

t h e
EMERGING
a r t i s t

the INDEPENDENCE of

On her new album

*I painted a picture in my
mind of how*

*I hear these great songs, a
picture so vivid and sharp
in color and detail.*

*Voice as instrument,
it must be a harp,
song as tree,
it must be an oak,
band as players,
gardeners of sound
and texture.*

*I was so pleased to get
a copy of Thoroughfare.
It plays in my car every
time I head home from
London in the night.*

—Chris Difford of Squeeze

REBECCA MARTIN

You know her as the sultry and unguarded voice of the band Once Blue, whose eponymous debut was released on the then-active EMI Records in 1995. Her name is Rebecca Martin, and after the demise of EMI, many of us wondered what happened to her and her group. Well, in 1997, Once Blue disbanded and Martin has since embarked on a journey of self-discovery that has given her new insight in herself and has helped to reaffirm her commitment to music.

But what was Rebecca Martin up to those years before the formation of Once Blue? Learning about that will give you a better understanding of her post-Once Blue life.

Born and raised in Maine, Rebecca Martin was always into music. She took vocal lessons early on—her teacher would hold classes in a local recording studio. In addition to pursuing her singing, she soon began to learn all about the recording process, ultimately becoming an assistant engineer during her high school days. Martin's favorite style was musicals and after a trip to Manhattan to see a show on Broadway with her parents, she began to nurture the dream that someday it would be her onstage. Not long after, she started to perform in *Annie* and other musicals in local productions.

In accordance with her grand plan, she began working her way closer to New York City by attending college in Upstate New York. There she became involved with the college's radio station and eventually became its Program Director; she fell in love with it. Martin was starting to drift away from her goal. Through a friend, she heard that MTV was looking to hire in the production department and she sent them a résumé. In it, she included a cassette of some songs she had recorded earlier in her life. The manager who was doing the hiring at MTV asked if she wanted to sing backing vocals for a punk rock band she was involved with, which Martin agreed to, and she was, once again, back on track. Even though this genre of music wasn't natural for her, it did give her the opportunity to get acquainted with the music scene in New York City. This was Martin's entree into Manhattan. She then went to work for MTV in a variety of off-camera positions and stayed there for three years.

As Martin says, "I loved the job and became afraid that if I didn't begin to pursue my musical career soon, I may never get back to it." So in a bold move, she quit and began collaborating with another singer/songwriter she was introduced to named Jesse Harris. The two hit it off right away, and the seeds for what would eventually become Once Blue were sown.

As a duo, the two began to gather a local following, which eventually led to a full-fledged band and a contract with EMI Records. *Once Blue* was released in late

1995, and received substantial airplay support from Adult Rock Radio. Once Blue was also warmly embraced by the press. *Music Direct* wrote of Martin: "Way, way beyond an interesting voice that could clearly deliver hit records, Rebecca Martin exhibits the distinctive vocal style on which you build careers...big careers." But after five years, the magic began to wane and eventually Martin, Harris and the other bandmembers went their separate ways.

Off the road and without work, Martin began to frequent open-mike and singer/songwriter nights at clubs around Manhattan and soon discovered there were many artists in a similar impasse in their careers. The record industry was beginning to consolidate and there were fewer and fewer places for these artists to go for support. And on the touring side, it was difficult to get regular gigs. They began to band together to enhance their mutual goals, and to give each other encouragement on many levels. "The idea was a residency program, where we would frequent an area where there was a club with a good reputation as a listening room," says Martin.

The consortium called themselves The Independence Project and is still active today. It includes Martin, Larry John McNally, Jane Kelly Williams, Timothy Hill, Dorothy Scott, Frank Tedesso and others. Under the auspices of Monterey Peninsula Artists, they go out on short tours in groups of three to build a reliable base of fans as well as nurture markets they can return to again and again. The hope is to build The Independence Project into an actual staffed organization, which not only forwards the careers of these founding artists, but also becomes an avenue for others to use as a career-development tool.

Much like Martin, many of these artists have experienced the major-label shuffle and feel more in control approaching things on an independent level. Many have recorded new albums to help in their cause, and Martin is not an exception. *Thoroughfare* was recorded in 1998 (although it's really only seeing the light of day on a national level now) and is a wonderful way to become more familiar with her own musical vision.

Martin's sound is literally impossible to categorize: it's a little jazzy and it's a little folksy...and very, very intimate. Through her voice, she makes every song a tapestry of word and sound that captures the subtlest of emotions and reveals observations of life that many of us miss in our daily trek. Whether she's celebrating the joy (and ache) of love in "Goodbye My Love" and "Your Arms Around Me Now," the remembrance of better times in "Thoroughfare" and "Empty Hands," the sorrow in the loss of a dream in "Arthur" and "Joey" or the profound experience of an important realization in "The Red Wall," Rebecca Martin is indeed an artist that stands alone, both as a singer and as a compassionate human being. ►

By John Schoenberger

Tell us how Once Blue came together.

After I had left MTV and was seriously pursuing a career in music, I was introduced to Jesse Harris by a friend. Up until that point I had never tried to write songs on a collaborative level, but he and I just seemed to see things the same way.

