

Michelle Willis

Just One Voice

**“Just one voice
is all I need,
Something full,
some open sound”**

Just One Voice invites us into a world of doubt, anxiety, hope, balance and letting go—a process Michelle Willis skillfully guides us through with arresting arrangements that seem complex but are deceptively simple—just like her subject matter. Navigating the sounds and emotions Willis bravely lays bare, expertly produced with Fab Dupont (Andre 3000, Gregory Porter) at Flux Studios, the songs change and unfurl to reveal their meaning: giving voice to smallness, navigating indecision and change, and making room for a new chapter which, in a sense, is finding relief and resolve. The outcome for Willis and for us is nothing less than transcendent.

Willis’s talent is undeniable given her formidable résumé amassed through a variety of collaborations as a session keyboardist and vocalist, as well as the critical reception of her debut *See Us Through* on the GroundUP Music label. Even more impressive is her persistence as a songwriter. A Toronto native, she moved to New York in 2016 with few prospects, save for a monthly residency at Rockwood Music Hall. Within months she was touring in two bands led by David Crosby, another by pop/jazz composer Becca Stevens, and opening for jazz/funk collective Snarky Puppy across the globe. *Just One Voice* was written during the intensity of



photo credit: David Goddard

non-stop travel, penned from the cramped seats of buses, planes and countless green rooms. One night, out on the open road, Willis played the title track for Crosby, her mentor and bandmate, who urged: “No one else sounds like this. This is you. You have to make this record.” So, with the fuel of warm support, Willis was able to secure a prestigious grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to set the album into motion. Having marinated during lockdown with Willis laying down final vocals, *Just One Voice* sprung back to life with the reopening of her beloved New York and her deep desire to connect:

**“I’m reaching out to
every hope I’ve seen,
Every shade of silver lining”**

The album begins with an immersive diatonic experience, “10ths,” which offers listeners a place to let go right

from the very start. The inviting intro is followed by “Liberty,” a vibrant, illustrative tale of the grass being greener in a new city and flirting with risk, a theme also explored in the infectious “Green Grey,” a playful song charged with risky thinking and energy, accentuated by Todd Caldwell’s dynamic organ playing.

The title track “Just One Voice” was written on the upright piano Willis’s mother bought when she was 18—the perfect antidote to the singer-songwriter’s feelings of change, isolation and disconnection. The harmonies discovered on that piano laid the foundation for the warm and woody sounds which ultimately became the template for the album. The lyric “touch / hold / thrill / high,” a private line of questioning made public and honestly revealed—“So tell me am I crazy now? / Is this the way it’s gonna be? / Have you got a shelf made now / For people like me?”—cements the confessional tone of the record.

“Trigger” and “Janet” tread in even darker waters: jealousy, passivity and victimhood. The clarity of Willis’s lyrics

vulnerably exposes the deep crevices of her soul with ideas and thoughts that most keep hidden: “I hope you wake up real soon / ‘cause you got a way to turn a whole lot of love into a bruise.” As with many great works that take time to develop, Willis carried the demo of “Trigger” around on her phone for years, a sparse version with guitar and vocals; the full

beautiful distorted overarching synths alongside Willis on “Think Well,” which she calls “a space for melancholic daydreaming, a hideaway amidst the chaos.” Willis is, indeed, referring to her schedule as a touring musician, one that pulled away from grounding relationships at home, leading to a feeling of a double life,

yet provided the fruitful foundation to test new concepts with inspiring musical confidants.

For instance, after years playing the chord changes from “‘Til the Weight Lifts” at soundchecks all over the world, Willis finally finished writing the song catching respite in a friend’s backyard, watching birds in murmuration. The tune, graced by Grégoire Maret’s harmonica, a symbolic and aural entremet, ushers in the final three tracks on the album, all in

some way struggling with indecision and searching for relief.

The arrangement of “How Come,” with its upbeat anthemic quality brushing up against soaring vocals, manages to negotiate the duality of petty, whiny musings on relationship changes, ultimately finding



album artwork

realization of the track came together in one of the first takes, with Taylor Ashton on banjo and voice turning a private thought into a dynamic conversation.

Collaborations and special guests thoughtfully pepper the album along with the essential bed of sound provided by Willis’ band. Christian Almiron plays

resolve in walking away from an unrelenting situation. Michael McDonald's vocals bring a sweet strength to the song and David Cutler plays buoyant, agile bass lines, both of which clarify the mood of the outro as Willis boldly and joyfully embraces letting go of the pettiness that holds her back, singing "This is it!" an unplanned serendipitous nod to McDonald's 1979 collaboration with Kenny Loggins.

Willis is masterful at creating sensations with sound that allow listeners to properly commune with her lyrics. One example is the cliffhanger feeling of the chord ending the refrain in "On and On," holding us over the edge for a moment until the harmony gracefully leads back to home base. The song tempts listeners to consider taking emotional risks as an actual means to stay grounded. The heartbeat that carries through the song, played by Louis Cato, is the steady sonic support we need.

"Black Night" conjures the images and feelings of a morning after rain which featured a cloudy, murky, purple sky, both ominous and full of potential. According to Willis, "This song is a promise to myself, of what I

can let go of, of taking action in my life, knowing my inner strength and power, and to not let fear get in the way." It is also a bit of a dare to darkness and all it brings, buoyed up by the electric guitar playing of longtime collaborator Thom Gill. As this finale is both the most recent song written and evokes a new songwriting direction, written exclusively on guitar, it seals the past and beckons the future.

About Michelle Willis:

Michelle Willis is a Canadian singer-songwriter and keyboard player based in Brooklyn, NY. She is a contributing member of David Crosby & Sky Trails, David Crosby & Lighthouse, and the Becca Stevens Band.

As a shy kid growing up, singing and playing was a way of communication, a pathway to self expression. "I grew up in the '90s when the hits on the radio were women like Shawn Colvin, Lauryn Hill, Amanda Marshall, Jann Arden, Whitney Houston, Alanis Morissette, Janet Jackson and Sarah McLachlan. These women dominated my emo-brain. They said how they felt; their

songs felt deep, harmonically and lyrically. Their music was a place where all my teenage emotion could live and be perfectly expressed."

It wasn't until later that she grew to learn the vocabulary of the '60s and '70s songwriters, a sound she has grown quite close to given her fixed position in two bands led by American songwriting folk legend David Crosby. After studying jazz in college, the art of songwriting and delivery became the new foundation she leaned on, taking cues from heavyweights like Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder, Carole King, Donny Hathaway, CSNY, Ray Charles, Paul Simon and The Beatles.

Since relocating to New York, Willis has cemented her place as an in-demand keyboard player and singer, touring and recording with a diverse array of artists such as the aforementioned Crosby, Becca Stevens, Zac Brown Band, Iggy Pop, Laura Mvula and Michael McDonald. Taking her unique style and adapting it to a band's sound has contributed to the harmonic melting pot of songwriting that defines her music. ●

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