

Marie Naffah: An overnight success, half-a-lifetime in the making

Indie and proud, the most composed composer you will ever meet on the music industry in the pandemic era, the graft of the craft and being the engine of your own success

It's a fine spring day as I travel into Edinburgh. While Princes Street is lined by explosive cherry blossoms, its gardens are populated by leaves of purest green, sprouting cautiously from their roots under uncertain skies. I'm joined on my journey by the musician, Marie Naffah. She appears to me not in person, but in an audio metamorphose to soundtrack the traffic horns and violent potholes characteristic of a Scottish public transport commute.

I try to listen intently, therefore, to what she's really saying through the storied lyricism and soothing melodies emblematic of her style of music. And, thankfully, it's a lot – and executed expertly.

She comes to meet me, finding me seated at a table for two (hacking away at my notebook) in a coffee house of vintage chic that neither of us had yet frequented. I go for a latte and raspberry ripple tart while Marie orders a cappuccino and lemon drizzle cake before we return to our corner of the thoroughfare. Just as our interview commences, however, a waitress delivers an extra latte and cappuccino much to our mutual delight, apologising for making additional drinks. As

if we would turn them down!

“California’s dancing with her eyes closed/Wearing all her clothes”

‘California’

I start by asking her about her current writing trip. “It’s going very well,” she says, “I’ve been travelling around a lot lately because I find new spaces often give me, not necessarily new ideas, but I often solidify and firm up the ideas that I’ve taken with me, if that makes sense? I shed all the bad ideas.”

On Instagram she wrote that she gave up a permanent residence a couple of years ago. Was this due to touring anyway, the opportunity arose or a move necessitated due to the pandemic?

“A bit of everything, really. The pandemic made it a bit easier to do because... my music career was kicking off during the pandemic so, as an early artist, I was releasing new music and having to do that all digitally. There were a million cons... about not being able to tour live and that’s why I do music, I love live performance... You can see everyone’s eyes. You can read the room, literally... you can’t do that online.

“But what that did mean was we had some flexibility to move round a bit when things opened up and connect with fans and followers through a digital space, which definitely isn’t the same as meeting them live, but it’s definitely more advanced than I think I would’ve imagined pre-pandemic. Being able to talk and play to fans in Mexico and Brazil and just hear their side of the story as well.”

“I don’t really talk to strangers/I just count on them to be kind”

‘Gabriel’

Hearing the other side of the story is also a marked, recurring theme of our interview. An interview is, after all, an exchange of views, and I sense that she is genuinely

interested in fostering an atmosphere of conversation, frequently asking me about my life and work when she most certainly isn't contractually obliged. As such, I use the word 'our' as opposed to 'my' or 'her' interview while the idea of hierarchy between a musician and their audience is an illusion she, herself, is not fan of and goes out of her way to deconstruct.

Although she doesn't believe that this degree of separation does or could ever exist between her and her fans, "when you often go to big shows there's a revering that happens and I'm exactly the same as I am onstage and offstage. I just wear a better suit," she laughs, though doesn't explicitly state on which stage the better suit fits. I'm hoping it's the former.

On that mobile residence, "A lot of people say to me: 'Oh, don't you feel like you don't have a home'. On the contrary I think I have multiple homes. It's nice to explore the different music scenes as well and I love the scene here in Edinburgh, I think there are some really lovely venues." 10 points. While London, her hometown, has an incredibly eclectic music scene, she tells me, "because Edinburgh is slightly smaller, more people seem to be turning up for shows no matter who's playing, which I love, and that's something I associate with an older London scene.

"I used to run a residency when I was a bit younger, about 18, and people used to just show up and take a punt on live music, which, actually, I don't think they do as much in London anymore. I was at the Jazz Bar the other night, here", where she played on Friday evening, "and I loved it. It was a full room of people that just loved music and I just think that is a really special and amazing reminder of why I still perform live. It's not about kudos and credibility, it's about just being in the moment."

"We talked of London like it was a bad script, a bad film/
And all the ways we would rewrite it"

'Gabriel'

Going back to Instagram, "You have to keep in the front of people's minds. I have definitely moved through different phases of social media and online presence. It was absolutely fundamental during the pandemic to keep connected... to the community of supporters that listen to my music who I care so much about because, as an indie artist, they are your priority, they are the people who are going to show up to your shows, they are the people that are going to tell people about your music."

Do you still think of yourself as an indie artist then? I but in. Marie was the MTV Unsigned Artist of the Year (before releasing any singles). She is a Rebuild Music winner, was the Independent Spotlight Artist of the Week and made the cut for BBC Music Introducing. She also pole-vaulted her way through 50 gigs in 50 days last year, wrote another song on that journey too and delivered her own TED Talk, hence my surprise. "Yes," she responds without hesitation, "absolutely, through and through." Despite appearing to me fully formed, the overnight successful professional.

"You've actually caught me in a period of my life where, I'm hoping I can row back from it a bit and refine the things I want to talk about. Because I'm not a thought leader. I don't need to be putting out daily messages about things. But I do care deeply about the context of how my music is made and I care a lot about my creative process. And I know that the people that choose to follow me on Instagram do care about that too."

