

The Soul of the Music

Martina McBride's talent proves to be *Everlasting*, no matter what she chooses to sing.

STORY BY
NANCY DUNHAM

PHOTOS BY
AMIEE STUBBS



This is going to be the first time, in a long time, I won't be on the road on my birthday," says Martina McBride, sitting backstage at the nTelos Wireless Pavilion in Charlottesville, Va., of her 48th birthday on July 29. "We'll be home. I'm kind of bummed."

It's several hours before Martina and her band—including backup singers and a horn section—take the stage as part of her Everlasting Tour.

As Martina talks, two women bustle about the somewhat dimly lit, crowded backstage quarters, preparing an array of silver serving dishes filled with everything from rice to fish to chocolate chip cookies and frosting (unofficially, everyone's favorite offering). The band and crew mill about, talking and joking as they eye the buffet.

Although everyone is casually dressed—well-worn T-shirts, sweats, jeans and sneakers—Martina is still elegant in a flowing top and slim-cut slacks.

As she stands to make her way into a dressing room for us to discuss the tour, her 9-year-old daughter, Ava, appears, chewing gum and eating an ice cream concoction, to remind her mother of family and friends awaiting their return to Nashville and her birthday celebration.

"Yeah, but they could be out here with me maybe," says Martina with a smile, her blue

eyes sparkling as she turns from the business at hand to her youngest daughter. "We could maybe all do a big thing out here."

Her eyes continue to glimmer as she mentions her two eldest daughters, Delaney, 19, and Emma, 16. "They were out here with us last weekend. Ava's always with us," she says. "If Delaney and Emma could be with us all the time, there'd be no reason to go home, really."

Calculated Risks

Martina took a big gamble with her latest release, *Everlasting*, and the supporting tour. Not only are the album's 12 songs—including Phil Spector's "To Know Him Is to Love Him," Van Morrison's "Wild Night" and The Supremes' Motown classic

"Come See About Me"—of a different genre than her hits, but she also released it independently on her new label, Vinyl Recordings.

The gamble paid off, as Martina became the first female solo artist with an independently released and distributed album to hit No. 1 in the 50-year history of the *Billboard* Top Country Albums chart. On the all-genre *Bill-*

board 200, the album debuted at No. 7, making this Martina's sixth Top 10 on that chart and her highest debut since 2007.

