

OUTSIDE THE LINES - MISTY BLUES

ALBUM NOTES

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The Blues has always had a language all its own, allowing us to try to make sense of and give voice to all that we feel. The very act of making music coaxes whatever it is that howls inside to travel through the heart and take flight in the shape of a song — and into a deeper understanding of life. Songs carry the full weight of our stories, with albums especially pulling us into different space and time — then connecting us along spatiotemporal journeys and across shared identities to remind us that we are part of something bigger. *I got mine, you got yours*. Just sharing them can lighten our load along the dusty road.

Outside the Lines, the 12th album by Misty Blues, pulls at threads both universal, ancestral, and personal in that ever-rich tapestry of stories and storylines that bring us back to one another in ways big and small. But it does so much more. If we're lucky, as listeners we get to experience those stories through a voice that is by turns gentle and powerful, wise and full of wonder — and through a band who beautifully underscores those lyrical threads with unparalleled musicianship, verve, and grace. The versatility of the musicians and authenticity of the voices in this shared space is something special. Each and every groove on Misty Blues' latest release reveals expert craftsmanship and care — within a certain kind of reverence for the often celebratory, transformative uses of sorrow that lie in the storytelling nature of the blues. As she concedes in *Judgment Day*, "through varied burdens I have endured...there is nothing more that I can do, til I face my last divine review." Living well, then, becomes a forceful reckoning that insists that we share whatever howls within us in a voice our own, unfettered and true. Our stories, ourselves. *Outside the Lines* shows us, then, how to build a blues song: *I lay my soul across these pages, I lay my fears across the score*.

Gina Coleman, Misty Blues' frontwoman, song writer, and cigar box smokeshow, commands these stories with a voice intent on speaking the truth and the stage with a showmanship that evokes the full essence of the human spirit roaring back. *Tried to scream but I learned to sing*.

The blistering opening track, *Where Your Blues Comes From*, asks us to consider what might be howling inside of us: "*Does it even matter... I got mine, you got yours...It's deep down in my soul... any tale can be retold*." Whatever it is, it belongs to us — and we get to write the answer to that question for ourselves. Coleman asks, *Does there have to be a label, must you put it in a box*. The entire album speaks of the frustration at feeling boxed in, obstructed, but the music — the making, performing, listening, dancing — is the pushback, breaking down those boxes and barriers no matter what. *Where Your Blues Comes From*, especially, is an exercise of containment, build up, and then rhapsodic release, with David Vittone's organ roaring in to rip it open. We can feel it in our bodies, that sublime pushback, *and* the triumph in that pushback, both palpable, pulsating — and rejuvenating, restorative.

God forbid you sing your truth. Speak your mind, they will reduce. We can feel the undercurrents of tension running through these songs, recognition of the energy it takes to

remain true to yourself and your calling — to give voice to the full ache and joy of living — amidst a culture and larger systems that often try to silence your story for fear of making someone uncomfortable. The music pulls that tangle of emotions straight to the surface, and lets it have its say. On *I Don't Sleep*, for instance, Aaron Dean's irrepressible sax seems to exhume the howling so it can scream as loud as it wants. *That's my life story, on that beaten track.*

In *Every Which Way*, penned by Coleman and her son, Diego Mongue, Coleman pulls us in close with deceptively sweet background vocals (featuring three old college friends and a regional country singer), some funky, quirky grooves, and a killer solo by Benny Kohn on keys — but sets some clear boundaries: *Walk a thousand miles in my shoes...I'll grant you voice to preach my blues.*

Coleman is having none of it — and she shouldn't — and sings from a place of deep resilience and hope. Art and music work to objectify feeling, to reveal truths and patterns about our lives. *Here's my story, you have yours.* And the blues, well, damn...they inhabit the darkest — and brightest — recesses of our collective and respective souls, where the ancestral voices, too, strain against the old shackles — and rise. *Outside the Lines* brings us deep into the belly of the blues, with storylines that tap into the very systems of oppression and racism that gave birth to the blues all those years ago, and that make us question where our own sense of belonging comes from. Each of the turn-it-up-to-11 tracks echo of longing, judgment, redemption — a full cycle that resounds with all the stirrings of a spiritual. We can sense the ongoing dance between heartbreak and revival in each and every song; listening becomes an exercise in experiencing shifts in our own bodies and minds as our unconscious mind starts to grapple with our own powers of perspective-shifting.

