



ME. MELINDA

MELINDA SCHNEIDER HAS TAKEN MATTERS INTO HER OWN HANDS AND INDEPENDENTLY PRODUCED A RECORD THAT'S ALL HER.

BY MARTIN JONES

I have to say, I didn't expect to like Melinda Schneider's new album half as much as I do. Not that I doubt Schneider's talent. It's just that, on paper, the whole co-writing and recording in Nashville scenario was ominous, the kind of process that results in so much vacuous detritus these days. And the fact that Schneider has been around the traps is no guarantee of immunity to the Music Row machine – many seasoned artists have been lured, in desperation, with promises of commercial success.

Schneider, however, has emerged not only undiluted by Nashville, but with possibly the most pure and complete representation of her own musical personality yet. And she knows it. It's there in the title of the record – *Be Yourself*. All of the disc's 13 tracks are collaborative compositions, most of them with Schneider's right-hand-man, Nashville stalwart Gordon Kennedy, but somehow Schneider's voice – a little sentimental, a little irreverent – shines through it all. It's certainly a more stripped-down and organic production, especially compared with Schneider's last record *Stronger*, and maybe that leaves more room for Schneider in the songs.

Be Yourself is still slick and radio friendly – it just doesn't sound compromised. It sounds as though this is how Schneider always intended the songs to be presented from conception.

Schneider is very aware of the pitfalls of Music Row: "You listen to the radio over there and the artists are interchangeable. It just really does all sound the same and it is just lollypop, most of it. And boring. So that's not the kind of artist I want to be."

Given that Schneider does most of her writing in Nashville, what's her attitude to the city and its music? Has she considered relocating there permanently like a number of our country artists?

"Oh I've considered it a few times over the years. Last year was probably the most time I'd ever spent there. In total I was probably there for about five months of last year, coming back and forth, and if it was going to happen I think it would have probably happened last year. But I pretty much decided at this point in my life that I don't really want to uproot and base myself there. I'm in my mid-thirties, I don't like the state of the industry there as far as major labels. There's a lot of sad stories about people and their deals. You know, Catherine Britt was over there and her album didn't even come out – she was over there for five years. By that time I'd be forty, so I thought, nuh. I like Nashville as a place to live, it's a beautiful place. I've got my old \$3000 Volvo sitting over there when I need it. And I've got lots of great friends. But I just thought 'no I don't want to play that major label game anymore at this stage in my life.' You know I'd been signed to Festival Records originally when I was 22 and then Compass Brothers for eight years and this time in my life now that I really understand very well how the industry works and what I want out of it, I just didn't want to play that game anymore."

Experience has driven Schneider to the path of total independence. As she attests, with *Be Yourself*, she "wrote the songs, picked the producer, the musicians, paid for it... did everything." The result is a record with integrity.

"Yeah and I guess it's all in the title of the album *Be Yourself* really, and that's the journey that I've been travelling and learning gradually over the last ten years really in my career. And I feel like I'm getting closer to that all the time with every record I make. And I don't think I'll ever... you know I'll always be chasing that and evolving with each record. But yeah I just thought, you've got to go out night after night and perform these songs, if you don't love them and have some really deep connection to them, and believe in them, it's bloody painful to get up there and sing them every night."

Does that mean Schneider has a pretty firm concept of her own musical personality; her own voice? It's all very well prescribing the 'be yourself' advice of the album's title track, but what if you don't know who you are?

"Um, I think I was always me vocally," Schneider considers. "I don't think I ever copied any other singers... I was probably most inspired by Alison Krauss and Ricky Skaggs and some more bluegrass artists. And George Jones I guess. The real hardcore, traditional bluegrass and country singers. And Dolly of course. They were my inspiration – bluegrass is something that I absolutely love. And I love soul music as well. My first album was a Renee Geyer album, *So Lucky*, that album, that's the first record my mum bought me. So I've got very diverse musical tastes, and it's interesting, on this album I do push the boundaries a little bit from anything I've done and it is a little bit more sort of blues oriented. And my mate, who I miss terribly, Billy Thorpe would be saying 'it's about bloody time' (laughs). Because he was always at me to sing in the kind of more bluesy, gospel vein that he first heard me sing on stage with him when I first met him years ago."

