



State of independence:
Marissa Nadler, Los
Angeles, 4 July, 2018.

MARISSA NADLER

PHOTOGRAPHS
COLIN LANE

➔ **Once, Marissa Nadler wrapped her ethereal goth-folk in mythology to disguise her true self. Her eighth album, *For My Crimes*, gloriously reverses that. **Eve Barlow** meets a fragile Nadler in LA to hear about sadness, madness, the end of love and finally seeking her musical dues.**

It's the 4th of July and some Americans are choosing not to celebrate. For prolific songwriter Marissa Nadler, her rejection of the holiday has nothing to do with Trump. Hidden in a coffee shop in LA, the 37-year-old is avoiding her husband – music journalist, Ryan H Walsh. He is at home in Boston. “It’s a trigger,” she says of the calendar date. “We broke up five years ago today. Then I wrote an album about it.” In 2014, a dream pop, nocturnal sprawl of an album – titled *July* – was a turning point for Nadler. For a decade, she’d been the musician’s musician, a respected footnote, but never a headline. In 2015, Nadler, by then

reconciled with Walsh, married him and her touring life began to thrive. Two albums on, she’s writing autobiographically again. For *For My Crimes*, her eighth album, invites listeners into a broken home, as it’s breaking. The relationship, it seems, is floundering. Trembling with nerves, she struggles to keep steady, distracted by a vase next to her. “The flowers are different in LA,” she muses. “I always touch them to see if they’re fake.” Nadler used to rely upon artifice. She cloaked her music in lace and mythology to avoid exposing herself. She’s still adjusting. Her new lyrics are too precise to be fiction. Take the song title *I Can’t Listen To Gene Clark Anymore*, or the contents of *Said Goodbye To That Car*, which detail that her old motor ran for 119,657 kilometres. That car’s life ended while Nadler was using it to tour. One night she returned to it to find a hole in the roof and a bullet on the back seat.

“It would have killed me if I’d been inside,” she says. Her replacement is a Ford Escape. Her friends found that funny. “I’m such a romantic escapist,” she laughs.

The song is a metaphor for a relationship that ran out of mileage. She doesn’t laugh talking about that. Being tongue-tied is an unnatural position for a professional songwriter. “It’s a tricky situation. I’m unravelling this in real time. How do you talk about personal songs without explaining it for clickbait?” Eventually Nadler surrenders. “When you have two artists living in the same house it can be very problematic. It’s been a shitty few years.”

Walsh just had his first book published and has instructed her that he’d rather not be mentioned by name. But it’s Nadler’s story, too. “It’s complicated,” she nods. “It’s easier when you write non-fiction, like he does. I try to be tactfully exploitative. I feel a responsibility. He’s still my husband.”

Fortunately (or not), there’s no fleeing the album’s candour. The title track is about a man on Death Row thinking about a lost love. “I’ve done terrible things, cold and careless lies,” sings Nadler. Curiously, the song was an “assignment” given to her by Walsh. Write a song about what it’s like to be on Death Row, he instructed. “The minute I wrote it I realised it wasn’t about that,” she says. ➔

"I'm hermetic, a loner – that's fine"; Nadler at home in LA.



"You need a certain amount of living, pain and joy to sing the way I wanna sing. I'm there finally."

massive success. That's what you get with Los Angeles – ambitiousness."

The eccentric pair encouraged Nadler to take advantage of her non-musical assets: her Rolodex. From their Laurel Canyon studio they built an army of collaborators for her, including guest vocalist Olsen. Olsen and Nadler go way back. "Ronny's bar, Chicago, 2006," she recalls. "She was my opening act." Olsen was only 19, six years Nadler's junior. "We hit it off but I didn't hear anything else of her." Since then, Olsen's career has eclipsed hers. Nadler would never ask Olsen to work with her. Nor would she ask



(Above) Nadler's latest album, *For My Crimes*; (below) with its star producers, Lawrence Rothman (left) and Justin Raisen (centre).



It's about her own guilt. "Nothing is black and white, there are no good and bad people. I am not a pristine protagonist."

The song gave Nadler permission to be at fault, more readily than he. "Sure, I could have written an Alanis Morissette ballad about how mean he was," she says. "But I don't wanna demonise him. I love him dearly." This LA trip means she's away during its release. Has he heard it? We don't know. "I'm an empath. I don't eat or sleep because I worry about someone else. But this is my job. I must focus." You wonder why a husband would give a wife a task where she imagines herself as an inmate headed to

slaughter. "It was random," she insists. "The first thing on his mind." The first thing on your mind is rarely random.

There was another. Nadler doesn't want people to know there was a love triangle. "But it's obvious," she concedes. "I fell in love with somebody else. It's brutal to talk about it. It was brutal to write about." Nadler is in knots, flitting between states of sadness and anger. "I'm fiery. I'm an Aries," she implores. After some swigs of

caffeine she launches into her targets. Bob Dylan is first. "He never needed to explain himself!" she cries. "Why should I have to make a second art project on what my songs are about? My music is the art."

