



skye media

Michael McDermott

I first met **Michael McDermott** musically in August 2000 when I began working with him. And immediately, I was saddened that I hadn't met him much, much sooner. It's the sort of, "How could I not have known this artist existed?" punch of pain (you didn't know) and pleasure (you do now) that you get when you find something amazing and new. I was blown away by his lyrics, his ability to tell a great story, wrap you up in it, make you feel like you know the people he's singing about and make you care what happens to them. He became my friend when I began working with him three and a half years ago as well, which made me think: why skate over the glossy ice of a typical bio? It fails to touch the soul of what someone, an artist, is really about. It gives big picture sweeps, but lacks the clarity of really getting to know someone as a person. So I've decided to go with a completely unconventional approach to his bio. I'm writing it first person, and I'm throwing the bio rules out the window in the hopes you'll get to know **Michael** a little bit better. I hope you don't mind my indulgence.

Having to put my thoughts to paper got me to thinking about the individual I know **Michael** to be and why I consider him a tremendous artist. And the layers are there, many of them, and they're all intermixed and intermingled so much that I had a hard time separating the artist from the person. It's the music, sure, and it's definitely the lyrics. But it's also because **Michael** is the guy who, if you sit next to him at a bar after a show, will regale you with stories, the next better than the ones before it, all stranger than fiction, 100% true, and all crazy enough to put soap opera plots to shame. You will have just seen him pour out his heart on stage, his eyes clenched shut, his curly dark hair sometimes hiding his face as he bends to coax a melody from his guitar or his piano. He becomes someone transfixing, entertaining, and bewitching on stage. Whip out the pedestal, he should be put firmly upon it when he plays his songs. Now go back to that bar after the show, and he's the same person, but different, no longer untouchable, no longer so far above us mere mortals.

Michael is the guy who likes to be the center of attention, so perhaps his storytelling gift, and it is a gift, stems from that. He's the kid who hasn't really grown up yet, someone for which the word "limits" has only perhaps recently come to have meaning. He doesn't self-edit -- if he thinks it, he'll say it. He's the comedian, the entertainer. He'll have you laughing, shaking your head in wonder at the bizarre folks he knows, and how much fun it is to hear him tell his stories.

But for all that facade of Mr. Life of the Party, he's just as self-doubting, self-deprecating as the next guy. His feelings are easily hurt. Sometimes he plays the tortured artist too well. Above all else, I think, **Michael McDermott** is a survivor. He's seen his career careen between highs (his MTV, hit-single, first-album days, those halcyon days of coverage in *Rolling Stone* and television appearances) and the lowest lows (drug and alcohol addiction, having his label shutter its doors for good not long after an album of his was released, not being able to recapture those same halcyon highs), yet he's never lost his faith, his hope, his desire to create music. He plays through, he regroups, he continues on. And he records a new album entitled "Ashes." "Ashes" as a title really talks about the aftermath of something that has really knocked you off your

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18 rainier road
fanwood, nj 07023
908-889-5029

skymedia@mindspring.com
www.skymediaonline.com

foundation," **Michael** says. "You gotta tear down, burn everything down before you can rebuild it. This is my aftermath, relationship-wise and career-wise. I abused myself and others. Hopefully there will be something rising from the ashes. You have to rebuild whatever you can. Even if it's a lean-to, you'll still have some shelter."

By the time **Michael's** "Ashes" rises Phoenix-like from his past this spring, it will have been three and a half years since his previous album, "Last Chance Lounge," was released on Koch. Too long, but plenty of time for **Michael** to assemble a strong stable of songs from which to cull the selections that would make the cut for "Ashes." He recorded it over the course of a year and half, in Houston, Los Angeles, and Chicago, and the songs were produced by Joe Hardy (The Replacements, Steve Earle, Tom Cochrane), Dan Petty (Shawn Colvin, the Stone Roses, LeAnn Rimes), and Michael himself in those respective locations. Because he recorded it over such a long stretch of time, he refers to it as, "a scrapbook of sorts." The album features guest appearances by Mike Malinin (Goo Goo Dolls), Jennifer Condos (Whiskeytown, Don Henley), Jay Belrose (Beck, Paula Cole), Scott Seiver (Jason Mraz) and Joe Karnes (Imperial Drag).

Perhaps most interesting to me as a fan of **Michael's** music was how much more personal this album seems than any of his in the past. Who knows if it's the more pronounced use of personal pronouns or the fact that I know the stories behind much of what he wrote that makes it smack of more **Michael** and less of his other characters. "There was a lot of personal stuff going on when I wrote the songs, so the personal came out," he tells me. A large chunk of the album derives from his break-up with long-time girlfriend. There are themes of self-doubt, frustration, being lost and not measuring up streaming through "Ashes." "I don't know how you get over that," **Michael** says. "Like the song, 'Darkest Night,' I really was in this town called Black River Falls, and the people I met there -- it's like everybody has the same issues. Everybody doesn't believe in themselves and doesn't think they're good enough. It's incredible how everyone has the same battles." If everyone sees their battles mirrored in the stories **Michael** tells, they'll also find an undeniable sense of the hopeful scattered throughout the songs. "I think a lot of these songs are a personal call to arms," **Michael** says. "About trying to find your place in this world, whether it's a shanty or a tent or your parents' basement without any windows. I hope it has some kind of redemptive quality to it. It's certainly not defeatist."

As a fellow music fan, I urge you to explore "Ashes." Find yourself in its lyrics. Revel in the fact that we all face the same demons. See **Michael** when he comes to your town on tour and be reminded why there is virtually nothing better than a great live music experience. And see if you can sit down with him at the bar after the show and hear some of his stories. I promise you, it'll be worth it.

Michael McDermott can be found online at www.michael-mcdermott.com.

For more information, please contact:
Krista Mettler, Skye Media
908-889-5029, skyemedia@mindspring.com