are you familiar with “Love and Theft?”

JOHN: I have it. It’s great.

MARIA: On it is a love song called “Moonlight.” It was the most delightfully romantic seductive jazzy little song. I told him when I saw him that you finally painted your masterpiece. It was such a gorgeous song, that every line was like a different impressionist painting of a beautiful landscape. And the words are very seductive and romantic. It sounds like something you’d imagine Bing Crosby crooning to some broad on a balcony in a nineteen thirties movie.

JOHN: I can see that

MARIA: I brought this song to my band and they said, Bob Dylan didn't write this. I said, "Yes he did." I told Bob that I loved the song so much that I was thinking of recording it and he said, "I could really hear you doing that. That would suit you. You'd really do it well." Although, he's known as a writer of songs of very insight full social relevance and consciousness, he's also just a beautiful writer of love songs. So I thought of doing an album of his love songs.

JOHN: It's great. My girlfriend and I can't stop listening to the album, if you don't mind me saying.

MARIA: The person, who just slaves away at her music, loves to hear that people love it. It means more than a Grammy to me. I'm very honored that you and girlfriend play it over and over again. You can hear a good album the first few times, but then that's the stand out album, the ones that draw you in. That's how Dylan's albums are.

JOHN: So how did you get this unique idea recorded?

MARIA: Before that I was immersed in blues and "bluesiana" music, which is a word I made up to describe the kind of gumbo of new Orleans flavored R&B and blues, and what we call swamp funk. That's kind of where my musical tastes have settled for the last fifteen years or so. So I had this idea of doing Bob Dylan love songs and brought it around to several record labels who were just kind of warm to the idea. So I shrugged my shoulders and went back to making blues albums. And my last two blues albums were nominated for Grammys. One was called "Richland Woman Blues" "Sweet Lo'vin Soul." So I was minding my own business last fall and I get a call from the President of Telarc who apparently had seen me being interviewed in the Martin Scorsese film on the early career of Dylan, called "No Direction Home." He chats with me for a little bit and

says, "Gee, I don't know what you would think of this idea, but I was just wondering, would you possibly be interested in doing an album of Bob Dylan material?" To which I had an instant reply, "Well how about an album of Bob Dylan L-O-V-E songs." And he thought that was just the best idea since gravel. And you know he gave me the go ahead to do the project. The funny thing was that Telarc was one of the record companies that wasn't interested in the idea. Maybe it was just an idea whose time had finally come. So I called up a lot of my favorite musicians from New Orleans and brought them out to California and I got to run through the entire Bob Dylan Catalogue, I was given free reign to do whatever songs I wanted and picked twelve that resonated with me. And that's how the project came about.

JOHN: You took Dylan songs like "Bucket Of Rain" and made them very romantic and sultry, especially "Lay Lady Lay," in your distinctive style.

MARIA: Thank you. Anyway, he said, "I never thought of Bob Dylan as a romantic." Well, I said. "Check out, "Moonlight." off the "Love and Theft Album," it's obvious that he really is, and even in his old age, he's still writing some of the most beautiful love songs I've heard. We just sat down in front of each song. We wanted to go beyond musical stylistics and just let each song take center stage. And just all kind of give our selves over to how the song wanted to be done. When you work with musicians that you really trust, it's just an organic natural process and in just a few days we had this album.

PERFECT: What did you think the first time that you saw Dylan.

MARIA: I can't remember the very first time I saw him? I started noticing him coming to the Hootenanny nigh at Folk City. I would talk to him at the bar and he'd get up and do a couple of songs. At first he would do Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams songs. I

dug hanging out with him. I thought he was funny and quite witty and bright. I was very enamored with the Stanley Brothers and Doc Watson all these early blues guys and extremely beautiful *musical*-music. The whole genre of protest music didn't interest me because it was *a*-musical. It was sort of three chord haranguing, so I didn't pay much attention to his early work. There was starting to be a buzz about him and at first I just shrugged. I was in the "I don't get it" camp. And then one day, I remember a very pivotal moment. I was rehearsing in this little cafe called the Third side. It was closed during the day. My girlfriend, Annie Bird, and I had a Carter family duet. Her boyfriend owned the club so he let us go in there and practice. So we were in there singing away. I was playing my fiddle and she was playing her auto harp. And we see Bob sort of rushing by. He sees us and starts knocking frantically on the window. And we go to the door. And he says, (imitating Bob speaking) "Man can I come in there. I cut my finger do you have a band-aid or something." He was all kind of worried. He says, "I'm supposed to do a gig tonight and my fingers all bleeding." So you know we went in the back, washed it, put iodine, and a band on it and calmed him down.