Amid the turmoil, something great happened. In January, Nadler found two unlikely champions in LA; producers Justin Raisen and Lawrence Rothman. Raisen is a pop guy (Charli XCX, Sky Ferreira). Rothman introduced him to Nadler's music while they worked on Angel Olsen's last record. He'd obsessed over her since high school. "They had no ulterior motive other than feeling bad for me," says Nadler. "I'd never had

singer-songwriter Sharon Van Etten, whom she influenced, nor Kristin Welchez (synthpop act Kristin Kontrol). "Justin made me do it. He goes, 'Dude! You need some ballers on your record.'" She smiles. "At this point in my career I'm not trying to fill amphitheatres. It's a life choice. What did I have to lose?"

The album's credits are a classy wink at Nadler's impact among her female peers. "It's a new era. It's not cool to be in competition," she says of changing times. "I don't want to write an op-ed about my bad experiences as a 'woman in music' because every woman has them. My approach is to kick ass as much as I can and not be threatened." Ten years ago she'd be told Van Etten was better than her. "Sharon and I always tiptoed around each other. I have twice as many albums but I've had shitty luck."

It's fair to describe Nadler as a disaster magnet. "There's no doubt that I write my best material when I'm falling apart," she says. She's lost herself in melodramatic fantasy since her teenage years. In high school she says she looked like Cousin Itt. "I walked with my hair in front of my face in big army fatigues. I was so fucking shy." Boston is largely Irish Catholic. Nadler grew up Jewish, raised by a dentist father and a tarot-reading painter mother. "I was a minority," she says. "I felt ugly."

Young Nadler wanted to be a famous painter, and whiled away her nights in the basement copying Da Vinci drawings. It was a pre-internet age. "I had books, cassettes and a boombox. I discovered Leonard Cohen through the liner notes of Nirvana's Pennyroyal Tea. There was no porn. You had to read a dirty sentence in a book over and over." She was a late bloomer. "In high school I didn't go on a single date. I was chubby. Like in Romy & Michele's High School Reunion, you wouldn't have guessed I'd grow into a beautiful swan."

Nadler's elder brother Stuart, a novelist, was the music guy; popular and in a band. Following in his footsteps, she picked up guitar and took lessons but abandoned that, convinced she was a prodigy. "I said, 'Fuck this! I've already written an album.' I was 14." Her musical heroes were grunge bands, mainly Hole. "My mum was tired of hearing Courtney Love scream, so bought me Joni Mitchell's Blue and Carole King's Tapestry." Nadler's own coming-of-age came post-school. She had a far older boyfriend and developed a taste for partying. "That happens to dorks," she says. "They get cool. I got an electric guitar. I wanted to be a rocker. I could scream back then. One of my greatest laments is that I lost my scream."

Inhibition quietened her. Nadler >>

attended Rhode Island School Of Design for fine art and felt diminished. “For eight hours a day people tore my work apart.” She wrote songs as an alternative outlet, playing at open-mic nights with crippling stage fright. Alcohol helped. “God, I loved whiskey,” she says. “It brought out parts of my personality I haven’t seen since.” Nadler has been sober for seven years. “I gave so many bad gigs,” she regrets now. “I had to drink a bottle of wine to get onstage.” She only smokes pot these days. “I haven’t been to a party in a decade,” she says, gladly. “It’s not that I’m not fun. I’m a one-on-one kinda hang.”

In 2004, Nadler emerged as the outcast. Her first album *Ballads Of Living And Dying* was as precocious as it sounds. “Man, you don’t get a gothier debut,” she laughs. The songs quoted Edgar Allan Poe and Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. “I didn’t wanna be thought of as a Lilith Fair chick.” Labelling her a folk artist felt reductive, but she wasn’t in the indie club either. She smirks at the thought of Devendra Banhart’s *The Golden Apples Of The Sun* compilation (2004), which featured Joanna Newsom and

“Find something you love, make it your job. My job is therapy. Whenever I worry that I’m airing my dirty laundry or caught in a vicious cycle, I remember that putting that pain in music helps people.”

Iron & Wine. “Even the freak-folk scene rejected me – thank fucking God,” she says. She opened for Peter Bjorn And John – “when they had that huge whistle hit”. It was “the worst experience of my life.” Nadler admits that she had created an “ice princess”. For the first decade her output was veiled in maudlin purple prose. “I was your undertaker/I was your highway girl,” she sang. Unsurprisingly, the goth metal scene became her kindreds (she toured with Swedish heavy rockers Ghost and sang with black metal group Xasthur). “People who encase themselves in metal are protecting a sensitive heart,” she reasons. “The sharper the points the sweeter the honey.” She buried

her voice in reverb for five records. She despises her second album. “Oh my God! If I could go back and remix all my records...” she says, only half-joking, citing her favourite singers Neil Young, Nina Simone, etc. “Those voices kill you. I wasn’t there as a singer then. You need a certain amount of living, pain and joy to sing the way I wanna sing. I’m there finally.” On *For My Crimes*, her voice is meatier, almost subterranean. In the past it’s been overly sexualised by critics. Q begins an old quote. “Oh, I know the one,” she interrupts, flicking her mane. “I’m done with that. I want people to know I’m not some mermaid siren on a rock, luring men to their death.” Despite the topicality of sexism, Nadler insists that it’s difficult for her to receive equal footing. “You have to play guitar twice as good, be twice as good a songwriter. The same stuff that floats as a virtue with male musicians is not with females.” She lists Elliott Smith, Mark Linkous and Sparklehorse and Sun Kil Moon. “These are men renowned for sadness. They don’t get criticised for not moving on. Whereas with women they’ll say, ‘Smile dollface. It’s not that bad.’”

