

How Martha

After a long period out of the spotlight, Martha Davis, former and current lead singer/songwriter of The Motels,

is once again ready to take on the crazy music business. She's writing and recording songs for the next record. (You know all the old ones—"Only The Lonely," "Suddenly Last Summer," "Shame," etc.). This time around, she's calling the shots.

An avid thrift-store junkie, Martha surrounds herself with items that others have discarded. Her studio is lined with multicolored drapes and assorted kitsch, an assemblage of dissimilar things that somehow look right when viewed as a whole. In her life, Martha has shown the same tendency to use what comes her way, to rise above the garbage and to make art out of her discoveries.

We had the opportunity to ask Martha a few questions and listened in amazement as she told us the saga of how she got where she is now.

When did you get started as a musician and songwriter?

When I was eight years old my babysitter taught me three chords on guitar. I

didn't write my first song until I was fifteen, when I became an Air Force wife and moved to Tampa, Florida.

Fifteen years old and pregnant, I moved just outside McDill Air Force Base. That would cause anyone to write songs. We lived in a little house at the end of the runway, and we didn't have a telephone, radio, or television. I had my first baby at fifteen and when she was taking her nap I'd get bored. That's when I started writing songs.

How long did you stay there?

Two years. I pretty much resigned myself to my life there. But when my husband was sent for special training, I got to come home, and realized that what I really wanted to do was art. Music still was only for myself. It was

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always my savior—somewhere I went when I needed to work through something. When I got home, I had this vision of myself 40 years down the line on some Air Force base with curlers in my hair, fluffy slippers, a beer in one hand and chocolates in the other, and I just went—ahgrrrrr!

Music started coming up to the top and I rejected the thought of ever becoming a painter. My friend Lisa Brenneis said, "Why don't you come over to my house? I've got a band." That was the beginning of The Motels and I still blame her to this day! We lived in Berkeley and the band was called the Warfield Foxes. We made a demo tape and thought we were badass.

Was it stuff you had written?

No. At that point the writers were mostly Dean [Chamberlain] and Chuck [Wada] because I never thought my writing was for public consumption.

I was in a top-40 band, trying to keep my family alive. Then my mom committed suicide. I found her diary and in it she talked about how all her life, she'd given up what she loved to try to please everybody else. When I read that, I realized that what I wanted to do was music.

My dad told me I was crazy. "You've got two kids. What are your chances of making it?" he said. But if I hadn't read what my mom wrote, I probably would not have pursued music. I told my kids, "It's not gonna be easy, but if I don't try, I'm going to resent you later for it and maybe hate myself." They were like, "Okay, whatever. What's mom talking about?" They were probably five and three years old at the time.

A year after my mother died, my father died too, leaving me some inheritance money. The kids and I went off on this incredible journey at a time when chicks, women, babes were not really big in the biz. The icon of the day was Patti Smith, who was ground-breaking and amazing. Blondie was just coming out of New York, and there was this other girl, Chrissie Hynde, who was real badass and made me think I wasn't the only girl playing guitar and writing songs. No

way you could play there was if you were signed to a label, so we put together this Radio Free Hollywood show. Three bands had garage sales and we scraped up \$900 between us. That was like a billion dollars to us! We got kegs of beer and rented a hall and threw a show with the Dogs, the Pop, and the Motels. Shortly after for some reason—I'm sure it's only coincidence—the Starwood called and asked if we would like to play there. Then the Whiskey called. Pretty soon local bands were playing these places without album deals. I'm not saying that we did it single-handedly, but it was successful. It worked. We opened for Van Halen, and then we were rocking.

You opened for Van Halen?

They weren't signed yet. They played the Starwood and we opened for them. The boys—Dean and Chuck—were in boy rock heaven.



Her Groove Back

By Audrey Bilger and Cheryl Pawelski

guys wanted to play with girls, so I was really cagey. I took the money from my inheritance and spent it on PA equipment. The boys said, "Well, she's a chick, but she's got gear!"

Did you change your name to the Motels when you moved to LA?

No, we were still the Warfield Foxes. Then we changed it to The Angels of Mercy. We were going to our very first gig at Barney's Beanery and driving down Santa Monica. I told Dean, who had thought up The Angels of Mercy, that it wasn't a good name unless we were giving out soup or something. He looked up and there were all these motels and he went, "How about the Motels?" We said, "Yeah, groovy, great, perfect, you rule."

