

RECORDS

Maria Muldaur
Reprise MS 2148

BY JON LANDAU

This is *it*: One of the half-dozen best albums of the year, the kind of glorious breakthrough that reminds me why I fell in love with rock & roll—even though there isn't much straight rock here. Maria Muldaur's art is mature, sophisticated, sensual and wise. She moves among the genres of jazz, Dixieland, jug band, country, pop and rock (blues are inexplicably missing) as if they were flowers in a garden, each worthy of her tenderest loving care. She handles humor with an earnest undercurrent, seriousness with a sense of necessary detachment, pain with an openness that elevates rather than diminishes, and musical styles with a precision that is the product of years of patient hard work and study.

The material (drawn from both contemporary and standard works) revolves around either historical themes or assumed personal autobiographies. As a whole the album looks to the past as a source of strength to face the present. Consequently, Maria sidesteps the easy trap of campiness—which is as far from her style as the overt assault on a lyric of an R&B singer—and substitutes an affection and affinity so deep that she creates an immutable link between past and present, the artist and her art.

Her most immediately accessible trait is a crystal clear voice that, in its fluid and daring charges up and down the register, continually suggests more than first meets the ear. No matter how gay she may sound, we sense the presence of turmoil beneath the surface; no matter how melancholy, we sense some residual joy and satisfaction. She has been that way since the first time I heard her in the early Sixties (she began a decade ago with the Even Dozen Jug Band, followed by the years with Jim Kweskin's Jug Band, and then blues and jazz albums with her husband Geoff).

And on *Maria Muldaur* she has the help of producers (Joe Boyd, with whom she has worked before, and Lenny Waronker) and session men (including Ry Cooder, Jim Keltner, Chris Ethridge, Mac Rebennack, his drummer John Bourdreux, Richard Greene, Clarence White, Amos Garrett, *Tonight Show* drummer Ed Shaughnessey, and pop traditionalist arranger Nick DeCaro) sufficiently sympathetic to her emotional and musical range. The personnel continually varies to suit the shifting moods of the album's 11 cuts, and it is another proof of her strength that she dominates such prodigious talent with ease.



Gary Gross

'Maria Muldaur': A glorious breakthrough

The record is organized around clusters of material—some Dixie-arranged tunes, a couple of jazz-and-pop numbers, string-dominated straight pop songs, and then some climactic contemporary original material by two new songwriters, Wendy Waldman and the Cambridge-based Kate McGarrigle. As an example of the first-mentioned style, she delivers Jimmie Rodgers' "Any Old Time" with near supper-club sophistication while surrendering none of the song's humor. She does more than that for Doctor John's "Three Dollar Bill," a hilarious trifle she dignifies with a graceful delivery, where a lesser artist would have reached for a lusty growl. "Don't You Feel My Leg" is New Orleans porno and has a static arrangement, but Maria maintains her inefable ability to balance conflicting emotions, in this case, desire and melancholy.

"Midnight at the Oasis" and Dan Hicks's "Walking One and Only" move the album into a jazz-pop feeling, and we are again aware of what she avoids: Maria doesn't bowl us over with the complexity and skill of her technique, nor proclaim the sophistication of the arrangements, nor compromise the material to make it more generally appealing. As a singer her sense of irony is as pro-

found as Randy Newman's is as a writer, and she holds "Midnight" together by walking a tightrope—singing its crazy lyrics deadpan. She also wraps her voice around a mind-shattering guitar solo from master Amos Garrett. (His work here is only a notch short of his spot on her earlier recording of "Georgia on My Mind." Woodstock legend has it that J. Robbie Robertson put that performance on a tape loop so he could listen to it continuously.) Meanwhile, on "Walking" Maria steps out, pushing the distinguished Messrs. Shaughnessey and bassist Roy Brown into place while Richard Greene reminds us how he got his reputation for fiddle playing. Maria does all the voices, and I don't miss the Pointer Sisters.

Her two performances in a lush pop vein—"Long Hard Climb" and "I Never Did Write You a Love Song"—are well performed but I find the genre less appealing. The latter tune is superior for its cutting edge of a lyric. Maria's desire to display all facets of her talent no doubt accounts for their presence as well as Dolly Parton's country standard, "My Tennessee Mountain Home" (with "Three Dollar Bill," her best single prospect). Jim Keltner's bass drum punches up an idiom notori-

ously resistant to modification and Maria's straight and unsentimental, rather than idyllic, interpretation of the lyrics again reveals her inclination to distill the deepest level of meaning from any song.

With so much fine root material I was surprised that my favorite cuts are all recently composed. Wendy Waldman's "Vaudeville Man" is in the Dixie vein but with a richly melodious chorus. The track sports Bill Keith's superb banjo, Andy Gold's oh-so-pretty finger-picked guitar, a horn arrangement by The Doctor that punctuates the verses with soul riffs, and the chorus with easy-on-the-ears whole notes.

The last song on either side clinches the album—they will reach you if nothing else does. Kate McGarrigle's "The Work Song" is about plantation life, the birth of black music and a lot of other things, and fuses hilarious verses with a powerfully righteous chorus. It would be easy for the artist to play the former for laughs and the latter for tears, but Maria sings it all with tremendous sincerity, lending a nearly tragic quality to the funniest lines and a feeling of gaiety to the most militant. Hence, her reading of the following is remarkably ambiguous,

Back before the blues
were blues,

When the good old songs
were new,
Songs that may no longer
please us,
'Bout the darkies, A-bout
Jesus,
Mississippi minstrels, the
color of molasses,
Strumming on their
banjos to entertain their
massahs,
Some said garbage, some
said art,
You couldn't call it soul,
you had to call it heart
while she enlivens the follow-
ing with her greatest display of
warmth:

Backs broke bending
digging holes to plant
the seeds,
The owners ate the cane
and the workers ate the
weeds,
Put mud in the stove
and water in the cup,
You work so hard you
died standing up.

At the conclusion of this utterly magnificent performance I don't know whether to laugh or cry. She has grasped some irreducible, cosmic feeling for America reminiscent of the force of Bob Dylan's "It's Alright, Ma," Randy Newman's "God's Song," and Robbie Robertson's "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" and "King Harvest."

If "The Work Song" stands as her most grandiose effort, the final cut, Wendy Waldman's "Mad Mad Me," stands as her simplest and most frightening. This eloquent statement about the existence of redemptive pain, suffering and love is the perfect conclusion to a melancholy, controlled and complex album. Ms. Muldaur's vocal iciness is integral to its effectiveness; if she merely sang it with abandon the shock would be too much to withstand.

She is aided by Greg Prestopino's deliberately simple, shattering piano (an exceptional singer, he will be heard from again in his own right) and a small-scaled string arrangement. But the album's greatest moment belongs to her alone. She avoids self-pity in the face of inevitable and irreversible tragedy and converts sorrow into strength, compressing into two minutes and 45 seconds a level of intensity that stretches capacity for understanding. Intensity and pride—for beneath the sadness I glimpse a sense of satisfaction in her own triumphs, both personal and musical: After a decade of work, she has this masterpiece to show for it and she somehow seems to know it. Long after *Maria Muldaur* ends, I can still hear her final, tense, perfect wedding of voice and lyrics, "Oh, baby, how I love you, mad as I think you are/Guess you think I'm crazy too, but mad mad me, I love you." Listen to it—it may haunt you too.