JOHN: That's funny.

MARIA: And we said, "Hey, you want a cup of coffee?" So we gave him a cup of coffee and then I think he felt a little sheepish for making such a fuss. He was sitting on... I remember it like it was yesterday, some kind of crates in the kitchen in the back. He calmed down and said. "Thanks girls. Say you want to hear a song I just wrote?" We said, "Sure." And I was saying it more to be polite than anything else. Well, he whips out his guitar and starts playing only a "Pawn in their game?" It's a song, unlike all the protest songs of the day, which basically were self-righteous. You know, "They're

wrong and we're right and how could they, jingoistic stuff. He sat there and played this song. I just sort of felt the top of my head open up into another state of consciousness, because his song was like this, dare I say, cosmic over view. It was very compassionate. He pointed out that the dumb red neck bigots who were busy throwing stones and perpetrating violence and cruelty to the blacks were also pawns in a higher game of the corporate slash political power structure. They were being manipulated into making a whipping boy out of the blacks in order to hide the fact that they're all being misused and manipulated, and under paid. So there I was standing in the kitchen hearing him sing, this and at that moment I saw his genius.

JOHN: He uses the language as good as anyone.

MARIA: And besides being impressed by his genius, was the compassionate over view in which he wasn't trying to come up with a polarizing statement. At that moment in the kitchen I become a life long fan and an appreciator of the work and the truth he's brought us. And at various times in our lives he has written something that's been sort of a life changing influence on me.

JOHN: What I noticed about your music is that you took a combination of rock and roll, blues and jazz and made it sexy like Peggy Lee did. I kind of blew my mind when I found out that you had done an album of Peggy Lee songs.

MARIA: Well, I didn't do Peggy Lee till she passed away three years ago.

JOHN: You always had sexiness or maybe it was seductiveness to your music.

MARIA: Well, thank you. I guess that's been one of my attributes. People think I sang in a very sensual way. And somebody pointed out that when I told them about falling in love with Bob Dylan's "Moonlight," I was describing a song that was jazzy, that had

sophisticated words, a beautiful romantic melody. He said, you could be describing “Midnight at the Oasis.” And I thought, my God you were right. I guess I had a passion for romantic kind of sexy songs. The ones that are on my next album, “Naughty, Bawdy and Blue” are funny and lusty in much more poetic way than today’s more sexually explicit lyrics. To me they’re not sexy they’re more gynecological than anything else.

JOHN: That’s a great way of putting it.

MARIA: Their so overly explicit it takes all the joy, playfulness and seductiveness out of the dance between men and women. And makes it just a sort of raw? These early blues gals knew how to make it very playful, very funny, very gentle in a tongue and cheek way and more poetic? And you still know what they’re singing about. They were the original liberated women and way before women’s lib.

JOHN: By the way, I love the name of you’re next album, “Naughty, Bawdy, and Blue.”

MARIA: Thanks. “Naughty Bawdy and Blue” is the third in a blues trilogy I’ve been working on for the last six years. It’s coming out, soon, in March. In the first two albums I pay tribute to the men and women that were early blues pioneers and legends. I did a lot of Bessie Smith songs. The third one is just the classic blues queens, Bessie Smith, Ma Raney, Sippy Wallace, Victoria Spivey, the latter two were contemporaries of Bessie Smith, but were still alive when I was coming up and both took me under their wings and kind of mentored me in blues, stage presence, and everything it takes to get up there and belt it out. And others like Ethel Waters, and these gals instead of being backed up by one or two guys on guitars which was what the more rural country blues sounded like, were backed up by top jazz musicians of the day. If you look at Bessie Smith’s discography, you see Louie Armstrong and all these other jazz names. And these women

were kind of an uptown fancy version of the blues. They stood at the cross roads of where jazz and blues intersected. You have these fabulous piano and horn players backing them up.

JOHN: If you could have picked one or two people who, died before you started your career that you could have sang with, who would that be?

MARIA: Well, I have to think about that one. Well... I've sung with Mavis Staples, I actually sang with her father Pop Staples. I'm just thinking out loud. I guess Memphis Minnie and Hank Williams.

JOHN: How did a New York City girl get into country music?

