

Michelle Malone will tell you that her career, spanning more than two decades, is "just what I do." But there is more to this musical live wire—who has been ranked in the Top 20 female guitar players by *Guitar World* magazine—than her pretty, rock-chick style reveals.

The media tries hard to categorize musicians, and Malone has been put into various boxes: Americana, Rock, Roots, Country, Alt-Country, and more. But, she says very matter-of-factly, "My music is Southern, not redneck, and not intellectual either... just Southern."

Known for give-it-her-all electric guitar performances, Malone says she loves playing unplugged just as much. "And frankly," she says (she says everything frankly), "I prefer acoustic slide guitar because it's more fun and accessible."

It's this emphasis on accessibility that allows Malone to really touch the lives of her fans. Malone likes to tell the following story: "About 10 years

ago, maybe more like 12 or 15, I was in Duluth, Minn., when a young guy, maybe 20 years old, comes up to me. He hands me a note saying he'd seen me singing "Wild Horses" with the Indigo Girls and Joan Baez and it changed his life, and he wanted to dedicate his life to music.

"It was touching and surreal that he told this to me," says Malone quietly. "I put that note in my wallet and kept it there. Then, maybe five or six years later, I was at a friend's party. A man came up to me and said, 'I don't know if you remember me or not...' and I said, 'Oh my God, you're Justin,' and I pulled out my wallet and took out the note I'd had in there the whole time, and we both started crying." The "Justin" who Malone is referring to is Justin Vernon, the front man for Bon Iver.

"Goes to show how deeply you can touch someone in life, sometimes without knowing you did, and sometimes finding out just how much you did," says Malone.

When Malone shares the names of musicians who have had an influence on her, Vivaldi, Linda Ronstadt, The Rolling Stones, Donna Summer, Jackson Browne, Billie Holiday, Michael Jackson, and Lady Gaga are all names that come up in the conversation. Many of those influences can be felt on her latest album, *Day 2*. It has a few heart-wrenching songs, such as "Marlboro Man," about her late father. "It's the most honest, compelling song I have ever written," she says.

Malone wrote *Day 2*, she says, as a 46-year-old woman who feels differently than she felt even four years ago, when *Debris* debuted. "Over the winter, I was writing and my heart popped open...and while some of the tracks are a bit more heavy, there are plenty of my usual fun and lighthearted songs in there, too," she says. Always the independent recording artist, Malone is adept at balancing art and commerce, and, as usual, her balancing act succeeds. (michellemalone.com)



## GIRL ON A WIRE

Michelle Malone plays Southern music with soulful enthusiasm.

BY STEPHANIE SCHROEDER