

# MARY FLOWER • BRIDGES

## NEW ALBUM BY RENOWNED ROOTS/BLUES GUITARIST MARY FLOWER RELEASED

**Mary Flower**, a 2008 Blues Music Award Nominee for “Acoustic Artist of the Year,” brings her uniquely personal vision of roots music to the most fully realized album of her career. On *Bridges*, Flower’s blend of ragtime, acoustic blues, and folk styles is technically dazzling yet grounded in the down-to-earth simplicity of early 20th century American music.

*Bridges*, Flower’s third release for acclaimed roots-music label Yellow Dog Records, was recorded in Portland, Oregon, Flower’s hometown of five years. She invited a dozen members of the city’s thriving music community to perform on the sessions, resulting in a recording that’s sonically rich but centered on Flower’s own distinct musicianship. Unconventional instruments such as piano, tuba, accordion, clarinet, mandolin, and saxophone flesh out the arrangements on 14 tracks that, taken together, reveal Flower to be capable of remarkable nuance — as well as more stylistic diversity than just about any other artist currently recording under the “acoustic blues” banner.

The album’s title reflects the interconnectedness of the wide-ranging genres Mary Flower tackles on the album. The relationships between acoustic blues, ragtime, jazz, and old-time gospel music are complex, myriad, and well-documented, and Flower explores them with an earthy voice that’s perfectly matched to such classic American music. Her phrasing is clear and unassuming, and her vocal color is sweet, husky, and perfectly natural.

Still, it’s her instrumental skill — a mastery of the difficult Piedmont blues guitar style that takes most players a lifetime to hone — for which Flower is most celebrated. Her fingerpicking forms the basis of a heavily syncopated, ragtime-based style wherein the thumb plucks a strong rhythmic base as the fingers etch out the melody. Flower also excels at lap slide guitar, with a signature sound based on open strings and unusual partial chords, allowing her to infuse her songs with a supremely delicate, plaintive sound that recalls the blues giants of the past.

Having twice finished in the top three at the National Fingerpicking Guitar Championship, Flower is an in-demand performer who has appeared on radio programs such as *A Prairie Home Companion* and played at numerous folk and blues festivals, including the Kerrville Folk Festival, King Biscuit Blues Festival, and Merlefest. Flower is beloved for putting a modern spin on traditional blues material; having fallen under the spell of Blind Blake, the Reverend Gary Davis, and the Piedmont blues players who followed them, she combines the smoothness of Bonnie Raitt with the whimsical vaudevillian charisma of Leon Redbone and the early jazz inflections of artists like Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton.

Flower's original compositions on *Bridges* are drawn from her own experiences as a musician — a role she's filled for some 35 years and that's found her crisscrossing the United States. "I've traveled down these hard-luck roads/Dust on the dashboard and holes in my clothes/Heat on the highway and wear on my treads/All I really want is a room and a bed," she sings in "Rhythm of the Road," the album's opening track. On "Portland Town," Flower has finally found a place to settle down, and the notoriously soggy climate of her Northwestern home is, in fact, a breath of fresh air: "What that rain's gonna do for me/Is wash all my troubles out to sea."

Elsewhere on *Bridges*, Flower resurrects obscure gems from the songbooks of 1920s and '30s America. "There Ain't No Sweet Man That's Worth the Salt of My Tears," originally recorded by hot jazz cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, came to Mary via a later version by Bing Crosby & The Rhythm Boys. ("It has an unusual progression in the bridge," Flower says, "and it laid out nicely as a fingerstyle piece.") "The Ghost of the St. Louis Blues," a wry 1929 piece by minstrel singer Emmett Miller, was suggested by Yellow Dog Records' owner Mike Powers; "it worked perfectly," Flower says. And "When I Get Home I'm Gonna Be Satisfied," a gospel number written by old-time country guitarist E.C. Ball and which Flower first heard performed by her friend Mollie O'Brien, is beautifully rendered on lap slide guitar.

Besides its reference to linking disparate musical styles, the title of *Bridges* resonates as a reminder of Portland's status as a city known for its numerous water crossings, depicted in the cover art by noted Portland illustrator Gary Houston. Further, Flower says that in recruiting so many Portland-based musicians to play on the sessions — many of whom had never met before — the album served as a "bridge" to different cross-sections of the local music scene. She drew from the cream of city's rich pool of talent, from blues and R&B performers (**Duffy Bishop, Janice Scroggins**) to those dealing in jazz (**Rebecca Kilgore, Reggie Houston, Mac Potts**), bluegrass and old-time music (**Tony Furtado, Mary's son Jesse Withers**), swing and trad jazz (**Doug Bundy, Mark Vehrencamp**), jug-band music (**Peter "Spud" Siegel**), pop (**Matt Johnson**), and even modern chamber / klezmer / world music (**Courtney Von Drehle**).

Mary also brought in bluegrass legend **Tim O'Brien** to add fiddle and mandolin to the project, while **Robin Kessinger's** flatpicked guitar intertwines with Flower's fingerpicking on one of five instrumental tracks.

There's no doubt that *Bridges* stands as Mary Flower's crowning achievement thus far. Ultimately, the disc's title might have an additional meaning for Flower: With its easygoing appeal, expert musicianship, and strong sense of camaraderie, it could well be the album that brings her closer to the devoted following she's long deserved.

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