

KATHY MATTEA

Kathy Mattea has enjoyed the kind of success many artists only dream of: two GRAMMY wins, four CMA Awards, five gold albums, and a platinum collection of her greatest hits. Mattea's dream almost ended, though, when she entered her 50s and found her voice changing. As much as she wanted to ignore the warning signs, there was no getting around the fact that she simply wasn't hitting the notes she used to. Taking the stage and giving anything less than her best wasn't an option, so as far as Mattea was concerned, there were only two choices: re-learn to sing, or walk away forever.

"The hardest thing was facing the question of whether or not I could continue," she reflects. "I had to be willing to come to a 'no,' to accept that my singing voice just might not be something I enjoyed anymore. There were days when I believed it was very likely I wouldn't be able to go on."

Mattea persevered, though, undergoing intensive vocal training and emerging with the most poignant album of her career, 'Pretty Bird.' Recorded over the course of a year with roots music wizard Tim O'Brien at the helm, 'Pretty Bird' draws its strength not only from Mattea's touching performances, but also from her uncanny ability to weave seemingly disparate material into a cohesive whole. These are the songs that helped her reclaim her voice, and though they're drawn from a wide swath of writers, genres, and eras, she inhabits each as fully as if it were her own. Exquisitely arranged and delivered with the kind of nuance that can only come from a lifetime of heartbreak and triumph, the album is a welcome reintroduction to one of country and Americana music's most enduring and beloved figures.

A West Virginia native, Mattea moved to Nashville in the late 1970s to pursue her goal of singing professionally. She signed her first record deal in 1983 and achieved modest chart success with a pair of early releases, but her true commercial breakout arrived with her critically acclaimed third album, 'Walk The Way The Wind Blows.' That record produced her first radio hits, and its follow-up, 1987's 'Untasted Honey,' was the first of five Mattea releases to be certified gold. 'Untasted Honey' contained back-to-back #1 country singles, as did 1989's 'Willow In The Wind,' which also earned back-to-back CMA Female Vocalist of the Year awards and a GRAMMY for Best Female Vocal Performance. The *LA Times* called Mattea "a performer of limitless potential," while the *Washington Post* hailed her as "one of Nashville's finest song interpreters," and *People* described her as "warm, strong, smart and generally splendid." Over the next three decades, she would record nearly a dozen more albums exploring country, folk, Celtic, and gospel music; earn her second GRAMMY Award; top the Bluegrass

Albums chart and garner an additional GRAMMY nomination for 'Coal,' her Marty Stuart-produced exploration of coal mining songs; and collaborate with everyone from Jackson Browne to Townes Van Zandt.

By the time she entered her 50s, Mattea's status as a legend was secure, but the one thing she'd always been able to rely on felt like it was in serious danger of slipping away.

"I kept noticing this shaky quality in my voice," she says. "I'd be onstage going for a note in a song I knew like the back of my hand and it wouldn't come out. The way I knew how to sing just wasn't working anymore."

So began a years-long odyssey Mattea describes as her "dark night of the soul," a trying time of personal anguish and professional uncertainty that threatened to silence her permanently. Some nights her voice would be there in all its glory; other nights, inexplicably, notes would lie just beyond her grasp. The harder she tried, the more she struggled, and Mattea was forced to reckon with the possibility that her career might be over.

"I kept running from it, but eventually I realized I had to stop and deal with the issue head on," she explains.

The classically-trained Mattea dove into an exhaustive regimen with a new, jazz-centric vocal coach, developing a fresh approach to singing and forcing herself to break habits she'd relied on for her entire career. Most importantly, she came to recognize the beauty in how her voice was changing. Age had helped open Mattea's lower register like never before, and songs she'd previously shied away from suddenly came to new, vibrant life.

"It was astounding to me," she reflects. "That's when I really felt this vocal rebirthing process, and it gave me great joy because there's nothing that's ever felt more right to me in my life than singing and making music."

As her confidence returned, Mattea and her longtime guitarist/collaborator Bill Cooley decided to take their weekly living room jam sessions on the road, performing an extensive, stripped-down duo tour of unexpected material and old favorites. It took courage for Mattea to get back on stage in the midst of her vocal training, but the work paid off, and as she learned to let go of the idea of "perfection", she stripped the power from the fear that had gripped her for so long and kept her from the stage. All that was left was to return to the studio.

“I woke up in my bed at 2am one night and realized, ‘Oh my God. I have to call Tim O’Brien,’” Mattea remembers. “Tim is like a brother to me. We’ve worked together on each other’s records for years, and he’s one of the most comfortable, patient, safe people to collaborate with that I’ve ever known.”

While ‘Pretty Bird’ certainly reflects that comfort, it also reflects the adventurous streak that’s long defined Mattea’s choice in song. The album opens with playful take on Oliver Wood’s sultry “Chocolate On My Tongue” before moving seamlessly into a soulful rendition of Bobbie Gentry’s “Ode To Billie Joe.” The Mary Gauthier-penned “Mercy Now” finds Mattea offering up a tender prayer for understanding in these troubled times, while Joan Osborne’s “St. Teresa” takes on new life in light of the ravages that addiction has wrought on the singer’s home state. The arrangements on the album are earthy and organic, but its most affecting moments arrive in stripped-down songs like the British traditional “He Moves Through The Fair” and the arresting title track, a Hazel Dickens tune that boldly closes the record with Mattea’s rich, a cappella voice. It’s that voice that saved her, and it’s through singing Mattea hopes she can help others, too.

“I think there’s something sacred in this secular act of lifting our voices together,” she explains. “When we sing together, it doesn’t matter who you are or where you’re from or who you voted for. We’re all having the same experience and expressing ourselves the same way, and that’s where I want to plant my flag right now.”

More than simply rejuvenating her career, recovering her voice presented Kathy Mattea with a new lease on her humanity. With an album as powerful as ‘Pretty Bird,’ it’s clear she intends to make the most of it.