

Melissa Ferrick *the truth is*

On her first self-produced album since 2004, **Melissa Ferrick** takes us through the ending of one relationship and into the early stages of another. It's a candid record that she sets to a sweeping Americana/alt-country soundtrack, layering pedal steel guitars and background harmonies into some of the lushest, brightest songs of her 20-year career.

Ferrick's life has always been an open book. Signed to Atlantic Records in the mid-'90s, she helped represent a new wave of alt-rock females—including artists like Liz Phair, PJ Harvey and college-mate Paula Cole—who sang about womanhood with sharp, unchecked honesty. Morrissey proved an early champion when he personally invited her to tour as his opening act, and Ferrick eventually went on to found her own label and release a number of albums in which she played every instrument herself. Her life took dips and turns along the way, and she chronicled every detail in her songwriting.

On her newest album on **MPress Records**, *the truth is*, Ferrick opens up the studio doors to several outsiders, including Grammy Award-winning mixer—and former Daniel Lanois apprentice—**Trina Shoemaker** (Brandi Carlile, Sheryl Crow), engineer **Rafi Sofer** (James Taylor, Juliana Hatfield) and a full band. The result is a raw, rootsy record about the ups and downs—but mostly the ups—of life and love.



Photo credit: Joel Benjamin

You began writing this album after a painful breakup... so why do some of these songs sound so happy?

Well, the songs are sequenced chronologically, so the album begins with a horrific breakup and ends with a new relationship. When I began writing, I felt so broken and betrayed by my ex—but as time went on, I began rekindling a long-term relationship with a previous partner. So the first third of this album is about the end of one relationship, but the rest is about the beginning of another one. It's about trying to right the wrongs you've made in the past, and learning to trust again.

That sounds very personal. Did you ever consider creating this entire album yourself?

I produced, arranged, and wrote this record—I knew exactly what I wanted it to sound like. That said, it is also a very collaborative album. In the past, I've made records where I have played almost everything. This time, I trusted my production instincts and my writing, and I hired the right players to come into the studio and help me get those things out of my head and onto tape.

Tell me a bit about the band.

I began playing with the drummer, Steve Scully, and the bass player, Richard Gates, during the touring cycle for *Still Right Here*. Steve is an exceptional drummer who can sing, too, and Richard has played with

artists like Suzanne Vega and Richard Thompson. Pedal steel player Matt Pynn has played with Nora Jones, Lucinda Williams and Aimee Mann. Natalia Zukerman, whom I've known since 2005, sings and plays lap steel and dobro. Cello is a key instrument on this album so I brought in Berklee student Ro Rowan, who was just awarded the William Randolph Hearst Scholarship for Outstanding Musicianship. Forrest O'Connor makes a guest appearance on the mandola for the track "Home." My friends Anne Heaton and Rose Polenzani sing background harmonies, because I love their voices so much, and Paula Cole sings on the first song, "Wreck Me." Paula and I attended Berklee College of Music together, and we both got signed to major-label deals around the same time. We connected again during the past year and a half while we were both doing special events at Berklee, so asking her to sing was a no-brainer.

You grew up less than an hour's drive from Berklee, and you still live in the area. What keeps you rooted in Massachusetts?

I did live in Los Angeles for about seven years, too. I moved out there in 1992, when I was 21 years old, to make a record with Atlantic. I took it all for granted at the time. They moved me out to California and gave me a convertible, and I thought, "Well, of course this is what's supposed to happen!" Ha! It was a great time to be there, and I'm glad I did it, but I wouldn't do it again. I grew up in Massachusetts, in a little town called Ipswich, and now I live about twenty minutes from there. I'm right back where I started from, which is what happens to a lot of people, I think.

Did you record in Massachusetts, too?

I got to track my record in Boston, mix it in Alabama and master it in Nashville, which feels like a good description of the overall sound. This album crosses a lot of borders. It's got a little bit of the Northeast, a bit of the South, and a bit of Nashville, too.

As a producer, were you trying to capture a specific sound?

There aren't any electric guitars on this record, and I didn't want to use any electrical instruments at all. We used microphones on everything. The bass guitar, pedal steel and lap steel guitars were run through amplifiers in a huge room mic'd directly throughout the studio. There is a real sense of audible space, which was relatively an elaborate endeavor, but the "room mics" were intentional. It was important to me that you hear the space the music was played in on this album. I believe it captures the "live show" vibe a bit more than on other albums I have produced. Working with my mix engineer, Trina Shoemaker, was very influential. She's probably most famous for producing, engineering and mixing *The Globe Sessions* for Sheryl Crow, and she also tracked *Wrecking Ball* for Emmylou Harris. On "I Don't Want You To Change," she threw a beautiful echo all over the pedal steel, and by the last time you get to the chorus that part sounds like it's floating. It sounds floorless.

You'll be taking a full band on the road for most of your upcoming shows. After playing solo shows for years, what's it like to tour with a larger lineup?

It's such a relief... It's really fun and liberating to play with a group, especially the talent that I'll be touring with. But it's also a big responsibility: when you tour by yourself, you only have to worry about yourself. That's not going to be the case this time, but I'm really eager to play these songs the way they're featured on the album. I'm excited to express them as they're meant to be expressed. I'm taking a four-piece band on the road with me, so I'm making the transition from performing solo to enjoying playing with a full band... which is exactly what I wanted to do.

Do you see this album as making a definitive shift, stylistically, from your previous work?

The album represents a complete change in atmosphere and musical intent. There's a lush, cinematic vibe. There's this alt-country-ish kind of beauty. The biggest misconception about me is that I'm a bitter, angry, lesbian folksinger who is really mad at the world, but that's not who I am at all. At 42 years old, I'm in a place where I've become much more compassionate toward myself and the world around me. I think there are two angry songs on the record—two songs out of eleven—so it's a step in a new direction for me.

What other changes does this album represent?

It represents a change in my perception on the whole concept of success—what it means, and how it's framed in my own world is very different today than it was in 1993, when I was on Atlantic Records. It's different than it was in 1998, when I was on W.A.R. Records, and it's different than it was in 2002, when I was putting out records on my own and selling 800 tickets in major markets. It's *always* changing. The only constant thing *is* change. I'm a child of the '80s and '90s, and I was taught that the way for an artist to succeed was to have a popular song on the radio. That doesn't apply anymore, and I never wondered which song from this album we were going to push as the radio single. It's the first time I haven't thought that while making an album.

Now that you're teaching classes at Berklee too, should we start calling you "Professor Ferrick?"

(Laughs) My students call me Melissa, but I am also sometimes referred to as Professor Ferrick. Spring 2013 marks my first full semester teaching at Berklee at the College level. I'm a part-time faculty member now, but I have participated in Summer Performance Program and Songwriting Workshops for the last four years. I'm officially an Assistant Professor in the Songwriting Department, and it's incredible. The whole experience has definitely impacted my writing. I feel more well-rounded as a musician and more at ease in my life. The change in me is audible on this record. I believe the song structures and writing are better and that this is by far the most revealing, beautiful, honest and complete album I have made to date. My hope is that songwriters, fans and industry peers listen to this record and can hear that transformation. I have 86 amazing students and being around these inspiring people has made me aware of new bands, new approaches, new sounds... It's brought a new energy into my writing that I am excited to share.