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RECORDS

# mary cutrufello

"Plenty of people are living lives of desperation;  
that's a constant wherever you go.  
It's the differences in people's choices that make it interesting.  
For no matter how much of a dead end there seems to be,  
it comes down to how you deal and what you do.  
Those crisis moments, the fulcrum moments in peoples lives...  
those are the moments of realization that change you forever."

With When The Night Is Through, **Mary Cutrufello** finds a way to create a worldview that is every bit as intense as the straight-up rock and roll she favors with her much-heralded guitar playing. Working with producer Thom Panunzio (U2, Black Sabbath, Lone Justice) and a core band of Kenny Aronoff (John Mellencamp, Smashing Pumpkins), Bob Glaub (John Fogerty, Jackson Browne), and Rami Jaffee (the Wallflowers), Cutrufello merges her love of populist rock and vintage Rolling Stones for a debut that addresses the conflicts that define our lives, the dreams that don't quite happen and, ultimately, the will that keeps us going.

"Everyone is responsible for their actions, the world they make and live in," she says, trying to explain the forces at work in her songs. "It's so much more than right or wrong; it's that sense of the past, but the future, too. It's about the realization, but also the weeks, months and years to follow -- because whether you decide to take action or not, those moments change everything forever.

"So, these songs are about knowing yourself and being comfortable with what you see inside. They're also about trying to get to a better place, being true to yourself and the people in your world...and yeah, I was trying to say something about love, but I think the songs are more about the fact that I haven't quite figured out just what to say about it.

"Love is a difficult topic. Like a lot of people, I spend a great deal of time trying to figure out what it means and how to integrate it into my life. A lot of these songs are about different ways of doing love and what it means to the people involved."

Broken love. Failed love. Long-gone love. Illicit love. Survived love. Exhilarating love. And, of course, love of the highway. For **Mary Cutrufello**, emotion comes in many forms and formats, and she's willing to brace herself and take an unflinching, unsentimental look at them all.

BIOGRAPHY

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Whether it's the shattered woman who loved once and clings to the tattered memories in the swooping "She Can't Let Go," the confident woman who emerges from the loneliness of youth on the accordion-soaked acoustic "Sister Cecil," the vulnerable, yet aware heroine who knows sometimes it's the isolated moments that matter more in "Highway 59 (Let It Rain)," or the abandoned wife and mother who must pick up the pieces and face betrayal in "Sad, Sad World," the people in Cutrufello's world are tossed about on the choppy waves of their own lust and naivete -- yet they also manage to get to shore, a bit tired, but ultimately braver and wiser for the journey.

"The heaviness and intensity of theme isn't incompatible with rocking. Many of the artists I respect -- Springsteen, Dylan, even the Stones -- treat rock and roll as a kind of catharsis. But the catharsis comes from acknowledging, and letting whatever it is go.

"You have to embrace the heavy stuff, because it's the only way you can deal with it. There's no relief in ignoring the stuff, because it keeps building...and you get no release without the tension. The Stones *knew* that...which is why 'Gimme Shelter' is such a great song! It was chilling because it dealt with all the strife that was going on when it came out, but it didn't sacrifice any of the rock."

Born in Connecticut and adopted by two educators, Cutrufello's rock baptism was as unorthodox as everything else about her unconventional story. After being steeped in show tunes from infancy, she was captured at eight by the car radio one sweltering afternoon. "It was the summer of 'Too Hot' and 'Romeo's Tune' -- and in that moment, I realized that songs were separate, distinct beings."

So, she begged for a guitar, took to her room and began the time-honored passage of world-class musicians around the globe. She had a horn band in high school, a Jackie Robinson Scholarship to Yale and the Cement Shoes Blues Band for spending money in college.

Though she graduated with a degree in American Studies (Transportation History of the 20th Century, to be exact), Cutrufello was more committed to the covenant of making music. She packed her Telecaster and her pick-up, and headed to Texas where she began her graduate studies in late nights, scorching guitars and real life.

"It's funny how much you can learn about people from the bandstand," she says. "People forget you're there...and you can watch it all go down every night. I mean, that's what I do. I'm the outsider, so I observe and report back. I drive through towns when all the lights are off, except maybe the blue glow from one TV being on, or a traffic light blinking red. In those moments, there is a world of possibilities and I try to imagine them all."

Certainly "Goodnight Dark Angel," etched with the jagged regret of a woman confronted by her lover committing murder, then suicide, "Miss You #3," riddled with the sting of obsession, raw lust and a scalding guitar, and "Tonight's The Night," fueled with the pent-up frustration of a young man destined to get out of a nowhere town, in search of his own place in the world, capture the fires that drive us. Even the world-weary "Tired and Thirty" is filled with hopes that grow soft and decay into a knowing that tinges forever forever.

"The point is: there's hope," Cutrufello says. "In 'Sad, Sad World,' the woman realizes she's in a bad situation -- and that she needs to get out. Once the decisive moment happens, it's not all better and the sun comes out. She's made a hard right turn down a good road, but she's gotta keep driving. Sometimes it's about making the best of what is, because optimal isn't always an option.

"It all comes down to personal agency. I'd rather depend on myself than anyone else, and it's that way for all these people: the woman in 'She Can't Let Go' has figured out what works for her, so she's way ahead of the narrator; the guy in 'Dark Angel' may have reached the end of his dark night of the soul, but the woman in Houston will have to pick up the pieces; even the narrator in 'Sweet Promise of Love' refuses to make any more of the moment than there is... "

That need to be aware -- whether her heroes and heroines choose to join her -- is part of what sets the Houston-based songwriter/vocalist/guitarist apart. In a world dominated by white men, she refuses to be bound by stereotypes. Recognized as a black woman who attacks her music with uncompromising passion and power, *The Washington Post* called her "a category killer," and *USA Today* proclaimed, "the performance is all rock and roll."

"There are those accidents of my reality: my gender, the biology of my parents, where I grew up, where I live. But those are just facts and they don't define me. What I do, I hope, will. After all, you never say someone is good at being a woman or a child or an Asian, but that they're a good father or lawyer or teacher. It's what you do and the mark you leave.

"It's not my skin color, my sex, or my education that matters. I am what I am; it's what I do with it that's important. That's why I hate definitions -- because they're just words that mean different things to different people. Say the word 'jazz' and see what I mean: some think Coltrane, others Kenny G."

As for Cutrufello, she's willing to put her faith in the music. She can be hopeful -- as in the dig-yourself-out-celebration of "Sunny Day" -- and freewheeling -- as in the barb-wire shuffle of "Rollin' & Tumblin'" -- and philosophical about it all. Listening to her tales of faithless loves, unbridled desire, unquenchable needs, the thrill of the moment and hard-won insight, it is obvious that she sees music's possibilities for salvation and renewal.

"I loved the title When the Night Is Through for a lot of reasons," she says. "But when we were almost done, another reason came to me, and it is the most true to what I was trying to do. This is a record full of the promise and hope and strength of rock and roll...and for me, when the night is through and you're all alone in the breaking dawn, it's the music you can always count on.

"Whether you've hooked up or you're alone, whether the night sucked or rocked, the music is what it is -- and it is a constant companion that knows how you feel. When the night is through, what else could you want?"

**Mary Cutrufello** believes in simple things: doing right, being true, the thrill of a realization. She is a woman who believes in the power of rock and roll to get you through. Sometimes that's more than enough.