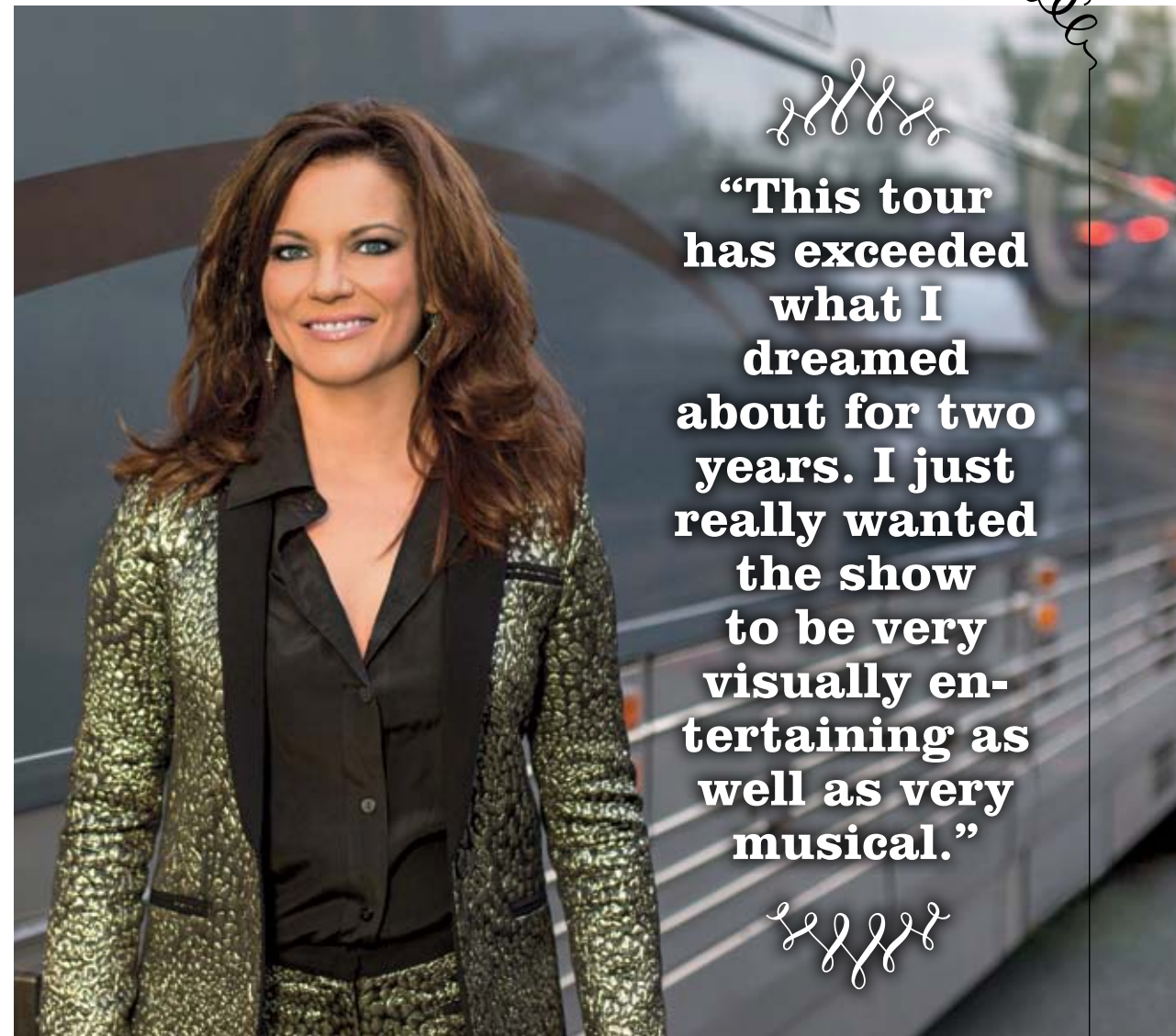
"She is a smart businesswoman," says long-time tour manager Mark Hively. "Somehow, somehow, Martina always has the knack" for delivering what fans want.

That's not always easy, especially as country





(Clockwise from above left) Martina goes over moves with backup singers; rehearses songs; the horn section warms up; and background singers (from left in mirror) Wendy Moten, Shandra Pennix and Shelly Fairchild get stage-ready.



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MARTINA McBRIDE CONT. radio continues to embrace the “bro-country” trend. In a way that’s made fans like those in the near-capacity Charlottesville crowd more eager to hear the radio-neglected artists perform. And it’s allowed those artists to take more chances in their music. Martina seems energized by that freedom.

Staying Martina

As Ava skips away from her mother to play hangman with a production assistant, Martina settles into an easy chair in the vacant dressing room to discuss her album and tour. As the sounds of a radio playing Fleetwood Mac’s hit “Go Your Own

Way” filter in from a nearby room, Martina talks about how *Everlasting* producer Don Was helped her secure the artistry she desired.

“He said, ‘This still needs to be a Martina record. You need to sound like Martina. You don’t need to sound like anybody else,’” she recalls. “And once he said that I thought to myself, ‘That makes sense.’ Then it all became natural. I started to think if Elton John did a country record, we’d still want him to sound like Elton John. We wouldn’t want him to have a kind of fake [Southern] accent.”

She brings up Ray Charles, whose 1962 album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* included the

song “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” a No. 1 pop hit. His lack of concern for rigid “genres” inspired Martina as she recorded *Everlasting* and extended to her retro-styled live shows.

“This tour has exceeded what I dreamed about for two years,” she says. “I just really wanted the show to be very visually entertaining as well as very musical. I am definitely taking my audience on a ride, on a journey. It is definitely asking a lot of the audience. In the beginning, they weren’t sure what was happening.”