On *Outside the Lines*, Misty Blues stays grounded in what's always worked for them — songs that showcase Coleman's impressive range, a deep-growl to soft whisper and everything in between, and the stellar, seamless virtuosity of her bandmates, from the farm team to the current ensemble, many of whom have been with her for years. The band stays expansive, too, by exploring their outer edges and taking off in new directions, with shared voices, guest artists, and collaborations, freshly-hued songs, and lyrics that challenge us to join them in going outside our *own* lines, beyond the effervescence of the shared musical experience, to discover something more meaningful in "this new wellspring" — so we, too, might "brave on through this untraveled road." This is no one-woman show, after all, and the album positively brims with talent: "I love working with my people, either in the core band or the farm team. These are the collaborations I'm interested in." Coleman shares songwriting credits with her son Diego on three of the songs, guitarist Seth Fleischmann on two songs, and Ed Moran, a "harmonica player with a killer voice," on two. On *One of These Days*, co-penned with Mongue, Fleischmann, and drummer Rob Tatten, the richness of the Misty Blues bounty energizes the song, with Matt Cusson joining Coleman on vocals, and Tatten bringing us into and through the song with deft precision and joy.

The band, all multi-instrumentalists themselves, often welcomes in the magic of the impromptu jam whether touring or just gigging, when other musicians drop in and create a “little honey hole” by playing totally different instruments — djembe and fiddle — with a respectful attentiveness that allow them to “catch little hooks and exemplify them.” “It’s amazing,” Coleman noted, “to hear the music we usually do re-energized by new instruments.” Misty Blues does this themselves, too, often “choosing a song from a back catalog that we thought was really good but didn’t quite get its due, and putting a fresh spin on it.” The album cover art features yet another gorgeous painting by Coleman’s husband, Michael Mongue, who captures well how Misty Blues truly blooms on this album. By venturing outside the lines, Misty Blues brings us into this bigger world and reminds us of all that we share.

Ultimately, *Outside the Lines* takes listeners on an exploration of the powers of reckoning, re-storying, and reclamation — especially when done within the space and shimmer of interconnection. When Coleman sings “just want to share my voice,” she sings for all of us. We all have our shit — and stories that need to be aired out. But what happens when someone blocks our way? We keep at it. Songs like *I Don’t Sleep*, featuring a fabulous echolocation-commiseration with her uncle Petri Byrd (who, no shit, is the bailiff from the Judge Judy Show), create a conversational feel in the blended voices and traded riffs — offering a *Hey, I get you* kind of empathy that works to break down boundaries between self and others. By sharing our voice, we are never alone. Music stokes the inner supernova while at the same time transporting us out of ourselves into others, allowing us to imagine something better, and then work, together, to create it. With *Outside the Lines*, Misty Blues builds a rousing sense of community, with longtime band members and session players sharing space with old college friends and family members. The very best payback — to discover a new sense of belonging — on your own terms. *Can’t take my blues away.*

Central to this greater story, and to the album, is *The Hate*, written by Coleman in 2021 in response to a racist comment left on a YouTube video of one of their songs, *Freight Car*. To Coleman, the hateful words — insisting she didn’t belong — intruded on what had always been a sacred space for her, and so she wrote *The Hate* as a form of catharsis and cleansing to reclaim that space for herself and everyone else who’d been on the receiving end of Hate. *Who has the right to cause such pain, without even knowing my name.* Coleman, with guests Kat Riggins and Justin Johnson, delivers a song gorgeously crafted and hooked with voices joined in some kind of deep, visceral grieving that ultimately connects us to our own. In telling the story, Coleman empties herself: *That’s all there is — there is no more — until I’m faced with hate once more.* The repetition at the end serves as a slow, drawn out reminder that hate is indeed a constant, unrelenting in how episodes big and small, near and far, personal, ancestral, and collective work to keep re-opening those wounds, raw and hard to heal.

There’s always someone who thinks they know best. As a woman, and as a woman of color, Coleman has plenty of reason to be wary — and admits to often feeling like she has to work twice as hard to overcome the usual obstacles. *Been dealt a hand that don’t seem fair.* She calls it the “Coleman Curse” — “Just when you’re riding high, someone is going to pull you back — and you have to be willing and prepared to get back on your feet.” In *I Don’t Sleep*, certain lines

speak of how these perceived “transgressions,” whether decontextualized or real, disrupt peace — and make Coleman forgo sleep. After all, she’s “got things to do.” If you know Gina at all, you know she’s one of the hardest working, generous, kind people around. “Who knows,” she says, with her usual humor, “Maybe in a past life, I was an asshole, and now I’m getting my due.” *Take one step forward, get pushed two back.*

Whatever the cause — curse, karma, or the racism that still haunts us — Coleman conveys her frustration, and then carries on. Everywhere, the ups and downs are ever-present. In *One of These Days*, a collaboration with Mongue, Fleischmann, and drummer Rob Tatten, she laments that those “bootstraps” might be “getting weaker,” making it hard to keep “trudging forward” in that “worthy fight,” but finds the strength to keep “holding hope.” Coleman and Matt Cusson join voices *One of these days I won’t be blue. One of these days I’ll get over it. One of these days I’ll get what’s due.* The Latin groove of the music reminds Coleman of growing up in a predominantly Puerto Rican, African American neighborhood — and her love for Tito Puente and Celia Cruz. “I saw them play on a double bill at my first concert when I was about 8 — in St. Mary’s Park in the South Bronx. It was magical — everyone with their street food — a delight all the way around.”

