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A photograph of Melinda Schneider, a country music artist, sitting on a brown couch. She is wearing a black spaghetti-strap dress and has a joyful expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

MELINDA SCHNEIDER

THE HEART OF THINGS

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THE HEAT

MELINDA SCHNEIDER is the first to admit that she puts her heart into the public domain every time she records an album.

It's just the way I write — I draw from my own experiences and emotional journey. And I don't mind putting my experiences into songs," Melinda said.

"But at the same time, I try to make them into something more than just a personal story. The magical part about songs is that they can turn very specific, personal experiences into something universal. A good song has the space for people to project their own lives and experiences on to the song, and to draw something — inspiration, comfort, whatever they want — from it."

So the title of Melinda's brand new album, *Be Yourself*, couldn't be more apt. The songs on this album are, if possible, even more personal than on her previous recordings — even her last album, *Stronger*, which she describes as "my divorce album".

What's more, this is the first album Melinda has released on her very own record label, Be Music.

"I'm in a fantastic place in my life right now. The last few years have been a healing process for me — following my father's death and the end of a ten-year marriage. When you make big changes in your life, come through a crisis, it takes a certain amount of time to heal. But now I'm feeling happy, centred and — well, content. I feel a huge sense of relief to be on my own, in control of my life, and happy."

Undoubtedly, creating *Be Yourself* has been a large part of that process. One of the standout tracks on the album, the powerful *Understanding*, was written in 2005, just after Melinda's marriage ended. It didn't make it on to *Stronger*, but it fits this album perfectly.

"I've been saving it for the right time — and

RT OF THINGS

BY SUSAN JARVIS

now is that time. It's exactly how I felt at the time, and I think it's a feeling of frustration many women share," Melinda said.

But these days Melinda has good reason to be positive. *Stronger* won her the Golden Guitar (her fifth) for Top Selling Album in January, and she's just taken out the MO Award for live performance for the seventh time. In addition, her *Happy Tears* album reached gold record status late last year.

She's also just returned from a life-changing trip to China, where she walked the Great Wall of China with a group of celebrities led by **OLIVIA NEWTON-JOHN** to raise money for cancer research.

The trip came about after Melinda's powerful song *Courageous* — also featured on *Be Yourself* — was chosen by Olivia to be featured on her album *Songs Of Hope And Inspiration* — Olivia and Friends. Melinda sang a duet with Olivia on the song, and was invited to walk the wall.

Other celebrities who lent their time to the walk included **JAMES REYNE**, **SIGRID THORNTON**, **SIR CLIFF RICHARD**, and **IAN THORPE**. The walk covered 200 kilometres over 21 days, and has so far raised \$2 million, with an ultimate target of \$5 million. The money will be used to build a Wellness Centre for

the Olivia Newton-John Foundation.

"I lost my beautiful dad to cancer four years ago, and miss him terribly, so I walked in his memory. He'd be looking down and smiling, I'm sure," Melinda said.

"Walking alongside cancer sufferers, doctors and others who had lost loved ones to cancer was extremely positive and powerful. Olivia was so strong, positive and happy, and her energy filtered through to the rest of us."

Following that memorable walk, Melinda headed off overseas again — this time leading a tour group to Nashville for the CMA Festival. She spends plenty of time in Country Music City these days, writing songs and immersing herself in the industry.

"I always work really well when I'm locked away in Nashville, and I can absorb the atmosphere and the talents of my amazing cowriters. I really get inspired there," she said.

"Most of the songs for the new album were written in Nashville. I worked a lot with the amazing Gordon Kennedy, who was also involved in the album's production. His input was invaluable. It's definitely the coolest record I've ever made — the most stripped back production wise and instrumentally. There's space in the music that makes it really powerful."

Melinda wrote seven of the album's 13 tracks with Gordon, including the title track, *Be Yourself*.

"I first had the idea for the song a couple of years ago, and I finished it with Gordon. I feel like this has been one of my big life lessons. You have to be true to yourself, to who you are. We all get caught in the trap of trying to fit in or follow the crowd, but it doesn't make you

happy. It's so easy to wake up and realise you're living a certain way for all the wrong reasons."

