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Death & Texas

Kimberly M'Carver returns from a seven-year absence with *Cross the Danger Line*

By John Nova Lomax

Casual national observers of the music scene tend to put genres into little geographic boxes. Blues has to hail from either Chicago or Mississippi to be real. True zydeco is only from Louisiana; the stuff out of Texas is perceived as a watered-down imitation. On this principle, it is likewise believed that Texas music (a term whose definition has been winnowed down to Lone Star State folk-country) must be from Austin to be the real McCoy.

Conversely, artists like Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle, Guy Clark, Lyle Lovett and Lucinda Williams are so much the real deal that the general public cannot handle the fact that they cut their teeth not in the Live Music Capital of Central Texas but right here in funky H-town. They are too good to *not* be from Austin, the story goes, so they must be from Austin. Houston? That's where *Urban Cowboy* music comes from.

The *Houston Press* recently caught up with Kimberly M'Carver, who embodies this principle, at the Ginger Man in Rice Village. It was early afternoon, and as the venerable (by Houston standards) pub filled up, M'Carver told her story.

"I can't tell you how many times on the road I've been introduced as an Austin songwriter," she says. "And I've gone, 'Well, I'm not from Austin. I'm from Houston,' and people have gotten pissed at me. They say, 'What's wrong with



Troy Fields

Don't box her in: M'Carver's music is Texan, just not from Austin.

Kimberly M'Carver releases *Cross the Danger Line* on Saturday, September 22, at Anderson Fair, 2007 Grant. For more information, call 713-528-8576.

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Austin?" or "If she's not from Austin, then what are we doing here?" "

It's part of the dilemma that M'Carver finds herself in. Houston is a city that has yet to impress its musical identity on America, despite the fact that as much great music has come out of here as anywhere. Unlike Austin, though, Houston's city leaders have never seen fit to trumpet the Bayou City as a music town. Unlike Austin, our leading information source has virtually ceased covering Houston music, going so far as to declare baldly that it reviews only local CDs that have major-label distribution deals. Thus reads the recipe for apathy among local music lovers.

Like other local musicians, M'Carver has a case of the hometown blues. "Houston considers me as always playing here," she says. "They think if they miss me this week, they can hear me two weeks from now."

To get the respect she deserves, M'Carver has to hit the road, a prospect she regards with mixed feelings. "It's just hard. You never really stop. You've got to do radio interviews first thing in the morning. You have to find where you're staying, then you've gotta do soundcheck. You're always getting ready to play, and then you play, and it goes good and you're excited. But you don't have time to really see the towns you play, and you want to. A lot of the places where I've been I've wanted to linger in, but you can't. It costs too much money."

There are other factors that keep M'Carver at home; one is of the hair-shedding, tail-wagging, bring-you-the-paper variety. "Then there are our dogs, too," M'Carver smiles. No fewer than seven pooches are thanked in the booklet to her long-awaited *Cross the Danger Line* CD. "They're our kids," she adds. She sits with her back to a faux mahogany wall, her auburn hair blending in perfectly with the red-brown wood. When she smiles, she's all white teeth and striking green eyes, both of which appear more so against this auburn background.

The smile remains in place when she talks about *Danger Line*, her first album in seven years and the first she has released on her own. There's a peaceful, easy '70s vibe to *Danger Line*'s proceedings, a sitting-on-the-beach-house-porch-in-a-breezy-sunset ambience. M'Carver's voice covers the same full-throated range that Emmylou Harris's does, but has a sweeter, more -- dare we say it -- "dulcet" tone, and here she applies it lovingly to seven originals and three covers, including Greg Trooper's "Ireland" and Van Zandt's underappreciated late-period gem "Niles River Blues," which features some of late local mandolin ace Dave Peters's final fretwork. Jim Lauderdale and Claire Lynch drop in to sing harmonies, while longtime Hal Ketchum sideman Scott Neubert co-produces and pitches in on guitars, steel and Dobro.

M'Carver, released from the third and final album called for in her Rounder Records contract, shows clearly with *Danger Line* that she no longer needs label help in putting out first-rate stuff. She also shows just how far she has come in the 12 years since her debut.

Not that she hasn't been singing for much longer than that. "I was a voice major at

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UT, and I was really frustrated," she remembers. "It was all opera and classical. I remember telling my friends, 'Hey, Willie's gonna be at Armadillo World Headquarters,' and they'd be like, 'Why do you listen to that?' And so I decided I really didn't belong there."

After abandoning vocal studies, if not the development of her voice, the Dallas-born M'Carver moved to Houston and "became a 'chick singer,'" she says. "Literally. They would call me and say, 'I need a chick singer.'" She found herself on the private-party and bar mitzvah circuit, which was a little closer to her musical home but by no means all the way there. "All these kids were requesting 'Like a Virgin,'" she recalls. "And I looked at the bass player and said, 'I can't do it.' And he looked at me and said, 'Me neither.'"

She wanted to play the music that moved her, but circa 1988 M'Carver was probably thinking, "It'll be a cold day in Houston before I get a record deal." But after sending in a Michelle Shocked-like demo (complete with chirping crickets) to Rounder, M'Carver was astonished to learn that label exec Ken Irwin was interested not just in her songs but also in her singing them. A hastily arranged outdoor showcase at Last Concert Cafe -- on a night so cold her guitar kept slipping out of tune -- won her a deal on the modern-day folkie's dream label, Rounder's Philo imprint. Seemingly overnight, M'Carver had leaped from the weddings-and-balls circuit to the home of Guy Clark, Nanci Griffith, Tom Russell and Iris Dement.

M'Carver was, as the Brits say, gobsmacked at the prospect. "Ken said, 'Let's make a record.' I said, 'Which song?' I was so naive; I thought he wanted to make a 45. 'No,' he said. 'I mean an album.' And then he said, 'You know what musicians you'd like to put on it?' I had no bass player then. I had me and my ex-husband playing guitar and a girl singing harmony. And so I was like what about my buddy so-and-so, and so on. And he was like, 'No, *who*? Look farther out. How about Jerry Douglas on Dobro? I was just in shock."

And looking back, it's as much a shock to realize that M'Carver has been on the shelf, at least as far as recordings, for seven years. She stresses that the wait for *Danger Line*'s successor will be immensely shorter. "As soon as it hit the shelves, I was like, okay, let's get the next one going."

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