

keep your courage natalie merchant



photo credit: Shervin Lainez

On her beguiling ninth studio album, *Keep Your Courage*, Natalie Merchant examines love in all its guises. While the award-winning and multi-platinum-selling singer-songwriter has hardly eschewed love songs in the past, she has never been this immersed in them. By Merchant's count she mentions love twenty-six times across *Keep Your Courage*. "I think the pandemic was a great period of solitude and longing," she says by way of one possible explanation for her fixation on matters of the heart. "I craved and savored human

connection; it was the only thing that *really* mattered."

Keep Your Courage is a sonically disparate and musically sumptuous collection produced by Merchant and recorded in Vermont with trusted collaborators and new friends. Whether it's delicate chamber pop ("The Feast of Saint Valentine"), horn-driven soul ("Tower of Babel"), Celtic balladry ("Eye of the Storm"), or instantly infectious pop ("Come on, Aphrodite"), the album is anchored by Merchant's unmistakable voice, whip-smart wordplay, and emotional delivery.

Though this is her first album of all new, original material in nine years, Merchant has been anything but idle in that time. In addition to raising her daughter, the singer-songwriter has tackled several projects in the last decade, among them: rearranging her songs for string quintet and acoustic instruments for the CD and documentary *Paradise Is There*, directing *Shelter*, a documentary on domestic violence, curating the 10-disc box set *The Natalie Merchant Collection*, and somehow, for two years, finding time four days a week to work with

children as an artist-in-residence with a local non-profit pre-school. She explains, “I felt like it was part of my job as a mother to be an example of someone who’s engaged in the community.” In November 2022 Merchant was appointed to a six-year term on the board of trustees for the American Folklife Center at The Library of Congress by Senate majority leader Charles Schumer.

The range of styles and sounds on *Keep Your Courage* is broad, from majestic orchestral passages, to infectious pop, to Celtic and American folk undertones, to soul and even funk. What was the key to making it cohesive?

In my mind, the fact that the songs were written during the same period of time makes them cohesive. Also, I had a core band play on all the songs, which further unifies them. Due to the restrictions of Covid, we could have only five musicians in the studio at a time. The first group was made up of bassist, drummer, guitarist, and pianist, the next was string quartet, then the guest vocalist with horns, followed by woodwinds and the orchestral brass. It was a layering process.

There is a lot happening musically, but it never sounds overstuffed. What was your vision?

It was really a big production; I had seven different arrangers and over two dozen musicians work on this record. Although the logistical details and navigating the sea of personalities could be challenging, I wanted to present these songs

in rich, complex settings. They needed all the textures of full orchestrations: wood, metal, gut, reeds, skins, human breath, pressure, and friction. I find it a real privilege to watch a gifted musician, with decades of training, play a flute, or a cello, or a French horn, or a harp. They practice a



magic ancient craft.

You duet with Abena Koomson-Davis on the first two songs of the album. How did you come to know her and invite her to sing on “Big Girls” and “Come on, Aphrodite”?

Abena is the musical director and one of the lead singers of a progressive political women’s collective called The Resistance Revival Chorus. I’m part of an organization called Hudson Valley Votes, and we invited the chorus to a get-out-the-vote event. I was completely taken by her personality, her voice, and the

mission of the chorus. I invited Abena to sing at Radio City Music Hall for a telecast to thank healthcare workers impacted by Covid. At that event, I promised we would make a record together, definitely. I hadn’t even written the songs, but I loved the way that our voices blended and wanted us to

sing together. This thought inspired “Big Girls” and “Come on, Aphrodite.” Abena’s husband, Steve Davis, is a phenomenal trombone player and arranger. He ended up writing the horn charts for “Come on, Aphrodite” and “Tower of Babel.”

It feels like the most openly love-oriented record of your career and those two songs, buoyant and poppy, really sell it right at the beginning.

