



## MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO

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New album : « Weather » out on the 8th of November

Biography by Romain Grossman

Meshell has changed. So has her music. It's more peaceful, freer. Her new album, *Weather*, cloaks itself in the colours of autumn, full of in-between shades and hues and with a certain mildness to it. The singer has let her feelings carry her along. Meshell has never been scared of sharing her most intimate thoughts in explicit or colourful terms that always come from the heart. As ever, she is true to herself. But *Weather's* folk sensibility and pregnant acoustic melodies make this a supremely accessible album.

*"For a long time I was at war with everyone else. I dug my heels in, I fought hard. That's all over now. I have my opinions, but they're no longer a source of conflict with the rest of the world."* On *Weather* Meshell's usually deep vocals slip into a register more like a whisper, sharing secrets about subjects that are straightforward, almost light-hearted. She has pared down her style to something like pop. *"I started to write this album on the guitar and you can hear it. The final atmosphere's gentler."*

And then the singer agreed without fuss to put her fate in the hands of a producer. Joe Henry (Ani DiFranco, Bettye Lavette, Allen Toussaint, etc.) helped her reveal a different side to herself. And Meshell went along with this. *"I've known him since the Bitter album; Craig Street introduced us. I hadn't called on someone from outside for several albums. But contrary to what everyone thinks, I love getting other opinions, hearing a different point of view and allowing myself to be led by someone with strong ideas. It's a dialogue. This kind of experience really motivates me."* One might well have imagined her bent protectively over her compositions, her own personal, contradictory and profound world. But she says that she wants to continue this experience in future projects with other musicians. She mentions Brian Eno and Lee Scratch Perry.

She worked the way she likes to with Joe Henry - just two or three takes to capture the spontaneity and freshness of the moment. She is accompanied by Chris Bruce (guitar), Deantoni Parks (drums), Keefus Ciancia (keyboards), Gabe Noel (cello) and guests Jay Bellerose (drums) and Benji Hughes (backing vocals). Meshell recently did some producing herself – for jazz singer Laïka Fatien and rising star Selah Sue. Despite the pop-folk sound of *Weather*, jazz remains a major source of inspiration. *"I love jazz musicians. They're free; they have no fear. I've done pop and there are lots of barriers, lots of holding back. You have to stick to the conventions. Jazz musicians embrace uncertainty and adventure, even in their private lives. They're more open and often more skilled, both in the studio and on stage."*

On *Weather*, Meshell sings of the ups and downs of love, one of her favourite subjects. Her heroines are marked by the void left by the loved one (*"Object"*) or else, like a game of mirrors, pour out their heart about the hurt they have caused others. She does a cover of Leonard Cohen's *"Chelsea Hotel"*, dedicated to Janis Joplin, an extremely sad and somewhat sexist song, as well as *"Don't Take My Kindness for Weakness"* by Soul Children, a sixties soul band, whose message she has made her own. Her own lyrics are always concise, precise or allusive, full of images and poetry (*"I want to be your answer"*). *"They're like mantras, some phrases cast to the wind, images that pop into my mind. Then I add the music."* She also talks about the wider world on a few tracks. *'Oysters'* is about *"the change that everyone talks about but never comes"*. Meshell explains that *"Consumerism is gaining ground all the time. We all live to get a new car or a new computer, but what's the point?"* So, join the great world party? *"Not for me,"* she replies in *Dirty World*. *"I live*



*two hours from New York. I ran away from all the dirt. There's a farm where I live, and healthy food. I love cooking – it's not all that different from making music. You need ingredients, and the greatest pleasure is when you share it with others."*

She's wary of politics. She believed in Barack Obama. She now realises that *"he's not as progressive as I hoped and he hasn't got as much power as I imagined"*. She's not disillusioned, though; her children are a great source of joy to her. She speaks very tenderly of them, as she does of her partner, who *"helps me keep things in balance"*.

Meshell had quite a bit of success in her early electric days with a mixture of hip-hop, funk and rock (*Plantation Lullabies* in 1993, *Peace Beyond Passion* in 1996), before branching out into less predictable projects. She doesn't miss that initial buzz, however; it wasn't something she went looking for. *"Music is my only guide. I don't care if people pigeonhole me. Miles Davis is my hero. He covered Cindy Lauper and Michael Jackson, and he didn't give a hoot about what the purists said."*

On *Chance*, incidentally, she professes her desire to continue along her current uncertain, risky and decidedly uncharted path. *"I make music because I love it. There's no point otherwise. I'm well aware that people will like some of my songs and not others – and that's an even better reason to be in harmony with my principles and my desires. I decided I wanted to be a musician after listening to Prince, who could switch from Controversy to Purple Rain."* Despite retreating into the country, far from the noise and bustle of the big city, Meshell wonders whether *"all these people can live together for much longer in peace when they want such different things. If it all collapses, if this capitalist illusion comes crashing down, civilisation will be rebuilt by tribes,"* she predicts. Her tribe? *"I imagine mine out in the wild, where people make do with the bare minimum."*

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