

# MARTIN SEXTON

## *Sugarcoating*

*Sugarcoating*, Martin Sexton's new studio album (April 6 release) finds this one-of-a-kind writer/artist doing what he does best: locating larger truths within the specific details of the life he's living. "I write from personal experience — my own hang-ups and quirks, good times and bad times," he acknowledges. "That keeps it real."

The title song, disturbing in its theme and audacious in its presentation, takes "keeping it real" to another level entirely. It's an unsettling look at post 9/11 reality, encapsulated in the lines "I wonder why nobody wonders why/with all the sweet sweet sugarcoating/the nightly news gone entertainment biz/and the politicians out showboatin'/One day somebody tell it like it is." Which is precisely what Sexton accomplishes right here. The fact that this urgent message is embedded in a danceable, happy-go-lucky arrangement complete with backing vocals by what Sexton calls his "cowboy trio" only serves to deepen the song's impact.

Sexton thinks of "Sugarcoating" not as a protest song but as "a *questioning* song — what's up with that? The last couple of years have been an awakening for me about how the world seems to work and not work. There's so much bullshit — I don't believe a thing I hear anymore on the news or anywhere else; you've gotta dig if you want a real answer about what's going on. I'm concerned, because I feel since 9/11 the world has gone downhill, our rights are going out the window and the powers that be continue to usurp our freedom under the guise of safety. My music has always been more about inspiration and entertainment, but this time I felt the need to toss some awareness into the mix." The title song brings a new contextual overlay — and an unmistakable edge — to Sexton's specialty: examining the joys and sorrows of everyday existence.

The Syracuse-born, western Mass.-based artist describes *Sugarcoating* as "a photo album filled with snapshots of my family and friends." The new release was tracked live off the floor in seven days with a remarkably cohesive studio band composed of what Sexton describes as "amazing players, the best you could find": drummer Dave Mattacks, guitarist Duke Levine, bassist Marty Ballou and keyboard player Tom West. "Each song is so stylistically different from the next," says Sexton, "I've always preferred records that range, sort of like the White Album from "Rocky Raccoon" to "Revolution No. 9." At one time industry types tried to convince me to stick one genre, but it was like wearing a suit that didn't fit. I recorded this album with no rehearsals, no pre-production, using all vintage gear from what went into the mics to what came out onto the analog tape. The fellas and I gathered around the big kitchen table at the studio, I'd play them the song, then we'd go in and start tracking. We nailed every one of them in four or five takes at most, and a couple are take ones. I like making records like the old jazz guys did — they just showed up and worked it out."

"Long Haul," Bakersfield-rooted right down to Levine's Telecaster-through-Vibralux riffs, is a bluesy, earth-toned shuffle that celebrates the unparalleled richness of a long-term relationship. "Ain't no passing phase/I want it all," Sexton sings in a burry baritone that resonates with conspiratorial intimacy. "I'm in it for the long haul." In the romp "Boom Sh -Boom," set in the Fez, a club in New York's East Village, Sexton extols the virtues of dancing over those of downing brewskis. "That's a true story, blow for blow," he says. "I met my future wife there while playing a gig at the Fez in the late '90s. She offered me a Red Stripe, and I'm a recovering alcoholic, so I said 'No thanks,' and the rest is history."

The weight of the world so powerfully represented by "Sugarcoating" brings added resonance to highly personal yet powerfully relatable songs like "Shane," in which Sexton imagines the experiences awaiting his infant son ("Shane soon you'll be walking on your own/strange sometimes I wish you'd just keep crawling"); "Found," which asserts that our wired existence drowns out our ability to see others clearly ("I'm a man who seeks high places/searching for common ground"); and "Always Got Away," a lament about missed opportunities and unforeseen circumstances ("I really thought I had it all/but reality came falling down"). Sexton says, "It's about forgiveness — forgiving oneself, the mistakes you've made in the past. It's about knowing who I am and who I'm not, and about having a conscious contact with my inner voice and my higher power . . . It's also about me trying to hold onto my baggage, but somehow it still manages to slip away."

Not every song is heavy. First single "Livin the Life" is a buoyant, joy-of-existence piece, with a churning clavinet burrowing a deep soul groove right through it; "Stick Around" is a piano-driven Beatlesque bouncer complete with an *Abbey Road* reference in the lyric; and "Easy on the Eyes" is a finger-snapping, ragtime mating call, complete with a voice trumpet solo from Sexton.

The album culminates with "Alone," on which the existential swoops of Levine's National steel guitar underscore the poignancy of the lyric ("It's called alone/the coldest note a throat can sing/the coldest light a dawn can bring"), and the closing "Just To Be Alive," a lovely, life-affirming ballad that erupts in a wild instrumental climax — "like a storm front is moving in," Sexton explains. This passage seems to intimate that in this life you can never know what's coming next, making the moment you're in that much more precious.

It's Sexton's uncanny ability to connect the personal to the universal via songs like these — mating heartfelt, unflinchingly candid lyrics with genre-spanning performances — that has earned him such a devoted following among fans and critics alike. *The New York Times'* Jon Pareles wrote that the artist "jumps beyond standard fare

on the strength of his voice, a blue-eyed soul man's supple instrument . . . his unpretentious heartiness helps him focus on every soul singer's goal: to amplify the sound of the ordinary heart." He's also renowned among his peers. John Mayer, who singles out Sexton as a primary inspiration, calls him "one of the greatest singers of our generation."

With *Sugarcoating*, Sexton may well have made his defining record. It's an unquestionable high point for this modern-day troubadour who headlines premiere venues from the Fillmore in San Francisco to Nokia Theatre Times Square, oversees his label KTR and derives great satisfaction from livin' the life he's made for himself. These are the fruits of a combination of rarefied talent, fierce determination, "and work — showin' up," he adds, sounding like Jeff Bridges' Bad Blake character in the film *Crazy Heart*. "I sing for free, man. I get paid to travel."