Musical Journey

But anyone who attends an Everlasting concert “will see it,” says trumpet

player Vinnie Ciesielski. “The music just smacks them in the mouth and they have grins on their faces. By about the third song, Martina asks them to take a musical journey with her and you see them start to settle in. By about the fifth song, they really relax. That is a really cool moment for everyone.”

Music director Jim Medlin credits the band and singers for the ease with which they join Martina as she guides the audience from her *Everlasting* songs to her major hits like “A Broken Wing” and “Independence Day.”

“Nashville is a small town and we know who we wanted,” says Jim of the newly expanded band.

Grammy-nominated vocalist Wendy Moten, who was with Julio Iglesias for 18 years, “is the go-to singer. She sang on the record as well, so why not have her voice out here on the road?” he says. “And Vinnie, the trumpet player, he’s on the record, so it made sense to have him out here. Everything just lined up. I’m telling you, when you work with the right people—and these are all the right people—all you have to do is give them a little direction and it all comes together.”

That much is clear during sound check and rehearsal when the performers, still casually dressed, gave an all-out performance of several songs.

Tour opener Ashley McMillen and her band sit about 20 rows back for this warm-up, watching with wide-eyed appreciation.

“I am just very, very, very honored to do this. I can’t believe it! She’s my idol,” says Ashley. “Even though I just play a tiny, tiny bit in this show, it means so much to me to perform before her. As a woman, she has always showed such style and class. And she can sing anything, anywhere and sound incredible.”

Though the amphitheater is mostly empty, Martina turns her voice up full volume as she leads her group through a few songs before she stops and looks



Martina takes the sound of her album *Everlasting* on the road with a big band sound. "I am definitely taking my audience on a ride, on a journey," she says.



MARTINA McBRIDE CONT.

toward the sound engineers. "Are you getting everything you need, John?" she asks of her husband, John McBride, a top-level sound engineer who brought Martina to the attention of his friend and one-time boss Garth Brooks. "Does it sound OK?"

Feeling Freedom

John exudes a quiet confidence backstage, taking a call from his father, spending a few minutes casually watching a video with Ava and

eating dinner with the crew, seated in the center of the long table. In the interview room, he waves away concerns that the previous night's show—relocated to a gym due to rain—was difficult to produce.

"This tour is the greatest sounding—and not because of me; I just turn up the faders," he says. "They are all so good. You can't make this group sound bad. It is by far the best thing she's ever done, in my opinion. When you see the set list and hear the music, it blows your mind. When Martina was born, God says, 'You

sing. That's what you do.'"

It's clear from the conversation that John has great respect for Martina's career decisions, including taking a step away from country to create *Everlasting*.

"I feel today she is better than she's ever been," he says. "When you've been around a long time and radio gets tired of you and doesn't feel the need to play you, it puts you in a tough spot. She decided to make a record of music she loves, and I'm glad she did."

Martina says that fans should not

think she's forsaken country. She still sings plenty of country songs on this tour, and she hints there may soon be new country songs in her catalog.

"I am still going to do country. I'm going to do a lot of things in the next few years," she says. "I've really started to feel a freedom about it all. I love country. I'm a country artist. But at the end of the day, I love to sing all kinds of music. And you know, frankly, I can't really make a record that fits in with country radio right now. I can either not make a record or I can make a record that works for me."

The Charlottesville fans certainly indicate it works for them, too.

At the start of the show they smile but look a bit startled as the horn section marches through the audience, and a trio of backup singers begins harmonizing as Martina—wearing a lush, embroidered suit and sky-high black heels—glides from her gray tour bus past a long line of cheering bystanders on a sidewalk outside the gated arena. Martina smiles broadly, waves and turns to her tour manager for a few words before taking a microphone

and walking onto the stage. The audience roars.

As the concert ends with a four-song encore, the crowd moves swiftly to the sidewalks outside the arena to watch as Martina's tour bus maneuvers out of the cramped parking area and onto a narrow back street. Fans wave and shout. Some hold signs praising Martina and yell to her as the bus slowly pulls away.

"That was the best show ever," says one woman as she and her two friends watch the departing bus. "Anyone would love it." **CW**