

Pop Talk: One 'Lucky' fella â€“ Raul Malo

by *George_Varga*

Who knew that three little words could mean so much, especially when those words read like a phrase from an old TV episode of "The Flintstones" cartoon show?

Choosing from a collection of music genres, musician Raul Malo recently released his new album, "Lucky One." Photo courtesy of Kristin Barlowe. But it's the special way that Raul Malo inflects those words â€“ dooby, dooby, doo â€“ that makes them sound so special when he sings them near the end of "You Always Win," a standout number from his new album, "Lucky One."

"That was a live little moment that just happened and it was a nod to Frank Sinatra, The Mills Brothers, Dean Martin and that kind of pop music," said Malo.

Accordingly, his new album includes a few songs that sound as if they could have been written specifically for Sinatra, Martin or Elvis Presley. But Malo's soaring voice and impeccably tasteful delivery are unmistakably his own in any musical setting, be it rock or pop, a vintage torch ballad or a strutting rockabilly rave-up, earthy country or svelte, big-band swing.

The ability to sound in the moment, while sustaining a deep reverence for earlier musical artists and eras, is something few of Malo's contemporaries have attempted, let alone accomplished.

But sounding timely and timeless has become almost second nature for this Miami-born son of Cuban immigrant parents. Ditto the ease with which he has collaborated with such disparate musical partners as Buck Owens, members of Ozomatli and Los Lobos, Brazilian music legend Caetano Veloso, surf-rockers Los Straitjackets and singer-songwriter Shelby Lynne.

"I've done so many different things musically that I think I've sort of earned the right to do what I want," he

said.

"There's a certain way I like to do things and I'll always gravitate toward strong melodies, because that's what I grew up listening to and that's what makes pop music great."

Malo, 43, rose to prominence in the early 1990s as a member of The Mavericks. After relocating to Nashville, Tenn., the Florida-bred band helped inject the country scene with a welcome dose of vitality and a then-rarely heard passion for the music's pre-"Urban Cowboy" roots. Malo made his first solo album, "Today," in 2001, the same year The Mavericks disbanded. Apart from a brief reunion in 2003, he has worked as a solo artist ever since.

Yet, while Malo has never lost his love for country — as demonstrated by some of the selections on "Lucky One" and by his 2007 album, "After Hours," which features classics by Owens, Hank Williams and other icons — he has always drawn from an unusually broad array of styles.

"When I heard (Sinatra's) 'Strangers in the Night' for the first time, that just blew my mind," recalled Malo, who can point to the same classic as the source of the dooby, dooby, doo he sings on his new album. "I was really young, maybe 7 or 8, and I remember it had a profound impact on me ...

"I want my music to be entertaining (and) to take people somewhere. And if I can do that, and the music does that, then I'm happy. It's not about teaching anybody a lesson or being a 'ghost of the past.' My music is going to do that anyhow, because I can't help that."

Like most kids growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Malo was bred on what is now called classic-rock. By watching the popular TV show "Hee Haw," he also became an early fan of "the Bakersfield sound" country pioneer Owens, whom he would befriend and make music with a few decades later.

But his biggest musical epiphany is one that sets him even farther apart from most other second-graders, then and now.

"The one I remember like it was yesterday was the moment I heard Louis Armstrong sing 'La Vie en Rose,'" Malo said, citing the 1946 signature song of French vocal icon Edith Piaf (which is also the title of the Oscar-nominated 2007 feature film based on Piaf's life).

"When I heard Armstrong's version of that song and when I hear it now it brings such joy to me. It's one of those pieces of music that reminds me of something so wonderful and pleasant and euphoric, yet I can't pinpoint what it is. If a musician doesn't get the nuance and the majesty of Armstrong's 'La Vie en Rose,' they're not going to be in my band. That song, to me, is the standard. When I hear it or Frank (Sinatra), if I come even close to bringing that kind of feeling to the listener, I've done my job."

He chuckled when asked if any of his elementary school pals in Miami shared his devotion to "La Vie en Rose" or Armstrong, the pioneering New Orleans jazz trumpeter and singer who became an international pop superstar.

"I felt alone when it came to that kind of stuff, but I always felt that I was right!" Malo replied. "I went along with all the modern stuff, and sometimes I nodded to my friends, and said 'Yeah, that's pretty good.' Then, I'd go home and put on Louis or Frank or Elvis, and I'd go 'You know what, this is the real stuff. This is what I really love. You can probably make a case for Louis Armstrong being the greatest musician of all time.'"

Produced by Los Lobos saxophonist and keyboardist Steve Berlin, Malo's "Lucky One" is his first album of new songs in eight years. In the interim, he recorded a Christmas holiday collection and several albums devoted to classic and near-classic songs by other artists. Those artists range from Bob Dylan, Henry Mancini and Dwight Yoakam to Randy Newman, Ron Sexsmith and Roy Orbison, whose haunting, reach-for-the-heavens vocal style has rarely been equalled by anyone other than Malo.

"I don't know if music means more to me now than when I was younger, but I know one thing: I appreciate it more now," Malo said.

"When The Mavericks were happening and all that was going on, looking back on it, I didn't enjoy it as much as I should have. I don't know if that was just youth or stupidity, or both. The fact that I'm able to go out and make music, and that people come out and hear me sing, really is a wonderful experience for me to enjoy. And I do. It's a lot of work. But, heck, in this day and age, I'm happy for the work."

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