



## Hilary McRae

The first developing artist to be signed to Hear Music, Hilary McRae is a 21-year-old writer/singer/pianist who seems to have time traveled to this decade from the 1970s. Her debut album ‘Through These Walls’ thrums with the vibrant rhythms and textures of old-school, horn-drenched, uptown R&B, a dynamic setting for the timelessly bittersweet songs and rich, dusky alto of this stunningly accomplished newcomer. McRae’s vocal instrument is capable of withering intensity one moment, hushed intimacy the next—a perfect match for these songs of uncommon candor and humanity—songs could only have emanated from an old soul.

The album also introduces another remarkably gifted newcomer in producer/guitarist Zach Ziskin, McRae’s longtime musical collaborator. It was Ziskin who had the crucial idea of enlisting the legendary Charlie Calello, who has arranged music for legends such as Frank Sinatra and Bruce Springsteen, to create the horn parts. “I’ve loved horns since I was a kid listening to Chicago and Earth, Wind & Fire,” she confirms, “but I never thought of my own music in that way until we started making the record. Charlie came up with stellar horn parts; I was blown away by his ideas and let him do his thing. I was amazed at how much they added to the feel of the songs and the overall recording.”

At once vibrant and deftly nuanced, the horns serve as a sort of wordless Greek chorus behind McRae’s vocals, providing a texturally rich counterpoint to her songs of romantic anguish—laden with missed opportunities, what ifs and lingering heartache. “I definitely got my heart stomped on, more than once,” she acknowledges. “That’s probably why these songs are so raw.”

The opening “Everyday (When Will You Be Mine?),” is suffused with yearning, while the following “Consider Me Gone” is delivered with a mixture of hurt and defiance, as a deftly manicured guitar solo from Ziskin redolent of vintage Steely Dan takes over in the extended outro. That leads into “Why Can’t Now Be Our Time,” burnished by brass accents that recall the Chicago of “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?” Subtly yet vividly, the track evokes an ill-timed romance in the Boston winter, as the horns suggest bare limbs standing vigil over a snow-covered expanse. It closes out with McRae scatting in the manner of Ella Fitzgerald, a hint of hopefulness in the gesture. It’s rare to find such a juxtaposition of raw emotion and refined musicality in contemporary music—but then, McRae is not your everyday contemporary artist.

She began writing these songs during the two years she spent at Boston’s prestigious Berklee School of Music, which had awarded her a scholarship to study songwriting after an audition during which she sang one of her originals and Don Henley’s “Heart of the Matter.” Additional song ideas came to her during the summer of 2006, while she toured Central and South America as the keyboardist and backing vocalist for Latin superstar Christian Castro. By the time she returned home to Boca Raton, Fla., where she lives with her father, Hilary possessed the material and the self-belief to take the next step.

“I got to a point of deciding whether I was going to focus on songwriting or performing,” she recalls, “so I went to my dad and said, ‘Listen, I really want to try to do something with these songs, and I want to do it as an artist.’ He was very generous in his response, and what started out as a Christmas present got a little out of hand. Because of his support, it turned into something really great—something beyond my wildest dreams.”

She then called on her friend Ziskin. They’d met when Hilary, then 16, was preparing to record her first set of demos as half of a duo, and Ziskin, a skilled guitarist and aspiring producer, recognized the immensity of her raw talent and eagerly took on the project. “Zach has been such an inspiration to me over the years.” When they reunited on the album project, Ziskin’s overarching vision brought another dimension to the material, but retaining the girl-at-the-piano torchiness that is the album’s heart and soul. “Zach saw what it could be from the beginning and knew how to convey it musically,” she says.

McRae describes the players—starting with the ace of rhythm section, handpicked by Ziskin, of bassist Fernando Perdomo and drummer Derek Cintron—as “musical gurus who know everything about everything. Fernando and Derek are two of the most talented and genuine people I know,” she says. “I’ve learned so much from playing music with these guys and from working with Zach; together, they really brought this record to life.”

When Ziskin played the finished album for his cousin, industry veteran Bruce Berman, it started a fortuitous chain of events. Blown away by what he’d heard, Berman in turn played the record for his friend and fellow vet Larry Frazin, who was hooked as well.

After agreeing that this was the most impressive new artist they’d heard in ages, the two came up with the concept of launching a new label venture, with McRae as their partner and her album as the first release. Hilary happily agreed, leading to the formation of Stone Road Records.

While Stone Road was setting up the album release, Frazin was visited in his office by longtime friend Alan Mintz, the head of music for Starbucks Entertainment. Mintz was there on other business, but after hearing McRae’s album, an excited Mintz told Frazin it was just what he’d been looking for, and a deal was made on the spot to release the record through Hear Music—a label launched by Starbucks and Concord Music Group whose roster includes Paul McCartney, Joni Mitchell and James Taylor. It appears to be a marriage made in heaven, uniting a young artist with a truly adult sensibility and a label that prides itself on committing only to artists of quality and distinctiveness.

Asked about her aspirations, McRae considers the question for a moment before offering her answer. “I really hope to have a long career,” she says, a Mona Lisa smile briefly flashing across her classic features, framed by blonde tresses. “And I hope to keep getting my heart broken so that I’ll have something to write about.”

The line mirrors one of McRae’s memorable choruses: “This is my love song for you,” she sings. “I know it’s sad, but it’ll do.”

It will indeed.