I ask what percentage of time is actually dedicated to creating music as opposed to maintaining that community engagement. "The music always comes first," she says, "it has to. I think that's also why I'm proudly an indie artist as well. I really, really don't want to ever feel like it's a machine or a burden in that way."

“I was wading through honey/But honey I’m drifting through air”

‘Honey’ and ‘Air’

As she, herself will tell you, her music requires an attention span – an investment of time and effort that is rewarded with the one-on-one attention to an audience of friends (listeners/followers) and, for want of a better word, foes (strangers/journalists) alike. Although I’m not made to feel this way. And that’s class, through and through.

Despite my not insignificant preparation regarding all things Marie, I had yet to discover her “very old-fashioned” monthly newsletter, to which she is very much attached and allows her to talk behind-the-scenes long form. An interesting personality convergence or concurrence (I can’t decide) henceforth emerges; of modern and retro, yet more superlatives with which to describe her particular brand of music. If the latter is its style, the former is its delivery.

When do you know that the work is good enough, in the process of or having finished writing/composing/recording/touring? “I normally know when it’s done, on a writing side, before I’ve gone into the studio. I like to not overlabour it, if it starts to become overthought... so if the words fall out naturally I tend to think that that’s a good sign. The one’s that I think are my best songs come very quickly.”

My introduction to Marie began ten days before our interview with ‘Run Away with Me’ (released on 4 March), an upbeat folk-hued dreamscape pining for the promise of summer whose music video was shot amid the bucolic winter countryside and slowly fades to the life of colour from the death of black and white. Although it isn’t slow, it evokes a ‘slow dance’ feeling of gladness; that moment of contentment surrounded by friends in a pub, nightclub or house party when the conversation relaxes and the presence of company makes us feel whole. If only for a moment. Neither of us can quite articulate that feeling into

words, but, thankfully, she senses what I'm trying (failing) to say.

"I asked the girl who could not see/What do you think when you look at me/She said I imagine something beautiful"
'Blindfold'

Which leads us to 'Blindfold', a marvel of storytelling released ten years ago in which, despite the somewhat grainy video quality, the audio emerges loud and clear as she performs cross-legged and blindfolded with an acoustic guitar at the microphone. A personal chronicle of the gradual loss of her grandmother's sight, while painful no doubt, by immortalising this loss in music Marie has too imagined something beautiful. In turn, the power of music has somehow reclaimed it allowing us to see her grandmother through the song in our imagination. A consummate musician from the start, it would appear, but no, she says, still a work in progress.

"After I released this short documentary called 'Blindfold', which was a series of interviews with blind musicians who had different stages of visual impairment, Kevin my pianist being one of them, it raised awareness of the kind of blindness and the relationship of blindness to music." A very uplifting experience, she notes, with everyone performing her song 'Blindfold' to close.

Her experience of working with blind musicians and hearing the discrimination they faced in the industry also informed her TED Talk, namely "the stories that I heard from my friends who were in this project about how many times they had been turned away at studios or in venues for being blind. I just couldn't really believe it. I thought the worst scenario at that point was that we were a bit awkward or that we weren't very helpful."

"You buy me drinks but you buy her flowers"
'Silver and Gold'

Hot off the press, her latest recording 'Angie' was released only five days prior to our meeting but immediately stands out as one of her very best. Angie, a composite character, appears to exist encapsulated by a glorious sunset and matches the positive wistfulness (surely her signature style) of 'Run Away with Me' and experimental storytelling (her magnum opus comedy-drama) of 'This Road' (The Best I Can Do).

"I don't know anyone called Angie," she says, a throwaway line that makes me laugh internally due to its randomness, as all the best throwaway lines usually do. And to make it more interesting for the musician and her band, I suggest, as if I have any idea of what I'm talking about. Happily, she concurs, so I'm not totally away with the fairies.

'Angie' conveys that recognisable festival vibe, most precious due to the elusive feeling of fleeting freedom and most prescient given this is the venue where live music thrives, especially in summer, which is on its approach again. Depending on how you set your watch, however, summer has already begun (think Coachella), at least according to the music industry clock. Never the most accurate of timepieces though, in comparison with railway time.

"It comes in waves but the big ones will knock you out/So I wash my face of hatred and self-doubt"
'Honey' and 'Air'

Which brings us to the theme of her next EP. Her first, 'Golden State', charted her travels across America to the California of the title. Her second, 'Trains', chronicles her railway journeys throughout Britain, and is due to arrive on 27 May and so the reason for our meeting. "For this EP that is coming out, that 'Angie' is on, that 'Run Away with Me' is on... I spend so much time on trains. These songs were born on those train journeys.

"Trains are an amazing space to think," she adds, "you've got the whole world rushing by and I love that so many people get

that feeling on a train. I decided that, even though these songs are not at all about trains or journeys, they are designed to be listened to on journeys.”



