



Buddy & Julie Miller
In the Throes

After forty years of marriage, Buddy and Julie Miller have learned to welcome a song however it arrives, questioning only where the song is taking them rather than where it originated. There's no process, no assembly-line procedure, just an openness to those bursts of inspiration and those hours of refinement, which means their fourth album together, *In the Throes*, sounds lively and diverse, eccentric and slightly askew: a deeply soulful collision of mournful gospel, dusty country, cosmic blues, ecstatic R&B, and anything else that crosses their minds.

Take "I Been Around," a wild and otherworldly stomp that arrived in Julie's brain one night. "I was asleep upstairs, and Buddy was downstairs in the studio," she recalls. "I got up, walked downstairs, and sang a few notes for him to play on guitar. I sang the whole song in one take, then went back to bed." She promptly forgot all about it. Buddy tinkered with it a little more that night, then he too forgot about it. "It almost got thrown away," he says. "I only found it by accident, when I was erasing some old sessions. If it'd been erased, it would have been like it never even existed." He loved what he found, which he describes as a "spontaneous mess," like a signal from another world. Julie was less impressed. "I didn't have any memory of it, and at first I wasn't about to let it get out! But we played it for some friends and they all liked it. So I just gritted my teeth and let it go."

Groggy and bedeviled yet utterly spellbinding in its rawness and directness, "I Been Around" became the centerpiece on the fearless *In the Throes*, an album thorny with desire and blame. Songs like the slow-burn opener "You're My Thrill" and the aptly titled "I Love You" evoke the exhilaration of love and commitment, but acknowledge the sacrifices you make for a partner, the scars you give as well as the ones you take. Music is an extension of their marriage, borne out of the joy and friction between them.

That partnership has been going strong for nearly fifty years. After meeting in Austin in the mid 1970s, they played together in a few bands. Buddy was awed by Julie's songwriting, by the way she could express knotty emotions with a clarity and purpose. In the 1990s, they pursued careers separately, both as ground-breaking solo artists and Buddy as a producer (Robert Plant, Solomon Burke). Between them they have a Grammy award and several nominations, 13 Americana Music Association Awards, and scores of gold and platinum records from other artists who've cut their songs (including Linda Ronstadt, Levon Helm, Emmylou Harris, and Diana Krall).

In 2001—twenty years into their marriage—they released their debut as a duo, simply titled *Buddy & Julie Miller*, which won the Americana Music Association award for Album of the Year. With each subsequent record—*Written in Chalk* in 2009 and *Breakdown on 20th Avenue South* in 2019—they've pushed hard at the boundaries of Americana music, devising their own idiosyncratic and imaginative equation of styles and genres.

In the Throes came to life during an intensely creative period for Julie, who wrote every song herself (except for one, but keep reading). "I got deep into songwriting mode, and they just kept coming and coming. All kinds of songs, too. Gospel songs and country songs and rhythm-and-blues songs and Celtic influenced songs. I was in that mode for a long time, and the songs were just pouring out of me."

She never knew when a song would announce itself, or what would prompt it, only that she had to be ready to hear it and work it out. One evening she was writing with the TV on, a news station on mute, and "I looked up and saw the news that John Lewis had died. I just started crying, and a song poured out of me." That song was "The Last Bridge You Will Cross," a hymn of heavenly consolation that features harmony vocals by Emmylou Harris and beautiful cello by Matt Slocum (Sixpence None the Richer). Rather than a strict biography of the U.S. representative and Civil Rights hero, it's a meditation on leaving the world better than you found it. "I was so touched by his life, how these men had beaten him until he had to have a metal plate in his head, and he forgives them—like Jesus would do. It's a very sad song, but it's your purpose as a songwriter to touch people where it hurts."

Buddy watched with wonder and admiration as his wife filled up notebooks with lyrics and recorded voice memos with melodies. By his count she ended up with more than one hundred songs—some of them fully written, others simply fragments that she would combine and recombine, at least one written wholecloth while half-asleep—and he began to assemble them into an album. “I played the role of the A&R man, to use an old-fashioned term,” he explains. “I didn’t write on this album, because Julie had all these songs that were really, really great. In my mind we were making a record, so I pulled some out and put them together and played them for her. You start thinning them out to get a vision for the story—what the feel of the record is going to be, what you’re trying to get across, and the story always reveals itself.”

With the story in place, they set about recording and completing the songs (excluding “I Been Around,” which appears on the album in its original form) with a small band of friends at their home in Nashville. *In the Throes* features some of the finest players around Nashville—including drummer Fred Eltringham, bassists Viktor Krauss and Byron House, keyboard player Tim Lauer, and fiddle player Stuart Duncan.

One song in particular took longer to fall into place: “Don’t Make Her Cry,” a co-write between Julie, Regina McCrary, and Bob Dylan. McCrary started the song several years ago, then met with Dylan, who wrote, and rewrote more lyrics. When it came time to write the music, he told her to “give it to Buddy Miller.” Unable to make heads or tails of it, Buddy passed it to Julie, who added more lyrics, moved others around, and set it to music. Swaying to a gentle 6/8 rhythm and featuring a sympathetic lead vocal from Buddy, “Don’t Make Her Cry” sits naturally on the album: a soft-spoken ode to perseverance and protection.

That song, like every other one on *In the Throes*, sounds like no one other than Buddy and Julie Miller. Their stamp is on every note, every word. It’s only their fourth album together, but they’re always creating, always making art together. “Music is such a wonderful thing to have in a relationship,” he says. “That’s how we met back in Austin in the mid 70s. We started playing together, and we’ve been playing together ever since. I love her writing and she tolerates my singing and playing. It’s a lot of give and take, but it’s such a joy.”