



Melissa Etheridge: Better Than Ever

Melissa Etheridge triumphantly survived cancer. And now she's back with an impressive greatest hits album. Here's her take on facing your demons and finding true happiness.

By John Polly

"How are you? That's how people greet me now, and I keep forgetting that they don't want just an 'Oh, I'm fine, thanks' answer, they want details." Melissa Etheridge, the two-time Grammy-winning, million-selling rock 'n' roll singer/songwriter and internationally renowned "out" lesbian celebrity, is laughing on the line from her Los Angeles home. "So, to answer that, I'm completely cancer free. I'm 100% back now; back from the treatments that wiped me out. That all started a year ago and I'm much better now."

And she certainly sounds it. Following her show-stopping performance back in February on the 2005 Grammy Awards, when Etheridge—her head still shaved bald following the chemotherapy treatments she received to fend off breast cancer—performed the classic barn-burner "Piece of My Heart" as part of a Janis Joplin tribute during the broadcast, world wide attention was focused on the veteran rocker. Suddenly, she was on the front page of every newspaper, with praise pouring in from all sides acknowledging Etheridge's bravery in facing her cancer openly, and lauding her triumphant return to the Grammy stage.

Given the strange nature of fame and living in the public eye, it's now Etheridge's grueling battle with cancer that has prompted renewed interest in her, from all manner of folks. And for Etheridge, the Grammy buzz around her created the perfect opportunity for her to take stock in her career, and put together a "greatest hits" record, which recently got released by Island Records/Universal Music Enterprises. Entitled *Greatest Hits The Road Less Traveled*, this 17-song collection contains Etheridge's biggest hits ("Come to My Window," "I Want to Come Over") some of her personal favorites, brand new songs, and some amazing covers, including her take on the Tom Petty track "Refugee" and the aforementioned Janis Joplin scorcher "Piece of My Heart."

The experience of stopping and looking back at her life's works has proved both exciting and bittersweet. "I sort of entered my career full-speed, and I just put my head down and went straight forward for 17 years," explains Etheridge. "When I got pulled off of that track by cancer and the treatments, I got to stop and look at what I've done and how far I've come. Before, success and rock 'n' roll were the most important things in my life. That's changed and what I write about has changed. In those songs from the first 17 years there's a lot of betrayal, a lot of aching—but I'm done with that now. I still love playing those songs, like 'I'm the Only One,' but thank god I'm 100 miles away from that emotion that I wrote it from."

Happier than ever, Etheridge shares her life these days with actress Tammy Lynn Michaels (the two were wed in a marriage ceremony two years ago) and the two children, son Becket, 6, and daughter Bailey, 8, of whom Etheridge shares custody. Luckily for Etheridge, and for the rest of us who are fans, these days she can focus on the positive in her music—and her life. That optimism led her out on to that Grammy stage back in February. "At that moment," Etheridge says, "I was thinking, 'I just hope I make it to the end of the song.' It was all so intensely happening in that moment. I was happy and excited—thrilled to be doing it because I'd been lying on my back for months, in misery. So it was like stepping back into my life in a big, big way. I was just praying that no one would laugh at me!"

No one did. In fact, soon Etheridge's phone was ringing off the hook, for all the right reasons. "Before all of this, a big company would never get within a 100 feet of me when it came to ad campaigns, or anything like that," explains Etheridge. "But after the Grammys, it's as if the cancer thing trumped the gay issue. Ford called, and then Safeway and Kimberly-Clark—and I think there's even a Bath & Body Works thing going on. It's all of a sudden okay to love a gay person now, which is fine. I'm all for it."

Thusly, on the heels of the October 4th release of her greatest hits album, Etheridge has been appearing all over as a spokesperson for breast cancer awareness. On October 18th, Breast Cancer Awareness Day, Etheridge will appear on Lifetime Television in the special, *WomenRock! Our Journey with Melissa Etheridge*, a program featuring Etheridge performing and sharing details about her own experience with the disease. And throughout October and beyond, the annual Susan G. Komen Foundation Race for the Cure events will ring with the sound of Etheridge's new single "I Run for Life," which was written at the behest of

Race for the Cure co-sponsor Ford. Record royalties from the song will go to breast cancer charities. Meanwhile, Etheridge will also be featured in a print advertising/breast cancer awareness campaign for Ford, as well as Kimberly-Clark's Health, Home and Hope campaign which will be prominent in Safeway and Vons grocery stores, also raising money and awareness for breast cancer charities. "How fun is that?" laughs Etheridge proudly. "People everywhere will see big old gay me when they check out at the supermarket!"

According to Etheridge, the reason for this newfound adulation she's receiving is simple. "I think people, no matter what, appreciate truth," she explains. "They appreciate it and honor it. I've lived my life in such a way that I think I've earned this priceless thing, which is respect. So when I got up and did the Grammy thing, I just stood up there saying, 'Yes, I've had cancer. I'm bald. *Whatever!*' And I think that truth won out over anyone's feelings of 'Oooh, she's a creepy lesbian.'"

Refreshingly, Etheridge has plenty of other options for getting her music and message out there. And even now, after all these years, she's still a vocal believer in the value and important need for gay people to come out of the closet. "Coming out is the most important thing, because it gives us the strongest thing we have: visibility," Etheridge states firmly. "I know I live in a bubble, living in Hollywood and being famous; I have no trouble at all. But gay people are rising to their place in society, and yes, we're going to have people mad at us for having that place, and we're dealing with that. But come on... Ten years ago, if I'd told you that we'd be voting on whether or not we're going to be able to get married in 11 states—and OK, we lost all 11 of those states, but people still had to read those words 'gay and lesbian' over and over, and hear about it over and over. And that's neutralizing and naturalizing. And it helps people learn to deal. It helps people realize, 'You know, those gay guys down the street with their two kids—they're really just fine. They have the same problems I do.'"

And these days, Etheridge is very happy to find herself in a place where she has fewer problems than ever. She's got a new record out, she's survived cancer and she's got a wife and kids whom she adores. "Tammy and the kids are the light of my life," she says warmly. "They're everything that makes sense and that is good in the world." And Etheridge also recognizes, having been through leaner times and rough relationships, how truly valuable that is. When asked what message she'd tell herself if she were able to travel back in time ten years, the rock and roll royal pauses, then laughs a wry laugh. "Whoa... There's a lot of things I'd tell myself, ten years ago. I'd tell myself to just hang on; that life's going to make a lot more sense, and it's going to get a lot better."

Greatest Hits The Road Less Traveled (Island/Universal Music Enterprises) is in stores on October 4th. A CD/DVD Deluxe Edition is available October 18 and includes the original CD plus a DVD featuring an exclusive new interview with Melissa, rare videos, television performances and bonus features.

Photo credit: Mark Seliger