

FIGHT. SURRENDER. BALANCE.

Serena Ryder's Newest Album,
Utopia, Embraces the Light and the Dark

By **CINDY FILIPENKO**

Ten years ago, singer-songwriter Serena Ryder came to national prominence with the release of the single “Weak in the Knees.” A heartbreakingly beautiful ballad about unrequited love, the single garnered Ryder a Juno for best new artist, the first of what is now a handful of the Canadian music awards.

On the summer day of this interview, she is anticipating the release of the first single off her sixth studio album, the philosophically titled *Utopia*. The anticipated follow-up to 2013’s *Harmony*, *Utopia* seems the natural next step for an artist who continues to explore the themes of love and loss through a lens of ego-less honesty.

The album’s first single, “Got Your Number,” released at the end of June, is reminiscent of the bass-heavy “Stompa,” the hit single from *Harmony*. Set in a bowling alley during a “Women’s Psychic Weekend,” the video for this driving pop song, with its earworm of a chorus, is fun, funny and

features an all-female cast. It’s also the most accessible single Ryder has released. It’s got a fantastic bass line, smart lyrics and a singalong chorus: “Got your number, got your number/ Finally awaking from the spell I was under.” It is indicative of a number of songs on *Utopia*, an album that just might turn Serena Ryder into a household name.

“I feel [*Utopia* is] both a change of direction and a natural evolution musically,” says Ryder. “I’ve realized a lot of struggle in my life has come from fighting the wind, where nature is trying to take me naturally. A lot of this album has come from the struggle. I’ve had to fight. I’ve had to surrender, and then I’ve had a lot of balance.”

Fight. Surrender. Balance. Those three words are shorthand for the process of learning to love herself, a process that informed both *Harmony* and *Utopia*, both of which were created in the aftermath of painful breakups.



Photo: Richard Sibbald

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“I fell out of love with myself, fell back in love with myself and made an album,” Ryder says simply. “And what happens when you fall in love with yourself? You fall in love with another person.”

A third album revisiting the themes of *Harmony* and *Utopia* seems unlikely. Ryder is in love with, and engaged to, Trews frontman Colin MacDonald. She seems grounded and happy, two states of being that haven’t always come easily to the 33-year-old musician who deals with anxiety and depression.

“Depression tells you lies and masks who you are, and puts a mask over your eyes so you can’t see anything beautiful—not even yourself,” says Ryder. “I lifted the veil of depression through things I chose to do in my life, things like eating well, exercising, sleeping more, taking care of myself and being gentle with myself.”

During her tour for her 2008 release, *Is it OK?*, Ryder suffered frequent anxiety attacks that made her feel alone and isolated. It’s been more than a year since she’s experienced the heart-racing dizziness that makes a person feel, at best, like they are going to faint, and at worst like they are going to die.

“I feel like the worst part about being depressed or having anxiety is that you think nobody else feels that way,” says Ryder. “Nobody can possibly know how you feel. It’s so terrible. And so you feel you need to keep a secret. It’s the stigma that hurts. I found that the more people I met who were in the same boat as me, the less it hurt and the less I felt ashamed.”

By being open about her challenges with anxiety and depression, Ryder is helping to encourage the national dialogue on mental illness and mental health.

“For most of my career, people come up to me on the street or after a show and say that just me talking about mental health has been helpful to them.”

Recently, Ryder has expanded her circle of influence by joining fellow Canadian celebrities Mary Walsh, Howie Mandel, Clara Hughes and Michael Landsberg in being a spokesperson for Bell Media’s “Let’s Talk” campaign, which is aimed at educating people about mental illness.

Getting behind causes she believes in is nothing new to the socially active singer-songwriter. Ryder, by giving both time and money, supports more than 40 environmental causes.

“I have a lot of investments in different eco organizations. I put a lot of what I make on tour into what I care about,” she explains. “I put a lot into my family and my home, which is Mother Earth.”

In August 2015, Ryder, whose love of nature was fostered travelling the trails behind her childhood home in Millbrook, Ontario, was featured on CBC’s second installment of *Quietest Concert Ever*, a series that brings music to unique outdoor spaces while respecting the sanctity of the environment. This is achieved by having music broadcast to an audience that hears the music through wireless headphones.

Ryder performed on the ocean floor during low tide in the Bay of Fundy. The Bay of Fundy, located in New Brunswick’s Fundy National Park, is considered one of the seven natural wonders of North America. It boasts one of the greatest tidal ranges in the world, measured at 50 vertical feet.

