

John McAndrew

Walkin' Back

It was a lesson long in learning, but singer-songwriter John McAndrew eventually figured out to let the music lead him.

In the depths of his substance abuse and mental health issues, before he found a new way, it was there. Through the ruined shows and blackout drives and performances that were not an accurate reflection of his immeasurable talent, it remained by his side. And when he emerged from the fog, determined to find a new path, it was with him still.

As he prepares for the release of his upcoming ***Walkin' Back*** album, McAndrew acknowledges every good thing about his music career followed in the wake of his decision to try a new way of life.

“Several years into my new journey I played for an event in Minneapolis, where there were several thousand people. The following Sunday, I met a man named Earnie Larsen, who heard me sing that day, and they were both life-changing events — singing there, and meeting Earnie. He started to mentor me and take me places where he spoke as he was an Internationally known motivational speaker, and he would have me sing to this new audience. Both of those things really changed the trajectory of my career and really changed what I sang about.”

“Soon after, I got my first record and publishing deal with Muscle Shoals Studios in Alabama, and I started coming to Nashville more. I was eventually invited to come and sing at Cumberland Heights, eventually became a regular, and because of my work with others in the field, I was asked to come on board full time four years ago to help run the music therapy program.

“It was just a natural fit,” he adds. “I believe we’re given uniforms by a Higher Power to do what we’re supposed to do, and this is what I’m supposed to do.”

Walkin' Back illustrates the clear-minded hopefulness that is at the very center of McAndrew’s music.

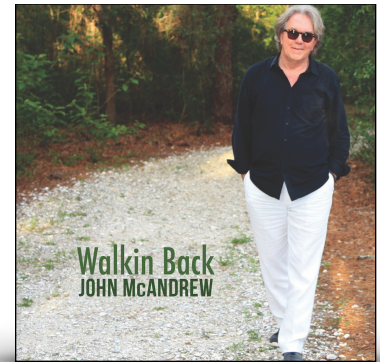
He deals with tough topics, all built on his belief that “Every day is a precious gift / Only once will they ever come our way / So I’m holding on as tight as I can / before they all slip away.”

On the title track, he begins with “When the wind dies down / And the smoke begins to clear / I can see the damage done / Facing my worst fears” before saying that even when in deep desperation by putting “One foot in front of the other / We can overcome it all.”

His “Right Here With Me” is a moving tribute to his brother Paul, and “Back When We Rocked and We Rolled” is an honest look at his early days “Every crazy fool in every little town / I was drawn to like a circus and its clown.”

“McAndrew is a storyteller whose songs are built on his own life experiences,” says Walt Quinn, Cumberland Heights Director of Industry and Community Relations. “John has a way of capturing grace in the worst of people’s circumstances. The songs are provocative and given a perfect backdrop in a blues-hued and fully orchestrated production. John nails it.”

McAndrew taught himself to play the piano in the basement of his family’s Minnesota home, and by the time he was 20, he was adept enough at it — along with saxophone, harmonica, guitar and flute — that he earned a spot in a neighborhood band. When the singer’s voice gave out, he asked McAndrew to take over on vocals, and his time in the spotlight lit a fire within him, he said.



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“I remember that I got up and sang one of his songs, and I looked up, and my older brother, Emil, was standing there with tears in his eyes,” he said, “I remember thinking that singing and music has a power to it.”

Shortly thereafter, a snowblower mishap severely injured his right hand nearly losing three fingers, and the only instrument he could play was the piano, which became his primary vehicle from that point forward.

Music was in his genes; his father, after World War II, took his clarinet skills (in the Pacific theater, the elder McAndrew played alongside Hugh “Mr. Green Jeans” Brannum and the future music director for TV host Ed Sullivan) and joined jazzman Stan Kenton’s Big Band, playing up and down the West Coast. McAndrew developed an ear for the jazz that was on the family turntable, and he remembers musician friends of his father always coming over to jam.

As a pianist, singer and budding songwriter, he enjoyed membership in regional country-rock bands, working odd jobs during the day and performing at night.

Around the same time, he was hospitalized and diagnosed with Type I Diabetes, “I remember at that point thinking, ‘Screw it; I’m gonna die anyways, so I’m gonna go out in a blaze of glory,’” he said. “So I consumed anything and everything I could no matter how harmful it was, don’t know how I lived through it.”

Finally, his wife made a simple observation:

“You’re dying,” she said.

“You’ve got to get some help.” McAndrew made an appointment for the following Monday with a facility in St. Paul, Minn., and that’s where his journey began, he said.

As a musician, McAndrew has transitioned from playing late-night shows in bars to patrons asking for “Piano Man” for the sixth time that evening to playing solo piano in private clubs and listening rooms, to enthusiasts who appreciate the nuance of his abilities and his between-song storytelling. He’s also come back around to a new appreciation for the old standards his father once played.



McAndrew’s music can now be heard in several feature films, television, and National Events.

He was asked to pay musical tribute to guitar god Eric Clapton for the latter’s work with the Crossroads Centre, a substance abuse treatment facility he founded in the Caribbean.

“Thanks for a wonderful evening of music and inspiration John,” said Clapton. “You have an enviable talent for connecting soulfully and meaningfully with your audience.”

— Eric Clapton

“It’s an incredible journey,” he said. “In the rearview mirror, I start to see this loving force working in my life, even when I didn’t know it. That’s exciting for me, using music as a tool to touch those parts of all of us that are waiting to be healed”

(With thanks to Steve Wildsmith)

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