



Uncharted Waters

Raul Malo keeps his fans guessing—just like they expect him to.

STORY BY KIP KIRBY

46 COUNTRYWEEKLY.COM

When Raul Malo tools up to the curb behind the wheel of an outrageously long-finned, turquoise 1964 Mercury Comet convertible, you'd never guess he's the same guy who's spent many sleep-deprived nights in the past year. Insomnia? No, just a new album, *Sinners & Saints*, which forced the artist out of his creative comfort zone and into uncharted waters.

For the first time, Raul wears every hat—producing, engineering, performing and writing the album himself—in his own home studio. As he says only half-jokingly, “This was my doing, so I’ll have to live with all the blame or all the credit. I enjoyed the process, but never have I been taken out of my natural comfort zone like on this album. I’d wake up in the middle of the night and think, ‘Is this album any good?’ It kicked my ass and it felt good. I think I needed this.”

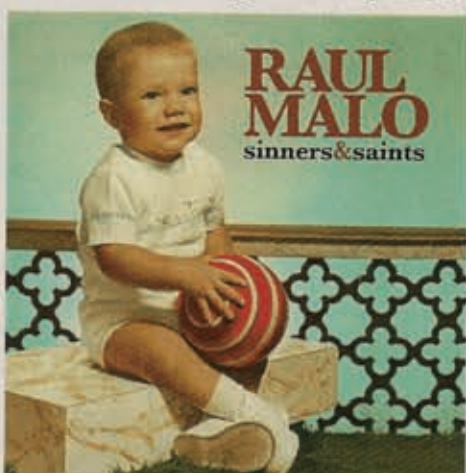
Fortunately, fans have come to expect the unexpected from Raul. Since the Miami native first showed up on country’s radar screen as a founding member of The Mavericks with longtime pal Robert Reynolds, he’s been praised for his musicianship—and pegged for his musical unpredictability. His ethnic Cuban heritage, love of experimentation and ability to sing anything from big-band jazz to Latin ballads to heartfelt country have kept his audiences guessing about what he’ll do next. Raul’s just grateful his fans remain loyal no matter which direction he heads.

“Some people want nothing but romantic ballads from me, some people want a Spanish album, and some people just wish The Mavericks would get back together,” he notes. “I think people have come to expect anything from me. They say, ‘We don’t know what he’s going to come up with,’ which is definitely better than the alternative, ‘Oh, big deal, another Raul Malo record.’”

Sinners & Saints, released Oct. 5, is Raul’s fifth solo album since 2001 and his second for Fantasy Records. But it’s the first one he’s ever done at his own home. “I worked on this record off and on for a year,” he says, “late at

night, in between tour dates, between football games, just whenever. I’d get up and go work on it at all hours. A lot of times, I had no idea what I was doing. Fortunately, my family’s incredibly supportive, and my kids still think what I do for a living is pretty cool.”

In addition to playing guitars, percussion, piano, keyboards, requinto guitar and ukulele (and occasional drums and bass), Raul’s name is on six of the nine songs as a songwriter,



including the Flamenco-flavored title cut, which opens the album and features his distinctive electric guitar. There are songs filled with gentle jibes at the current state of affairs (“Living for Today”), Tex-Mex-laced numbers (“San Antonio Baby”), a reflection on the effects of fame (“Superstar”) and a cover of Rodney Crowell’s “Til I Gain Control Again.” (Asked about Rodney’s reaction to his version, Raul admits he hasn’t had the nerve to play it for him yet. “I hope I did him proud, but what if he doesn’t like it?”)

So how did Raul the producer deal with Raul the artist?

“Oh, Raul the artist is insufferable!” he says, laughing. Turning more serious, he adds, “Because I didn’t have another sounding board working with me this time, I relied a lot on experimentation and instinct, and a lot of flying by the seat of my pants. Eventually, I just went with what felt right to me.”

Once the album was done, Raul took the tracks to Ray Benson’s Austin studio for finishing touches with guests Michael Guerra, the Texas Tornados, The Trishas and Shawn Sahn (son of Tejano music pioneer Doug Sahn). “I learned so much being the producer and

RAUL MALO BY GEORGE GUIRREZ/CONANBDO