



kathy mattea

Songs of Innocence

and Experience

*In a country scene increasingly centered on the quick crossover hit, Kathy Mattea's music stands out for its uncompromised purity and sincerity. Mattea's 11th studio album, *The Innocent Years*, may be her most personal disc yet. The West Virginia native contributes some her most touching songwriting to date and takes a bolder production role than ever before. "It's a really emotional record for me," she says. "I feel like I've done a lot of growing up during the process." We recently spoke to Mattea about how the disc came together.*

How do you know when a song is right for you?

I look for a gut-level reaction. Then I live with the song for a while, weighing it in terms of my own perspective and music. Is this something I want to say? Is it in a style consistent with my music, or can it be reinterpreted that way? How do I sound singing it? How does it fit with the other songs I may be assembling for a project? Does it add diversity to the album, or help reinforce an overall theme? It's kind of like trying on clothes. Sometimes there are things you love, but when you get them on your body, they're all wrong. The best songs are the ones that are obvious fits from the beginning.

Some of the songs on *The Innocent Years* fit so well, it's hard to believe you didn't have a hand in writing them. "That's the Deal," for example, seems to address your father's recent illness.

Just as I got into the process of recording this album, my Mom got sick, and then my Dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer, which he wound up surviving, to every-

that point, songs that fit perfectly just began to emerge. It was like synchronicity.

One of your co-writers is your husband, Jon Vezner. Is it ever tough being married to one of your collaborators?

Jon and I have made feeble attempts at writing together over the years. I was always a real weenie about it. I guess I was just too intimidated. But it just fell into place on this record. Jon and I are still learning how to be married and write songs together. But it's just a natural extension of our relationship, which is very verbal, full of long conversations where time just disappears. We're learning to channel some of that energy into the songwriting process.

You took a more active role in production this time around.

I've always been an active artist in the studio, and Keith Steagall (co-producer) encouraged me to be even more independent. There were a couple of instances where the backing vocal arrangement was a direct cop of the demo, but on most of the album, the vocals were recorded in our basement, and I produced them. It was great fun, and it became a big part of the sound of the album. The vocals are used like another instrument, in some places almost like a synthesizer wash. One advantage of working at home is that you can experiment without the clock ticking. For example, one

day Mick Conley, our engineer, and I were doing percussion overdubs. I ran upstairs and got a crystal ashtray, which sounded awesome on the track. There was no one there to tell me I couldn't do it. We were like little kids.

You have a Yamaha PSR9000 keyboard. Does it figure in your songwriting?

Jon and I worked out the basic arrangement for "Calling My Name" on it. We started messing around with feels around noon one day and got so into it that I was late for the bus, which left at 11pm! We started with the drums, added bass and keys, and then I put on the guitar parts. Then we started messing with a string arrangement I was hearing in my head. It was great. This keyboard is so user-friendly that we could express what we heard while it was still fresh in our minds. I'm just learning about electronic keyboards, but this is the first one that hasn't completely intimidated me. And the sounds are great.

You're respected for not following trends. But has it become more difficult to stick to your guns in today's pop-driven scene?

It's only as difficult as you make it for yourself. Years ago Allen Reynolds (producer) taught me that it's all about the song and framing it well. That's still my goal. I try to be smart about it, to make it easy to listen to, to find songs I think will stand the test of time. That's my job. And as long as I'm willing to go wherever that road takes me, I'm alright.