Coleman’s songwriting talents are formidable, her process often bordering on the mystical, and drawing upon bloodlines, a little bit of kismet, and the often unexpected inner workings of her unconscious. She always starts with a small bit of the music first, whether a snippet that’s been sent to her by a collaborator or come to her in a dream: “I hear a riff and then the floodgates open...but if I don’t hear something immediately, it’s not meant to be.” Music and lyrics often arrive tethered and fully formed in dreams, or hit when she’s behind the wheel: “On a rainy day, the windshield wiper pattern hits me — and the lyrics come.”

Gonna roll with it. Sometimes, the universe works a little mischief to make sure things come out just so. During recording the album, Coleman kept singing the original line in *Where Your Blues Come From* — “every tale has been retold” — as “any tale can be retold.” No matter how many takes, she “wasn’t aware she was singing it this way,” and ultimately, had to change the lyrics. But how perfect, really, and ain’t that just the thing about the blues: the transformative power in the idea that “any tale can be retold.” To first tell our story in our own voice, find connection and community in the shared experience — and then lay claim to the indestructible within ourselves that emerges in the process of re-storying — is the powerful healing tonic that music, and most especially the blues, provides. *Outside the Lines* reminds us to drink up.

In a testament to this, Coleman asserts that better times *are* coming. “Life is overwhelming,” she admits, “I could just spiral — but I refuse. I have to think hopeful thoughts.” Coleman is not afraid to roar, and her band loves to let loose. On *Granville T.*, named after the man who invented the roller coaster, drums, guitar, sax, keys, vocals come together to pound with all the excitement of a breathless ride, with Fleischmann’s guitar shredding the thrill of the anticipatory descent: *I’ll guess I’ll just surrender...let my soul be ensnared.* Tracks like *Grip your Soul* invite us to get lost in the music: keep “moving your feet” because “what lies ahead nobody knows.” Dean and Fleischmann do battle with a ferocious, rapturous sax and guitar call and response;

all we can do is *Kick on back... and let the blues grip your soul*. On *Days of Voodoo and Laughter*, the back and forth solos feel like sweet pillowtalk, while Bill Patriquin's bass sets a low simmering line that leaves us with a "dewy glow." Co-penned with Ed Moran, *Voodoo* began as one line — "moonlighting in your bed" — and a short riff sent by Moran to Coleman, who created the song from that. For *On Been a Long Time Coming*, Moran sent an iPhone recording of a bit of chorus he'd come up with to Coleman, who listened and immediately heard the rest of the song. Mongue added his trademark "funky, weird overlay of bass riffs," and a song was born. The lyrics echo many of the themes ever-present in *Outside the Lines*: the simple request to be allowed to just "do my thing...Just want to share my voice," the hard work that goes into it — "I work from rise to set, with dreams of better times" — and the frustration with being pushed off that road again and again: *Why must you block my way?* Legendary blues guitarist Eric Gales sends the song soaring with his guitar solo, which pulls out all the notes of sadness and regret deep in the belly of the lyrics and gives them wings. *I can't roll over now, you're just a heavy load. Won't let you take me down, I'll take the higher road, I'll find another way to reap what I've earned*. Coleman opts to leave the regrets behind: *Can't take my blues away, a lesson you must learn*. Amen.

In *Dare to Dream*, co-written with her son, who also plays bass on the song, *Coleman* arrives again as the seasoned sage, her quiet, encouraging voice reminding us that we've got to find our courage and keep taking chances. Amidst the turmoil and heartache, the "crushing blows" past and present, Coleman offers a *how, then, shall we live*, call to arms: To "rise up," you have to free yourself from any bonds, whether internal or external, and "learn to fly." *Tried to scream but learned to sing, the sweeter the fruit did the latter bring*. Again, there is much here that evokes a spiritual of years past, a lovely, poignant lyrical and ethereal thread here that runs through those ancestral lines right on into the future, all the harvested strength and resilience spinning along grooves into a world of possibility for Gina's children — all of our children. *Dare to dream...be entranced. Dare to dream...hold your stance. Dare to love...at first glance. Dare to lose...take a chance*. "The more I educate myself, the more I understand that this is the music of my heritage. The blues deepens my connection to my ancestors." As she sings on the opening track, "I can still honor the past and tell my stories of the present."

This is, after all, music to feel in the body, each and every instrument playing a part in taking us on that journey back through the stories we've embodied, unearthing and shaking loose our own ache and joy in a somatic sound healing experience that, if we pay attention, can enable us to process and better understand our own role in these stories. We can bear witness, show up for ourselves *and* each other. We can, as *Misty Blues* has done, create a wellspring of community, connection, belonging — the very best way through. This is *the blues*, after all — the stuff of repair. Hasn't it always been so?