Yes, those first two songs establish the love theme. “Come on, Aphrodite” is an invocation to the goddess of love and passion. In the lyrics, I list all the clichés we use to describe falling in love:

being drunk and blind, over the moon, weak in the knees, and half out of our minds. For the Greeks, when the spirit of love descended, it was seen as a kind of assault; you would become powerless against an all-consuming, sweet madness. Amazingly, humans still crave it, in spite of the perils.

You also dip into Greek mythology for “Narcissus.” But you flip the script in that one and create almost a cautionary tale about seduction as Echo writhes in the fire of her yearning for Narcissus. What inspired you to tell the story from Echo’s point of view?

I was doing a lot of reading of myths during the pandemic lockdown and came to see, more and more, the mythic proportions of the tragedy we are living. Some people would say the dawn of the destruction we are witnessing, the plagues and climate crisis, is punishment for our sins of hubris and insatiable appetite. Anyway, I thought it was time to tell the story from Echo's point of view, since she's often neglected when the myth is remembered. Narcissus was terribly beautiful, and because he was so cruel when he rejected Echo's love he was punished for his beauty by wasting away, entranced by his own reflection. Echo was punished too, first with the loss of her own voice and then by unrequited love. Her body turned to stone and she became just a disembodied voice.

By contrast, "Sister Tilly" is a loud, jubilant homage.

Yes! "Sister Tilly" is all about love and appreciation for the older women in my life, women of my mother's generation who are leaving us now. Tilly is a composite portrait of several women and each verse reveals a new aspect: her crystals, her chimes, her moonflower vines, her tinctures, teas, her secret remedies, her Rilke poems, her stacks of Mother Jones, her feminist raves, and her Didion shades. I invented her, I adored her, and I imagined what I would say at her memorial. I'd call her a superpower, a lotus flower, a constellation, and a white light vibration. I'd tell her that there's no fear and no delusion, no doubt and no confusion now, that everything fades away. It's a

densely packed song; I set out to eulogize an entire generation of women with it. We owe so much to these women, and I think we take for granted the advances that they fought for and we inherited. We have a shallow view of history if we forget that they kicked open all the doors for us.

In that song and elsewhere, the album is rich with wordplay. What do you think inspired that?

I fell in love with language again, and I should give credit where credit is due. The Scottish poet Robin Robertson sent me a copy of his book *The Long Take*. It's a brilliant novel of narrative poetry, brutally visceral and luminescent. I read his book and it affected me so deeply that, after many silent years, I started writing again. And I gave myself permission to write lyrics with more freedom and poetic intent.

You end on a note of hope with "The Feast of Saint Valentine," the lyrics from which provide the album title. Why did you choose *Keep Your Courage* as a title?

I placed "Saint Valentine" deliberately at the end of the album. It's a closing statement meant to summarize everything the other songs have argued: love will be the curse and be the charm, love will be the bruising and the balm, love will set you free and love will be your bonds. The song offers some encouragement to all weary soldiers of the heart. They should keep their courage, keep marching, keep risking, and find comfort

in knowing they're not alone. Wouldn't it be lovely if there were a little army to come to your rescue and bind your wounds when your heart was bleeding? I conjured it, but really, it's just hope and faith.

You're well known for writing songs that embed social issues in their narratives and here you turn to love. While certainly elements of *Keep Your Courage* could be interpreted through that lens, why did you choose to be less explicit in this album?

After all the socially conscious or topical songs I've written over the years, I feel some of my most effective songs have been the ones that talked about personal rather than societal transformation. When I meet people in wheelchairs who tell me that my song "Wonder" made them feel validated, even powerful, I know that it's probably here, in more personal stories, that my writing has had its greatest impact.

Why did you choose a portrait of Joan of Arc for the cover?

I found this image when I was 15 years old and have kept it in my ephemera collection ever since. Whenever I look at it, I'm moved by its combination of dignity, strength, and calm, but also its resignation. Joan of Arc carries so much meaning for so many people: the iconic purehearted, beautiful, heroic, tragic warrior, saint and heretic. In some inexpressible way, she fits perfectly with the music and the messages in *Keep Your Courage*.

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