Gordon also collaborated on several of the more "out there" tracks on the album. One is the final track, *Awake Now*, which Melinda says just poured out one day from a "spiritual place".

"I feel a huge sense of relief when I hear or sing this song. I'm feeling more free now than I've ever been," she said.

The down-and-dirty *Grassy* is quite a different kind of song, however. It began simply with the title, and the idea of a bluegrass sound.

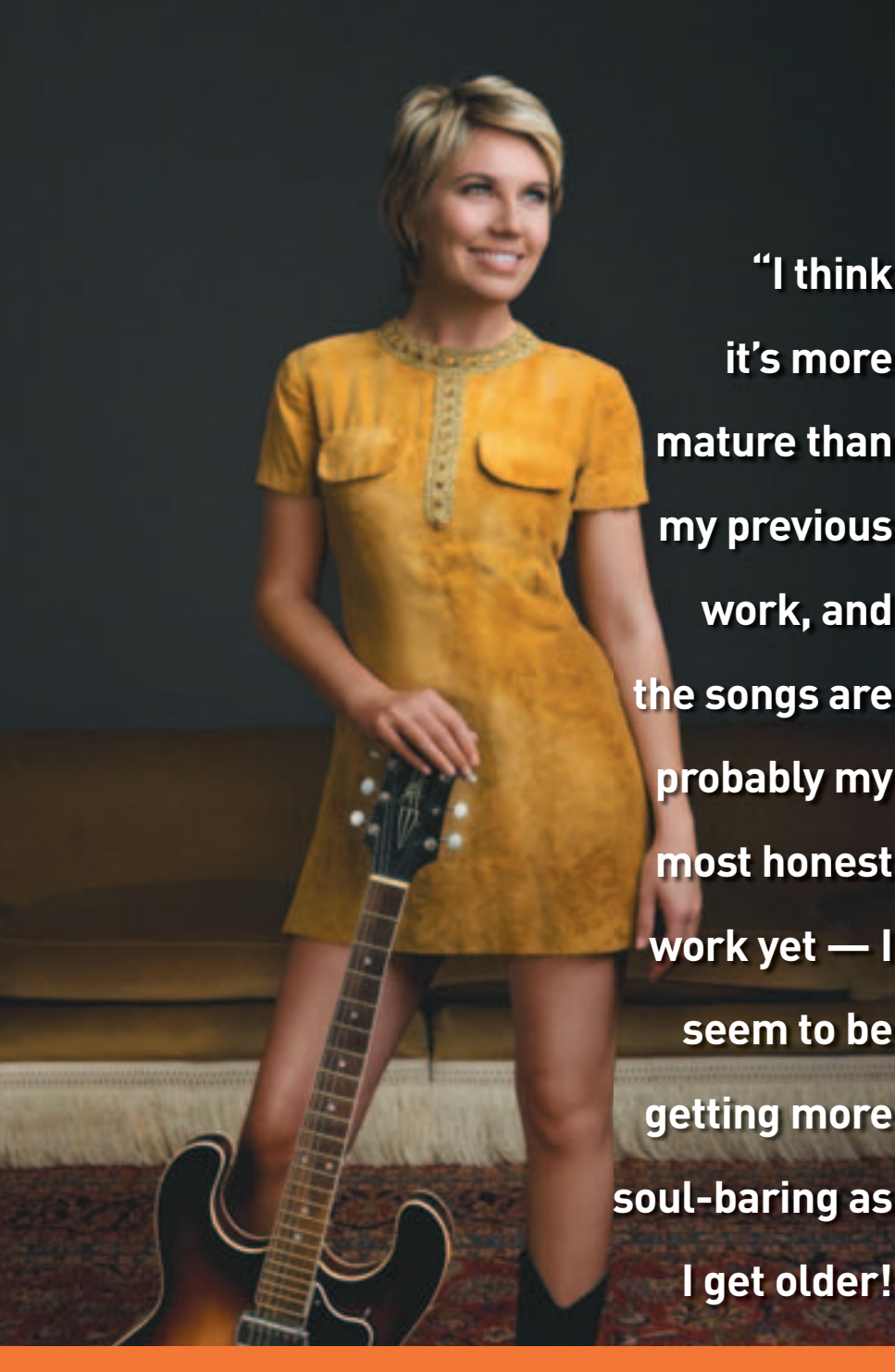
"I wanted to use lots of bluegrass instruments — I just love the banjo, and the dirty lap-steel rocks. This is just a fun song, but I know my old mate **BILLY THORPE** would have been so happy to hear me record this — something a little more bluesy. Can't wait to do this one at the Muster!"