Photography | Parri Thomas

“Travel is something that really inspires me and I’m lucky that I have been to lots of different places. I think that whole record ‘Golden State’ is dealing with the idea of going and coming home and longing to return, the different identities you feel when you’re abroad.”

Our conversation lilted between the text and subtext of her songs to the content and output of her aforementioned Instagram account, an equally intimate yet professional curation of her creative process at every stage of its development. She shares a screenshot from a fan interaction where they sent a lyric from ‘Angie’ and by coincidence, I noted the same one.

“You’re taking longer showers as it’s somewhere to hide” – ‘Angie’

'Angie' talks of the perennial, millennial anxiety that permeates the 24/7 lifestyle of the social (and) media pressure to perfect and maintain an image of success – and the depressive isolation that follows when that fantasy never fully becomes the reality we, collectively, convey to others that we are living. An avoidance of artifice or overproduction allows her voice to penetrate and lyrics to resonate conjuring the atmosphere of a live set, an environment, she tells me, where she feels the most fulfilled.

I ask her how she cultivates a unique voice, vocally and textually to which she says that she counts the “big female vocalists; Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, Adele, Florence + the Machine” among her influencers. “I like that unique and slightly raw quality of vocals. I’m very, very strict in the studio about not adding lots of effects on vocals... I’m very rooted in live music and so I like the spontaneity that vocals can have when you’re performing live. I like the way it can be slightly raspy... and so trying to make that happen on something as calculated as a record in the studio is something I really, really try to do.”

Her music is nostalgic, not for childhood per se, but for the way music used to be, when voices and instruments were all that mattered. Where the response of a live audience or their word of mouth would determine what we should all be listening to, rather than the soulless algorithms and market research that dictates our popular culture for us. Now we have to listen because everyone else is, not because we really want to. If 'Run Away with Me' is the morning and 'Angie' the evening, 'Blindfold' has got to be the dawn and 'This Road' the dusk, her 'Piano Man', 'Purple Rain' or 'Tiny Dancer'. I put it to you.

“I’ll keep this simple as a country song/So all the fools in love can sing along”

'This Road (The Best I Can Do)'

Not content with writing, composing and touring, her interests expand beyond music to verse, fashion and imaging. "It's not something I really talk about very often but I've really turned to the visual world a lot... I am very interested in collage and the fitting of poetry, art and photography. I often describe it, with my music, as a 360 experience.

"When I write it's a very visual experience and what I would love to continue to do as my career develops. I'd love to be able to give my fans, friends and community this 360 experience where you can listen to the music but you can also see mood boards. Which, I think, Instagram is teaching you to do but it's still very short form."

I ask her where she gets her confidence, that most elusive yet sought after of qualities, and she elucidates that the support she receives from her team and fans, family and partner all help but "everyone I talk to, all my friends who are musicians as well – it's a grind, and you have to remind yourself, 'what are things you love about it and how can you keep doing those?'" It becomes clear to me as she talks that empowerment must transcend confidence, especially when handling artistic compromise, the thorniest of rose bushes.

"There's a positive bit of compromise that I have in the studio... I work with a producer now called Ian Barter who presents ideas musically that I would have never thought of. I really like our relationship because it's totally honest. I used to be a bit less confident when I was younger in the studio. It's a hard place to be.

"It's not that [producers] are wed to one sound either," she continues, "because there is such a variety of styles they can make, you need to be quite clear what you want... and you're always going to care more than anyone. It's hard, especially when you really respect the person in the room, but I think it's all a bit of a learning curve."

“‘Cause I know, I'm becoming one of those people/That's singing about how they feel/And it's embarrassing
But you know, like all things sentimental/like a soundtrack instrumental/There's some poetic license”
'This Road (The Best I Can Do)'

While she doesn't co-write, an increasing rarity in the music industry where the talents of ten or twelve songwriters can be employed to work on any one song (at the highest echelons of pop, at least), she does take her own material to another songwriter to obtain an objective opinion. In effect, she advises external advice. At one point Marie turns to me and goes, “I was really laughing because I just got TikTok recently and I was like, ‘Oh my god, this is just absolute chaos. It's such a scary space.’” I watch the compilations on YouTube, I confide, as I have it too and don't know what to do with it.



And with that, our interview is neatly concluded. All of my questions have been asked and answered with detail and candour. Two hours have elapsed and my recording equipment has done its job, picking up all the high notes of conversation (and drumbeats of backfiring motorcycles lest we dare to

forget our chat becomes too peaceful in the heart of a major city). She provided me with enough material to write up an interview twice this length, with more chat in the hat than could ever be committed to the text you're reading now.

By now the sun has obliterated all the clouds leaving only peerless blue skies in her wake, another metaphor, if you will, for the company you keep. Either through wired headphones, or if you're lucky enough, in person. Marie sashays off into the glare of the evening sun, into the summer before her that has already begun.

Better suit TBA.

'Trains' will be released on 27 May 2022.

[You can follow Marie Naffah on all good music streaming platforms through her website here](#)

[You can also follow Marie Naffah on Instagram here](#)