

Up from the Gutter

**Ex-punk New York troubadour
Jesse Malin brings his latest
offering of uplifting, rootsy
rock to Miami**



Put a Starbucks here over
Jesse Malin's dead body

You need input to get output," Jesse Malin insists during a scarce private moment on the pool deck of a Salt Lake City hotel. Over a cracking cell phone connection, he holds forth on his main songwriting influences. "I'm always reading novels, reading plays, going to see movies, listening to other artists, taking in a lot of stuff. Even listening to conversations among strangers. I've always carried a pen and scribbled on napkins; I'm scribbling in the movies on a popcorn bag. A lot of it ends up in these black-and-white school-type notebooks. Or on cassette tapes. And then it all merges together."

At this point, presumably, he remembers to breathe. Talking to Malin is a bit like conversing with a living, breathing real-time sequel to *On the Road*. There's a fast-flowing series of observations and impressions, a verbal patchwork celebrating both the sublime and the mundane, complemented by a hint of an accent from his native Queens.

The undercurrent of down-at-the-heels, looking-up-at-the-stars optimism is brought into full, rootsy force on his third, most recent solo album, *Glitter in the Gutter*, released this past March. Across thirteen tracks, Malin takes up the mantle of true American singer-songwriter, intoning narrative tales rooted in his beloved downtown Manhattan but speaking to universal themes of love and loss, good music, and beautiful women. It's an up-tempo outing that rocks hard without hewing to genres. And it includes a star-studded cast of real American rock guests: pal Ryan Adams, Jakob Dylan, and Josh Homme, among others. There's a Replacements cover, "Bastards of Young." Oh, and a little duet, "Broken Radio," with the Boss, Bruce Springsteen.

All this from a guy who was once a standard-bearer of glammy punk, the frontman of the over-the-top Nineties outfit D-Generation. In the tradition of the best sleaze rock, the quintet often came across as free-wheeling, hard-partying, preening peacocks. With song titles like "No Way Out" and "Helpless," the band, which released its debut album in 1994, had more in common with earlier groups like Hanoi Rocks than with its alt-rock peers. (Later, actually, Hanoi Rocks' bassist, Sami Yaffa, would play bass on *Glitter in the Gutter*.)

"We'd play wherever, outside of New York and L.A. and maybe Chicago, and the entire audience would look like farmers with their flannel shirts," Malin says. "We'd

get booed and things thrown at us. Now rock and roll is so popular and people dress up, but back then it was all indie grunge, and we were a little freakier somehow."

The public's constant misperception soon grew tiring.

"With what D-Generation was doing, by the end we were touring with groups like Offspring, Green Day, even Kiss, and the audiences just wanted to mosh. I could have been singing the phone book for all they knew," he says. "You know, we did three albums, seven years; it was like my five best friends, like we all grew up together. But while I was still young enough, I was hungry to do something where people would listen to my songs more, my lyrics more."

So Malin began to sneak away to write his own tunes, revisiting the music he had grown up with: the Beatles, the Stones, even Elton John. In his bus bunk, he scribbled a portion of the material that would end up on his solo debut, *The Fine Art of Self Destruction*, released in 2002.

"It's like masturbating, writing a song," Malin says. "You gotta find a private moment when no one's around. You know, whispering into a tape recorder sitting in a motel room by yourself. And I was listening to things like Neil Young, Tom Waits, the Kinks, Springsteen, newer stuff like Wilco, Pete Dinklage, and all the stuff my friend Ryan Adams was doing."

Returning to the live circuit in New York as a solo artist was daunting at first.

"I started doing shows at [the now-defunct East Village rock club] Brownie's, just as Jesse Malin, which was scary," he says. "It started acoustic, with a piano player, and it all kind of built up from there."

After *The Fine Art of Self Destruction* came 2004's *The Heat*. Both were critically lauded and pure Noo Yawk — of downtown, about downtown, recorded downtown. Then, late last year, Malin lost his place on Grand Street. The building was being turned into condos. It was time for some distance, he decided, so he headed for — gasp — Los Angeles to live for a bit and to record *Glitter in the Gutter*.

"My new label was in L.A., and I had a lot of musician friends who were out there, happy and sober," he explains. "I figured I'd try the Hollywood thing. But it really wasn't for me. I like to walk and live spontaneously. If you walk out there, they think you're a male prostitute or a homeless person. It was very lonely; I'd get out of the studio and everything would be closed."

BY ARIELLE CASTILLO

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Meanwhile his old stomping grounds were becoming increasingly gentrified. Still, he returned to Manhattan, but this time he took a place in, oddly, the typically whitewashed, posh Upper East Side. "It's not downtown, but I've been downtown so much. Up here there's a little more anonymity; I can walk down the street without people wanting to talk to me about what happened at the bar or the gig last night," Malin says. "Besides, downtown is uptown now; it's not where the artists live. And now people are going to Queens, places that I tried to get out of my whole life because they were full of these Archie Bunker types."

Not that comments like this should be taken as pessimism. Rather, the geographic shuffling, the transience, gave Malin a more universal, Zen-like world view focused on treasuring life's passing moments. On the opening track of *Glitter in the Gutter*, "Don't Let Them Take You Down (It's a Beautiful Day!)," Malin catalogues a few of the world's ills: "Hurricanes, love in vain, Murphy's law, days of war." But still, he urges listeners to follow the song's title.

It's the attitude that keeps him going after so long. He misses the feeling of home, his friends, his cats, but he's a dogged road

warrior on an extensive national solo tour. "I'm reading an article about Marley and the Wailers and thinking about the Seventies and how revolutionary that was. You know, people that are pioneers, whether you're a painter, or you run a pet store, or a teacher, or a rock musician. It's about passion, it's about honesty — that's the new danger," he says, on a roll, the tempo of his speech increasing.

"Everything's kind of been done. It's all easy access, the Internet, living like a cyber-digital human sitting on the couch. I think going out to shows is about being around strangers. I'm not religious — to go to a rock show and be in the pit with strangers, that's my religion, my ritual, my tribal thing. All the touring, hard living, sleeping in a bunk and eating bad food ... that's just to get up there and hopefully connect with an audience in a way beyond selling some T-shirts."

Jesse Malin performs with the Wildbirds and Acute on Tuesday, July 3, at Studio A, 60 NE 11th St, Miami. Doors open at 8:00 p.m. Tickets cost \$15, and all ages are welcome. Call 305-358-7625, or visit www.studioami.com.

Contact the author to discuss the story:
arielle.castillo@miaminewtimes.com