And *Cry A Little* is a lost-love song with a difference, which explores the way music can bring back a moment and an emotional experience.

"Most of us have experienced this kind of heartbreak in our lives, and I think this song immediately takes you back to that place. I love the sadness of the song and the reference to the fiddle — it's an instrument so full of emotion," Melinda said.

And the gutsy *Safe* shows just how diverse Gordon Kennedy's talents are. The song's about avoiding love and commitment ... well, trying to.

"This is probably more inspired by some members of the male species than by my own feelings. We all get scared and play it safe - I guess some of us can live to regret it," Melinda said.



“I think it’s more mature than my previous work, and the songs are probably my most honest work yet — I seem to be getting more soul-baring as I get older!”



As well as Gordon, another regular cowriter, Jay Knowles, cowrote three of the tracks on *Be Yourself*. The highlight — and one of several outstanding tracks on the album — is *Still Here*, a duet with the legendary **PAUL KELLY**.

Melinda has a delightful story about asking Paul to perform with her on the song.

“Earlier in the year, I was snorkelling at Coogee beach. I came out of the water, and there was Paul Kelly sitting on a rock. I’d

already decided he’d be perfect to sing this with me — I knew he’d sound wonderful. I asked him then and there, and he agreed — which was great because he doesn’t often perform songs he didn’t write.

“Recording those vocals in Paul’s lounge room is something I’ll always remember. We didn’t know each other very well, and we were a bit shy and awkward, which of course suited the song perfectly. I’m absolutely thrilled with the way it has turned out.”

Jay also penned the tongue-in-cheek *Thank You* with Melinda.

“It is a genuine thank you, but it’s

something else too. Any woman who’s been in a relationship and been burned will relate!” Melinda said.

In fact, women everywhere will relate to pretty much every track on this album. They’ll particularly like *Bad Day*, penned with the only female cowriter on the album, Marcia Ramirez.

“It’s nice to have some oestrogen on the album — I’ll definitely be writing with Marcia again,” Melinda said.

“This is a real chick song. We all have our bad days — men usually try to fix them for us, when all we really need is a hug, someone to listen and to know we’ll get over it.”

Be Yourself also features one of those songs that is destined to become a perennial favourite for weddings, christenings and other celebrations. Melinda says she wrote the beautiful *I’ll Take Care Of You* with her mum in mind.

“I wrote it for my mum [legendary yodeller **MARY SCHNEIDER**], but it works as a love song for a couple or in any scenario. It’s about pure love in the most idealist form. We all want to take care of the people we love.”

The messages of the final two songs on the album, *People Don’t Change* and *Outside*, are very different, but they both have one thing in common: the kind of wisdom that comes with experience.

Outside is simply about the need to remember the real and simple things in life. And *People Don’t Change* — also written with Gordon Kennedy — is a piece of hard-won advice.

“This is one of my favourite songs to sing. I love the whole spiritual thing. It’s an older, wiser woman telling a younger girl she cares about to wake up and smell the coffee — she’s been there, she knows the story.”

And that’s the overwhelming message of this album: life’s lessons are worth learning; they make you stronger, more understanding, wiser and more willing to embrace the full gamut of human experience.

“I feel that I’ve moved forward in a really positive way, and this album — as all my albums have — reflects that shift in my life,” Melinda said.

“I think it’s more mature than my previous work, and the songs are probably my most honest work yet — I seem to be getting more soul-baring as I get older! But I always feel I still have further to go to get to the truth, the heart of things.”