

MELISSA ETHERIDGE

## The Awakening

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Album Info:

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All there is  
Is atoms and space  
Everything else is illusion

There's back to the beginning, and then there's back to the beginning. It doesn't get much more elemental than "All There Is," the brief, swirling invocation of the essence of the universe with which Melissa Etheridge opens *The Awakening*, the ninth studio album of her singular career.

The story she tells through this involving, colorful song-cycle, though, is completely her own, a tale that runs from her first uncertain steps through her well-chronicled rise to rock star, human rights activist, parent, cancer survivor and 2007 Academy Award winner for "I Need to Wake Up," featured in the Al Gore environmental documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. It's a journey full of joys and tears, portrayed in songs that are at turns powerful and playful, at once confessional and engaging, personal and universal. In other words, Melissa Etheridge at her creative peak - and the most open she's ever been.

And it's Etheridge as we've never heard her before. "Message to Myself" rides an indelible pop hook that's sure to be the most buoyant sing-along she's ever led. The sly "Threesome" is a country-rocker that, well, it's unlikely you'll ever hear Carrie Underwood covering. "California," "An Unexpected Rain," "I've Loved You Before" and "The Universe Listened," among others, are poetically detailed chapters of her remarkable life and the epiphanies along the way. Co-produced by Etheridge and David Cole (whose extensive credits include Etheridge's two previous albums, 2004's *Lucky* and 2001's *Skin*) with sparkling play from her band (guitarist Philip Sayce, bassist Mark Browne and drummer Mauricio "Fritz" Lewak), the album embraces the music and emotions of an artist reaching a new peak.

As such it's nothing short of a gift to her legion of loyal fans, but even more a gift to herself.

"I hope people listen to it from beginning to end at least one time," she says. "That was my goal with this -- to make an album you could do that with. I remember listening John Lennon's *Imagine*, and it was like going to church for me. And I wanted to make one of those albums that artists make - *What's Going On* by Marvin Gaye, *Innervisions* by Stevie Wonder."

For Etheridge, though, the gift has already paid more dividends than she could have imagined.

"This is my ninth album and I wanted to get back to why I love music," she says. "It's already a success for me. I got to create it. That was the fun and joy."

What freed her to be so open?

"Cancer," she says, unhesitatingly. "The huge, big fireball that shoots you through fear. I ended up on the other side of that, and I thought, 'I did it! I went through chemotherapy! Look what I did.' And I didn't go through chemotherapy to not do what I love. So y'all can come with me or not. I'm having a blast."

Etheridge acknowledges that her 2004 breast cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment, understandably, brought some perspective to her life and achievements.

"I had made Lucky, I was on tour and it was kind of, 'Is that it?' " she says. "And I thought, 'That's okay.' Musically and professionally I was okay with it. I'd been to the mountaintop. I'd sung with Bruce Springsteen! But some of the songs I'd been singing didn't really mean as much to me as they once did."

She found fresh inspiration, though, from some unlikely and diverse sources, including a voice from the past: Her own.

While undergoing treatment, Etheridge revisited her past records start to finish, in order, over a period of weeks.

"I would listen, stop and talk about it -- 'Gosh, I remember when I wrote that, when we recorded that, I remember why I wrote that.' "

From the later perspective, even such mainstays as "Come To My Window," the 1993 song from her multi-platinum album Yes I Am that rocketed her from star to superstar, were full of new revelations, as if the Etheridge of then was speaking to the Etheridge of now.

"So when I started writing this album, I thought, 'If I'm going to be speaking to my future self, some day driving in a car and hearing myself singing on the radio, what would I be telling myself? What message was I saying to myself?' So I wrote down the line, 'I'm sending out a message to myself / So that when I hear it on the radio / I'll know that I am fine / I'll know that I am loved.' And it was that simple!"

It was her own little artistic experiment in time travel, but other inspiration came from a growing interest in real matters of time and space. One day she strolled into a bookstore and in the philosophy section was drawn to Ken Wilber's "A Brief History of Everything," which explores the intersection of quantum physics and spirituality. That set her on a path of more reading, more thinking and a lot of writing, some of the

results providing key elements for *The Awakening*, notably "The Universe Listened" and the closing "What Happens Tomorrow?"

"I told the universe I wanted fame and fortune and was given that," she says. "Then I wanted love and got that. *The Awakening* as an album is the spiritual side coming open."

The perspectives she gained also shed light on earlier episodes of her life, as explored in the portrait of a young woman on a different quest in "California" and the pained "An Unexpected Rain," as well as a first awakening to the superficial Hollywood mentality in the portrait "Map of the Stars."

The themes also are threaded through the album in the four short pieces ("All There Is," "God Is In the People," "All We Can Really Do," "A Simple Love"), somewhere between haikus and mantras, serving as prologues and interludes among the full songs.

"I spent about a year just reading and reading, writing and writing, pages and pages of things," she says. "Some of the things were not whole songs, just something of that moment."

The in-the-moment tone was preserved in the sessions. Recorded largely live in a burst of creativity at a studio set up in a Malibu locale overlooking the Pacific, *The Awakening* shows off the bond that's evolved between Etheridge and her band of recent years. Rami Jaffe (*The Wallflowers*) added organ to a few songs, while Bernie Barlow and Lily Wilson contributed background vocals.

"I've always loved my bands, but there was a very special energy between Fritz, Mark, Philip and myself," she says. "We really locked on stage, and personally all the stuff I've talked about, they've been very interested in. We had great talks on the bus."

She extended that family feel to the making of the album, not just working in the stunning, glass-enclosed ocean-view studio, but the whole band living there.

"I'd get up in the morning, go to the beach, go up to the studio and they'd all be waking up and we'd be living this album."

And *The Awakening* is - literally and figuratively -- the album of her life. Atoms, space and everything else. The universe listened to Melissa Etheridge.