Mental health struggles have become trendy, and Nadler resents this. She doesn’t want to extort hers for album sales. “Goddamn,” she says aghast. “I would have been a helluva lot more successful had I said that my records are about my lifelong battle with depression.” In 2009, she suffered her biggest downward spiral when she was



Home is where the art is: Nadler relaxes in her work space.



Nadler turns over a new leaf.

dropped by label Mexican Summer (which, incidentally, is named after one of Nadler’s songs). “The worst thing that ever happened to me,” she says – again. “I’m not over it. They’re assholes. They signed all these girls who were just like me. All I want is to continue to have a successful career so they can continue to regret it.” Needing to survive, she got a job teaching fine art and music to autistic and bipolar high-schoolers in Boston. “I was too sensitive for it,” she says. She quit after two years. Having spent the morning trying not to break down, the floodgates finally burst now. “My favourite student committed suicide,” she weeps. Zoe, 16, was a profound influence, reminding Nadler of her younger self. “At 16 your brain isn’t fully formed. It was a shock. She seemed fine. It broke my heart that she couldn’t get past it. She would have been a brilliant artist. That’s when I realised I couldn’t live without being a musician. I missed it so much.” Nadler grows loose-lipped about her health history, later requesting that the details be redacted. In short, her mind is now in check. “Obviously, I struggle from depression. It doesn’t take a brain surgeon to figure that out when you look at my discography.” Work became medicine, and her mind always races. She self-funded an album in 2011, then signed to label Sacred Bones. It’s been onwards and upwards since. “Find something you love, make it your job,” she says. “My job is therapy. Whenever I worry that I’m airing my dirty laundry or caught in a vicious cycle, I remember that putting that pain in music helps people.” Therapy can be addictive though, and Nadler is a workaholic. On her 37th birthday, she panicked, concerned she hadn’t created a legacy. “I’m constantly thinking about mortality. I don’t want to squander my gifts. What am I doing on the 4th of July? The same as I’m doing every day. I’m hermetic, I’m a loner, and that’s fine.” An hour ago, Nadler said she didn’t believe in the word “talent”. Is that a statement of self-love or self-loathing? “Talent is a dangerous word. It discredits the amount of work that creates greatness, which I aspire to. I’m not there yet.” Nadler will never stop trying. **Q**

➔ *The Best Of*
MARISSA NADLER
From spooky tales of lonesome sea maidens to even spookier tales of Death Row.

1 ANNABELLE LEE
Ballads Of Living & Dying (2004)
This interpretation of an Edgar Allan Poe poem about a lonesome sea maiden is drenched in husky tones and picked guitar, taking listeners to a spooky underworld.

2 MR JOHN LEE (VELVETEEN ROSE)
The Saga Of Mayflower May (2005)
Nadler may be embarrassed by her vocal, which is affected but it carries another of her murder ballads.

3 MEXICAN SUMMER
Songs III: Bird On The Water (2007)
With its warm, sun-drenched strums and country twangs, it’s no wonder Nadler’s former label named itself after this bright serenade.

4 MARY COMES ALIVE
Little Hells (2009)
Produced by Chris Coady of Beach House fame, the synthetic beat at the song’s start may suggest Nine Inch Nails territory but Nadler’s harmonies soften the edges.

5 BABY, I WILL LEAVE YOU IN THE MORNING
Marissa Nadler (2011)
How Nadler sings the words “baby, I will leave you in the morning” is chilling. From her record after being dropped by her label.

6 LEAVE THE LIGHT ON
Before July: Demos & Unreleased Songs EP (2014)
A sparse demo and yet so captivating it’s clear why Nadler has opened doors for the likes of Sharon Van Etten.

7 DRIVE
July (2014)
With producer Randall Dunn, Nadler turned a corner, putting herself at the forefront of her writing. This song sets the scene of a broken tryst and a longing to turn back the clock.

8 KATIE I KNOW
Strangers (2016)
A more fantastical album followed July to compensate for Nadler’s happy post-marriage stint. This number is surreal and brooding, a psychedelic gothic-folk song about friendships.

9 SAVE ME A PLACE
Covers (Self-released, 2017)
From Fleetwood Mac’s most extravagant LP, Tusk, Nadler turns Lindsey Buckingham’s ditty on needing to run into some open arms into a subtle lament.

10 FOR MY CRIMES
For My Crimes (2018)
“Please don’t remember me,” repeats Nadler three times, before qualifying with “for my crimes”. You’d think she’d rather not be remembered at all.