
Iris DeMent





On her transcendent new record, *Workin' On A World*, Iris DeMent faces the modern world — as it is right now — with its climate catastrophe, pandemic illness, and epidemic of violence and social injustice — and not only asks us how we can keep working towards a better world, but implores us to love each other, despite our very different ways of seeing. Her songs are her way of healing our broken inner and outer spaces.

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With an inimitable voice as John Prine described, "like you've heard, but not really," and unforgettable melodies rooted in hymns, gospel, and old country music, she's simply one of the finest singer-songwriters in America as well as one of our fiercest advocates for human rights. Her debut record *Infamous Angel*, which just celebrated its 30th anniversary, was recently named one of the "greatest country albums of all time" by *Rolling Stone*, and the two albums that followed, *My Life* and *The Way I Should*, were both nominated for GRAMMYS. From there, DeMent released three records on her own label, Flariella Records, the most recent of which, *The Trackless Woods* (2015), was hailed as "a quietly powerful triumph" by *The Guardian*. DeMent's songs have also been featured in film (*True Grit*) and television (*The Leftovers*) and recorded by numerous artists. Fittingly, she received the Americana Music Trailblazer Award in 2017.

Workin' On A World, her seventh album, started with the worry that woke DeMent up after the 2016 elections: *how can we survive this?* "Every day some new trauma was being added to the old ones that kept repeating themselves, and like everybody else, I was just trying to bear up under it all," she recalls. She returned to a truth she had known since childhood: music is medicine. "My mom always had a way of finding the song that would prove equal to whatever situation we were facing. Throughout my life, songs have been lending me a hand. Writing songs, singing songs, putting them on records, has been a way for me to extend that hand to others."

With grace, courage, and soul, Iris shares 13 anthems — love songs, really — to and for our broken inner and outer worlds. DeMent sets the stage for the album with the title track in which she moves from a sense of despair towards a place of promise. "Now I'm workin' on a world I may never see / Joinin' forces with the warriors of love / Who came before and will follow you and me."

She summons various social justice warriors, both past and present, to deliver messages of optimism. "How Long" references Martin Luther King, while "Warriors of Love" includes John Lewis and Rachel Corrie. "Goin' Down To Sing in Texas" is an ode not only to gun control, but also to the brave folks who speak out against tyranny and endure the consequences in an unjust world. "I kept hearing a lot of talk about the arc of history that Dr. King so famously said bends towards justice," she recalls. "I was having my doubts. But, then it dawned on me, he never said the arc would magically bend itself. Songs, over the course of history, have proven to be pretty good arc benders."

Bending inward, DeMent reaches agilely under the slippery surface of politics. She grapples with loss on the deeply honest "I Won't Ask You Why," while encouraging compassion over hate in the awe-inspiring "Say A Good Word." Album closer

"Waycross, Georgia," encompasses the end of the journey, thanking those along the way. As she approaches subjects of aging, loss, suicide, and service, an arc of compassion elevated to something far beyond words is transmitted. The delicate fierceness encompassed in the riveting power of her voice has somehow only grown over time.

Stalled partway through by the pandemic, the record took six years to make with the help of three friends and co-producers: Richard Bennett, Pieta Brown, and Jim Rooney. It was Pieta Brown who gave the record its final push. "Pieta asked me what had come of the recordings I'd done with Jim and Richard in 2019 and 2020. I told her I'd pretty much given up on trying to make a record. She asked would I mind if she had a listen. So, I had everything we'd done sent over to her, and not long after that I got a text, bouncing with exclamation marks: 'You have a record and it's called *Workin' On A World!*'" With Bennett back in the studio with them, Brown and DeMent recorded several more songs and put the final touches on the record in Nashville in April of 2022.

The result is a hopeful album — shimmering with brilliant flashes of poignant humor and uplifting tenderness — that speaks the truth, "in the way that truth is always hopeful," she explains. Reflecting on the lyrics of the song "The Sacred Now" ("see these

walls/ let's bring 'em on down / it's not a dream; it's the sacred now"), DeMent is reminded of Jesus saying *the Kingdom of God is within you* and the Buddhist activist monk Thich Nhat Hanh saying *the rose is in the compost; the compost is in the rose*. On *Workin' On A World*, Iris DeMent demonstrates that songs are the healing and the healing arises through song.