"In fact, our professional relationship was very rewarding and, I think, productive for the years we were together. What first started as a duo performing at a variety of clubs in Manhattan eventually led to a full band, demo tapes and, ultimately, a deal with EMI Records. That entire period of time was a wonderful learning experience for me. We toured extensively for just about two years in support of *Once Blue* and I loved being on stage and connecting with people.

"Near the end the synergy seemed to begin to go away, though, and everything started to break apart. When EMI folded in the US, it simply coincided with the mutual feelings among all of us in the band that it was time for us to go our separate ways."



Did you go into a period of mourning, so speak, or were you ready to jump in and take things further in terms of your career?

"I make no mistake about it, it was very scary; however, a career in music was and is something I'm completely committed to, so I didn't hesitate really.

Thoroughfare is actually almost two years in terms of when it was recorded, and many of the songs were originally demos for *Once Blue* that didn't make it on the album, or were songs that Jesse and I had written during that period. But I also feel the material in *Thoroughfare*, and the way it was arranged and recorded, represents some important growth on my part as a songwriter and as a performer.

Many people have told me that my love for Broadway musicals—especially *Annie*—could be felt on the *Once Blue* album and, although that kind of music still influences me, I feel I'm finding my own voice as time goes by."

Tell us how the recording of *Thoroughfare* came together.

"I had been working with a variety of artists, but I felt I needed a recording to help support the live dates I was doing. Joe Ferla (who had engineered *Once Blue*) co-produced the sessions and some great players were also involved, including Steve Cardenas on guitar, my husband, Larry Grenadier, on bass and Kenny Wollesen on drums. These guys are all jazz players, really, and live for improvisation. My music allows some of that to come into the mix. I am very happy with *Thoroughfare* and I feel the songs will stand up over time."

I don't mean to pry into your personal life, but many of the songs on *Once Blue* and *Thoroughfare* deal with loneliness. I don't get the aspect of regret from them; rather it seems the characters seem to have some type of closure about the emotion. I suspect you must have had some very lonely times in your life to be able to capture it so eloquently.

"Yes, I know loneliness...but I think we all do. You can either take those periods of time and sit around and do nothing, or you can use that experience and turn it into something constructive, something you can grow from. I have done both."

"There's something mystical and unexplainable about music. I guess that's why I love it so much."

Yes. I suppose the hard lessons are the ones we learn the most from.

"That's certainly been the case for me. I find the *sound* of a song can convey a feeling or emotion just as strongly as lyrics can. I also feel that you shouldn't talk too much about your music. The power and magic of music is that it often works on levels beyond words. If you've had the feeling and the experience a song is referencing, then you can somehow take that into yourself as a listener."

You mean, allow the listener to step into the song?

"Yes, that's a great way to put it. There's something mystical and unexplainable about music. I guess that's why I love it so much—whether I'm listening to music by another artist, in a studio helping to create it or whether I'm performing it.

"It's all about giving of yourself. Something that I feel doesn't happen in this world enough. I love to cook and have a group of friends over for a meal. When they start asking me what ingredients I put in something to make it taste so good, I simply say, 'It doesn't matter. Just enjoy the food, the experience of being with friends. Have another glass of wine and just savor this moment for what it is.' That is how I feel about music, too. Some things can't be put

into words...or simply shouldn't be."

Tell us little about The Independence Project.

"Once the band was over I had some time on my hands, and since I was off the road, I started frequenting clubs that feature singer/songwriters. I soon discovered there were several great artists out there who felt as frustrated as I did. We found that we could not only support each other as friends and colleagues, but we could go out on the road together as a 'package' of two or three. This collective was originally conceived by Larry John McNally and myself, but our group of like-minded musicians has grown since that time.

"I had realized when we were touring as Once Blue that we often played in front of large audiences as an opening act. The idea was to expose our music to a lot of potential fans, but it cost us quite a bit of money, with what I see now as very little lasting return. I now believe that you have to start small and develop a fan base market by market. We've all participated in residency-type tours where we regularly return to the same club in a market and gradually win over supporters. The money we spent when we toured as Once Blue could keep us *all* out on the road for a year or more! It's really viewed as a five-year plan in terms of developing our careers, and we are very dedicated to this long-term view. We are also involved with a company, Road Work Music, that not only helps us book dates, but also promotes us to radio and covers the press aspects, as well.

"In my own case, getting involved with Louise Coogan and Peggy O'Brien at Sound Advisors has been a great experience, and their efforts are a good complement to what The Independence Project does. They have helped to open a lot of doors for me."

So you feel that now is a good time for artists to do it on their own?

"Don't get me wrong, I am very grateful for the strides I made while in Once Blue, and many of the fans of that band are now beginning to find my Web site and discover that I have a new album out. However, I do feel the climate for artists being able to survive and prosper on an independent level is much healthier today than it was few years ago.

"Things are looking up for many of us: Larry John McNally has a song on the new Don Henley album ['For My Wedding'] and I produced an album for Dorothy Scott. Dorothy has also recently signed with a manager and touring for her is picking up. In September, I will be doing a three-week West Coast tour from Seattle to L.A. I am very excited about it. I just love to be onstage playing music for people."

• For more information, be sure to log onto www.rebeccamartin.com and www.theindependenceproject.com.

• You can reach Louise Coogan and Peggy O'Brien at Sound Advisors, Inc. at 212.978.6979.

• You can contact Road Work Music at roadworkmusic@yahoo.com