

# STARTING OVER... FROM THE TOP

by KIP KIRBY

After nearly 20 years in the music business, Martina McBride is starting over. It's a time of seismic change in the superstar's career — and nobody is more excited than she is. With a new record label, new management, new producer, newly-spotlighted songwriting prowess, new studio recording process and a brand new air of accomplishment, McBride's career is taking on a fresh patina.

"It really does feel like starting over for me — starting over but with a track record and with the success and experience I've had over the years. I feel more mature and more confident, which comes with knowing yourself better. But there are a lot of opportunities now that I haven't had in a long time."

When her contract with RCA Nashville expired in 2010, McBride revved up for new challenges ahead. "I have a lot of friends there and we obviously had a great run," she pointed out. "But there comes a time when you have to step back and say, 'I need something different.' It was a bit of a risk, but you have to do what feels right. It took me a long time to realize that it wasn't a marriage, it was a business relationship."

After weighing her options, McBride decided to join Republic Nashville, the label launched jointly in 2009 by Big Machine Records and Universal Republic. "We had a couple of offers that were really great," she noted. "But what really drew me in the end was (Big Machine Label Group President/CEO) Scott Borchetta and his reputation. Just sitting back and watching what he's been able to do with his artists, and then when I met with him, his enthusiasm and passion for music — not only for the business but for the music. The company is very music-centric. That was fascinating and inspiring to me. I really got the feeling that they get up every day and say, 'Wow, we get to be in the music business!' They're so excited by it. They're aggressive and passionate and doing innovative things, and it's contagious. I wanted to be around that positive energy."

At the same time, the Republic Nashville team was vocal about wanting to help McBride make a great career record. "It wasn't about, 'OK, let's sign her and we'll continue doing what she's done before or we'll see what happens,'" she said. "It was, 'We want you and we want this to be the biggest record of your career.' There was no sense of them signing me only to continue on the same path. Just to have that belief and confidence in me and to see a future that's even bigger than what I've had at this stage of my career was really exciting."

The feeling was mutual. "Scott and I are big fans of Martina's," explained Jimmy Harnen, President, Republic Nashville. "So when we found out she was looking for a new home, we didn't run after her — we *raced* after her. An artist of her stature is timeless."

Borchetta planted the seeds for another first. "We were talking and Scott said, 'Have you ever thought about recording outside of Nashville?' I said no," McBride recalled. "He said, 'Well, maybe you should think about it. I think you need to get out of your comfort zone a little bit and see what happens if you get away.' I think he understood that when I'm here (in Nashville), I wear a lot of hats. I get to be a musician part time, but I'm a mom first. I only get to focus on music a few hours every day before I have to pick up the kids from school and figure out what to make for dinner every night. For Scott to say that, I thought it showed a lot of insight. It was a respectful way to say, 'You need to focus on the music if this album is really important to you.'"

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With Byron Gallimore, who would co-produce with McBride, and a group of seasoned Nashville musicians in tow, she headed down to Atlanta's Southern Tracks Recording studio in January in the middle of an ice storm that shut the city down. "There was nothing to do there but make music," she said, laughing. "We couldn't go shopping. We couldn't go out to eat. Every day we'd slide across the parking lot from the hotel and work in the studio, making music all day." The proximity to Nashville allowed her to return home to see her daughters Ava, 5, Delaney, 16, and Emma, 13, mid-session, yet being away from home for several days at a clip furnished her the luxury of focusing totally on the music.

When McBride's album, as yet untitled, comes out in October, fans and industry alike might be surprised to find that most of the songs are co-written by the artist herself. For the first time in her career, she found herself with plenty of time on the front end to stretch her songwriting skills.

"I started writing and looking for songs between signing with my new management and signing the new record deal," she said. "While I was meeting with people to see what would happen, I began taking song meetings.

Then I thought, 'I've got this time and all three girls are in school all day,' so I didn't have to worry that I was taking time away from them. I decided I'm just going to see what happens. I love writers, and I'm not an artist who now thinks I have to write everything I record. But people were encouraging me to write and wanted to write with me, so I just started doing it. Because of it, I think this record shows a lot of different sides of my personality. I think the songwriting peels back a layer and shows a whole other part of me."

McBride's co-producer can't say enough about the singer's craft. "This was our first time in the studio together, and she was amazing," Gallimore enthused. "She has perfect pitch, delivers 100 percent, and the one thing that

slayed me was how she brought her songwriting in on a level that she's never done before. I think she may have written one or two things in the past for an album, but people are going to look at this album and go, 'Wow, she wrote that one? And that one? And that one?'"

Case in point: "Teenage Daughters," written by McBride, Brad Warren and Brett Warren. "The first time we all listened to it, we looked at each other and said, 'That's the first single!'" said Harnen. "The decision took all of about three seconds. A few weeks later, our entire promotion staff was running around the Country Radio Seminar with their iPods, saying, 'Hey, listen to this!' and playing the single for radio every chance we could get. Later that week, we invited radio and industry executives to an evening with Martina at her home, where we officially debuted the single. The reaction was over-the-top amazing. Radio was asking 'When can I get this' or saying 'This is an add right now!' It was like a fever and so much fun."

The label followed with a "Martina Live by Request" promotion in which 24 nationwide Country radio morning shows were given a list of McBride's hits to post on their Web sites so listeners could vote on which song they would most like to hear her perform live on the radio. McBride spent two different mornings on the

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air with a full band, performing each market's biggest vote-getter live. "Let me tell you this," Harnen said, chuckling. "We all knew Martina was an amazing vocalist, but when I witnessed her singing songs in full voice at 7 o'clock in the morning, well, kids, just don't try this at home."

As the fastest-rising McBride single since "This One's for the Girls" in 2003, "Teenage Daughters" fanned anticipation for the album. Plans are to spread the news through all levels of media over at least two weeks leading up to the release date. "Martina has stepped up her game with this record in a major way," said McBride's manager Clint Higham, President, Morris Artists Management. "My hope is to re-establish her as a headliner, to show more of her personality, to let the public and the industry see there's more to her than this great big voice. Every time Martina steps up to the plate, she delivers. Certainly her voice is what draws people in, but I want to show that she's much bigger than that. When you talk with her and see her enthusiasm for what's ahead and what she wants to do, it's obvious she's not complacent at all. This lights a fire under all of us."

As for McBride, she has high hopes at what she sees as first-time opportunities the second time around. Touched by the feedback "Teenage Daughters" is eliciting from parents and teenagers who tell her they recognize themselves in her lyrics, she can't wait to visit with fans at CMA Music Festival before starting her summer tour schedule and promotion for the new album.

Her bucket list includes one day singing the national anthem at the Super Bowl and perhaps having a song in a movie so she can sing on the Academy Awards. But these pale in comparison to what she wants most: "My biggest desire is just to keep making records and keep touring. I hope to get to do this for as long as I can because I love it so much."

[MartinaMcBride.com](http://MartinaMcBride.com)



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