MARIA: I had an aunt who used to tune in a station from Jersey, what she called *cowboy music*, when I was very young. The theme song was Gene Autry singing "Back In The Saddle Again." It was Hank Williams, Kitty Wells and all those country artists. She used to quiz me. And I'd have to say who was who. And the very first time first song I ever learned to sing was Kitty Wells' answer to Hank Williams', "Honky Tonk Angels." It was a song called, "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." I was four or five, a little Italian girl singing that. It was pretty cute.

JOHN: What is it that makes Hank Williams' music still so relevant?

MARIA: This is what I love about all American Roots Music whether it's Hank Williams, the blues... the kind of stuff I gravitate towards. This is music that's created and emerges by the people, of the people and for the people. Not with an idea for some formulized gimmick that will turn it into a top ten hit. It's just a very natural expression of the human heart and soul. And that's always timeless. That goes for these Bob Dylan songs, it goes for the early blues songs, it goes for Hank Williams. It goes for the real

music. Where is something you get off the pop charts, it has a fifteen-minute life span and that's it.

JOHN: It's a shame that kids aren't learning about American roots music with all the cut backs in music programs.

MARIA: You'll be surprised. I'm here to tell you. With the coming out of, "Brother Where Art Thou," which had a sound track pretty much of old Appalachian, old-timey music, and a little bit of blues thrown in. That album was nominated for several Grammys, sold several million copies, and formulaized controlled country radio wouldn't play any of it. There has been a new wave of interest among younger people of our early traditional music. There are more blue grass bands, festivals and record labels and old-timey.

PERRECT TEN: What is old-timey music?

MARIA: Old-timey music is Appalachian music that preceded blue grass. It's a little more raw and rustic. Its roots are more Celtic, from the Irish and Scottish people coming over hundreds of years ago. In the sixties there was a proliferation of interest in American roots music. It seemed to die down. But that's the thing, now it's geometrically expanding and spreading with no help from the media! Good music is to nourish the spirit and the soul. That's what this music does. That's why the kids are so sick of being forced fed this crap and drivel that passes for pop music today. With no push from the media, on their own, they are finding the music that really matters. In America because of all these cultures, the big melting pot is really rich, richer than any other country. This rich gumbo of music all meeting and cross pollinating with each one other. It's sort of where I live musically. I don't care if I ever have another *top ten*

record. My last two records are all acoustic, all songs originally written in the early 1920's and both were nominated for Grammys. I could have stood on my head and tried to come up with some hot commercially up to the minute sound and probably not been nearly successful. The music will be around for longer than you think.

JOHN: Thanks partially to you.

MARIA: Well, I'm schlepping about the United States with my band

JOHN: The other night you brought your daughter, Jenny, on stage. What's it like singing on stage with your daughter?

MARIA: It's wonderful. She's a great singer. She's soulful. She's beautiful. She put out her own album a few years ago, called "Jenny Muldaur." on Warner brothers. She's an especially gifted harmony singer and also has her own sound. So that was really a joy for me to sing with her. Her father's a wonderful singer. We tried to scare her into a saner line of work. But it was in her blood.

JOHN: Was your mother a singer?

MARIA: My mother was a teacher on the lower east side for many years. She taught five languages. Even though she had a lot of my gold records on the wall, she'd always say, "Maria when are you going to get your teacher's license? I'd say, "Mom I'm doing something else." She says, "Just something to fall back on." She passed away a few years ago. At colleges I started doing these talks and then presenting a concert of women in the blues. So while I was doing my class, I looked up and said, "Ma, are you happy now?"

JOHN: I'd say she was very happy.

MARIA: I was blessed to have certain mentors teach me, and so I'm coming to that time, I'm ready to pass it on. In my last two blues albums I had an ex boyfriend of friend of mine, who plays base with Chris Issac, do these gorgeous water colors of my favorite blues artists that I was paying tribute to. I had all my friends helping me, Bonnie Raiit, John Sabastion, Taj Mahal, and all the other blues artists who share my love and reverence for the early blues pioneers. And then I wrote a paragraph about each artist that I was paying tribute too. It's like a little blues primer. Especially with the third album coming out, if you've never heard the blues before, you'd get a good introductory course just listening and reading the liner notes.

JOHN: I know a lot of college kids have gotten into sixties music.

MARIA: I.e. the Beatles.

JOHN: Joni Mitchell.

MARIA: Jimi Hendrix.

JOHN: Janis Joplin...Bob Dylan, and a lot of people from the sixties. It's great seeing them go back there.

MARIA: Absolutely, the cream always rises to the top and it continues to do so.