It takes a bit of imagination to appreciate that more bluesy tone when listening to *Be Yourself*. It's very much a country pop record, so melodically bright at times your ears need shades. But I do understand what she's talking about – there's a voice of experience and attitude and Schneider's vocal delivery is authoritative and unpretentious in its story telling. 'People Don't Change' is the most overtly bluesy album track, a gospel piece that, instead of preaching hope, presents the advice of a cynic.

"Yeah, I love singing that. It's a lot of fun," Schneider attests. "And I started writing that as I was driving over the Anzac Bridge actually in Sydney. Just the first verse, I was just driving in the car and it just came to me. I don't even know how, I just started singing (she delivers an impromptu performance), "If you're living with him and you think he's strange, you better brace yourself 'cause people don't change, Lord, I know people don't change, Lord'. I just started singing that and I whacked it into my phone 'cause I didn't want to forget it."

While the most obvious radio fare greets you at the door to *Be Yourself* in the form of the title track and the McCartney-esque ballad 'Courageous', there's a real heart to this album that keeps you listening through to the end. 'Cry A Little' is a first class demonstration of song-crafting and 'Grassy' is the most frivolous and sassy album track. But, for me it's the trio of tracks 'Safe', 'People Don't Change' and the duet with Paul Kelly 'Still Here' that give the album its hook.

'Safe' is a sparkling piece of pop that you could imagine being played on almost any radio format. "Yes if it was recorded by someone other than my name. Yeah, funny that!" Schneider laughs, making one of a number of disgruntled allusions to a lack of radio support. "Yeah I wrote that with Gordon about three years ago. That was one of the first songs we wrote together... I had it there ready for my last album but it didn't really fit and it did for this. It's the song that a lot of people probably friends of mine who are into the more country side of things don't really get."

'Still Here,' I have to admit, is largely responsible for *Be Yourself* jumping my ever-lengthening queue of 'to be listened to' discs. Having Paul Kelly sing on your CD is a sure-fire appropriation of credibility, coincidental or otherwise. Schneider confirms that the duet was her idea and proceeds to relate its serendipitous development.

"He didn't write the song with me, I wrote it with Jay Knowles, another co-writer of mine who I love working with. And we wrote it half way through the process of recording the album actually, and I knew as soon as we sort of decided it was going to be a duet as we were writing it and it was just unfolding that way, I thought 'god this is so Paul Kelly. He'd be fantastic! I can just hear him singing this.' And I'd met him at a few festivals and stuff and we had been swapping some songs prior to me going over to record. And I was then in Sydney early this year, I think it was in February, snorkelling at Coogee in the rock pool, and I came up out of the water, and there was Paul sitting on a rock! (laughs)."

What? The image of Buddha-like-Paul-perched-on-rock-appearing-out-of-thin-air is too much – though somehow entirely in harmony with his zen angel aura.

"I know! I was like, 'oh it's not a mermaid, it's Paul!' So I went over and said 'hey' and told him about the song and said 'look I know you don't usually record other people's songs that you haven't written but I really would just love you to have a listen to this and if you think it's something you'd like to do with me I'd love you to do it.' So he said, 'yeah email it to me', so I did and he liked it. So it was great. And I went down to his house and recorded it there in his lounge room. And it was a really lovely, we were kind of like a couple of giggling teenagers, a little bit shy 'cause we don't know each other that well, and I think that comes across in the song, there's a real tenderness there."

As Otis (and many others less successfully) sang, "try a little tenderness". Schneider has proved that it's possible to take on Nashville and emerge with integrity, tenderness and all, intact... if you just be yourself.

Be Yourself is available on *Be Music* through *destraMusic*.