In practical terms, that meant that the stage Ryder performed on could be submerged in under three hours. The technical team had 12 hours to set up the venue, produce a concert for an audience of more than 1,000 and get all the gear back to higher ground. The show was tested exactly once before being recorded.

It went off without a hitch. Ryder sang through a gold-plated Sennheiser handheld transmitter and her band used similar “noiseless” equipment. The audience quietly danced along. The concert was the green, pop-rock equivalent of a silent rave.

“When I was asked about it, I responded with a gigantic ‘yes,’” recalls Ryder. “It was so cool an idea. It was magical.”

“The beauty of having the headphones was that we were able to hear the music—the energy was going up, but it wasn’t affecting nature. The sound—it wasn’t going out and bouncing off the trees or the mountains. We could be in nature without disturbing it.”

“Parks Canada was a partner on the show and obviously their priority is to keep the integrity of the space. So whatever CBC did, they did with respect for nature.”

Ryder takes inspiration not only from the physical aspects of nature but also from the metaphysical. The title for her new album links to a parable about two wolves and an elder.

“Basically, an elder is talking to a child and says, ‘There is a battle going on inside each of us between the light wolf and the dark wolf.’ The child asks, ‘Which wolf wins?’ And the elder replies, ‘The one you feed.’”

In most accounts, the story ends there. However, longer versions observe that wisdom comes when both animals are nurtured—dark and light.

“I believe if you feed both wolves you get utopia. My definition of utopia is when the light and dark

marry. So I have that as a symbol for the record ... a 3-D triangle that is dark, light and grey.”

Three years in the making, *Utopia* divides its 12 songs equally into three distinct categories: dark, light and, of course, grey.

“Making [*Utopia*] has taken me to dark places, light places and places in the middle,” she says. It’s my goal in life, and I think everyone’s, to find some kind of balance. That’s what *Utopia* represents for me.”

That balance for Ryder is coming, in part, from taking on only work she wants. For example, she anticipates that the tour for *Utopia* will be extensive in terms of the countries she will travel to. However, she is committed to doing fewer concerts.

“It will be quality not quantity,” she laughs, adding more seriously: “For your emotional, spiritual and mental health, sometimes you have to be like a turtle.”

For a turtle, Ryder is not afraid of putting herself out there. Last summer, for example, she was the voice behind the official anthem of the Toronto 2015 Pan Am/Parapan Am Games.

“I was asked to write a song with Stephan Moccio, who lives in L.A. now, for the Pan Am Games. We wrote a song and it wasn’t chosen. Another song was chosen and that was “Together We Are One,” written by Murray Daigle, Jasmine Pelham and Bobby John [Pelham]. And they still wanted me to sing it. We listened to it, and it totally kicked our bum asses.”

Sure enough, Ryder’s performance of “Together We are One,” at the closing ceremonies of the Games was mind-blowing.

“It was the largest audience I had ever played in front of,” says Ryder, who was backstage when Kanye West did his famous “mic drop” 13 minutes into his set at the Games’ closing ceremonies.

Unlike many of the rapper’s critics, who viewed West’s throwing of his mic in the air and walking off stage as an act by a temperamental divo (a mic malfunction may have been a factor), Ryder sees the mic drop incident as an example of artistic expression.

“I think a big part of Kanye’s artistic essence is to create friction, and I have learned from being in my relationship that friction is what creates fire. And healthy friction is really good, and I think Kanye is a master at creating that.”

Ryder, who is also a painter, believes that all art, whether it’s West’s or her own, must stand on its own as a finished product released to the world.

“I don’t mean to sound weird, but it’s not up to me to define the music. It’s for other people to

put what labels they want on it—my definitions are for me. Music is like abstract art; it’s whatever you see and what you feel.”

With a handful of singles, including the highly danceable “Fire Escape,” which features ethereal vocals begging for a remix, “Electric” and “Me and You,” *Utopia* is more radio-friendly than Ryder’s previous album. And the vocals on powerhouse ballad “Killing Time” clearly demonstrate why Ryder’s maturing voice is increasingly being compared to Adele’s.

There is a confidence, openness and expansiveness to the sound of *Utopia* that *Harmony* sought to reach. Featuring strong melodies, evocative lyrics, and rich vocals, *Utopia* is a cohesive, masterful and accessible album.

And, like Ryder these days, it is ultimately happy. ❁

“Depression tells you lies and masks who you are, so you can’t see anything beautiful—not even yourself.” —SERENA RYDER