We tried to make some noise, but there was no place to play. There were two clubs, the Starwood and the Whiskey, and the only

One night we had a pretty good show and afterwards a guy from Capitol Records named John Carter expressed interest in the band. After pouring a glass of wine in his lap because I was nervous, I went back and told the guys. Right then and there, the drummer announced he was quitting. Since I wanted to rock with strange, new, crazy visions, I told the guys they had to get a new singer, too. That was the end of the first incarnation of the Motels.

Here I was. I had moved to Hollywood, come close to getting a record deal, which nobody does anyway, and now I had nothing. I was starting over and I was a mess. I remember waking up to overflowing ashtrays and guitar picks stuck to my forehead! My kids and I were living in squalor. It was disgusting, depressing and depraved. It

was all those things you think you need in rock and roll.

Then Jeff Jourard showed up. Jeff, is a very, very straight-ahead guy and I was groveling on the ground. He told me what I needed to do and I was so relieved to have someone picking up that end of it, that I thought, "This is good." Pretty soon we had gotten the band together. We only played out for six months when Capitol Records showed up again.

When did the band start performing your material? All along?

Yes. From the time we moved to LA we performed my songs.

The first couple of records were good and fun, but I wasn't able to get into the whole recording thing. I never wanted to open my mouth because I have this phobia that if you open your mouth when you don't know what you're talking about, you're an asshole. I figured I should shut up and learn. Most of my career I was just scared shitless. I never had the confidence to be assertive about what I wanted musically. As time went on, that took a toll. Different producers would

record company insisted that I was the focal point of the band because I was the one that wrote the songs. I fought the whole time, saying "It's a band, it's a band, it's a band." Then we recorded the *Shame* and *Shock* albums.

Did the singles from those albums chart?

Yeah, but we could see a demise going on. The morale was definitely not there. We started on the next album and I was trying to get that whole *Motels* spirit, but it was just gone. It was just over. I called everybody over to the bar across the street from where we were recording, and one by one I bought them a drink and fired them. Michael called it the St. Valentine's day massacre because it was February 14.

Then I had a solo album on my hands with some pretty songs on it. The people at Capitol said it was brilliant, compared it to Joni Mitchell, and said every song was a hit. They released two songs at once, which could have been a brilliant marketing ploy. But actually, it ended up splitting it.

When we finished the record, Capitol refused to pay for any tours and Australia wanted me to play there.

"The people at Capitol said it was brilliant, compared it to Joni Mitchell, and said every song was a hit."



MARTHA DAVIS ON THE TOUR BUS FOR THE 1982 U.S. TOUR OF ALL FOUR ONE
PHOTO BY MARTY JOURARD

want me to be this way or that way, and as long as I was doing music, I'd get into it somehow. You could put me in country and western and I would get into it. But when I look back that wasn't what I wanted to do.

My life back then was pretty much summed up by "Only the Lonely." There I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing, and a side of me was completely miserable.

How were you able to keep writing songs?

Every time I sat down with my guitar, it was like some kind of exorcism.

At that point I got cancer. I still maintain that I got cancer because the only way I was going to stop the abuse was to lie down. My mom used to say, "If it looks like you're going to get hit, lie down in the gutter." That's what my body did. I knew that what was happening was the sum total of how sad I was psychically. My whole spirit was gone and I was tired. But I guess I wanted to live after all.

After we recorded *All Four One*, I was on auto-pilot, which is what I do in times of stress. The band was pretty much at an end and the

So I put together a tour in Australia and when I came back I had had enough. Capitol had changed so drastically since I first signed. I called my lawyer and said, "Get me off this label, Something's gone terribly wrong!"

I didn't write a song for a year. I went back to my little house in Encino and drank a lot. I upholstered and refinished furniture. I did anything that would give me instant gratification. In the business, you don't get any instant gratification.

Were your kids grown by that time?

Yes. My youngest daughter was married and I sat there and stewed and gardened. Then the little survival Martha came back up and said, "You're not doing anything except dying." I was planting more and more stuff and that house was getting darker and darker. All of a sudden I thought, "If you want to live, you'd better start working out. You'd better get your life back together." I started writing again.

Finally, this amazing shrink, this shrink to all my friends, totally raked me across the coals. In six sessions he freed me of so much crap, and after the sixth time, he said, "I think you're done." I sold half of what I owned, left the little house in the Valley where I'd been sequestered for fourteen years and moved to the beach, where there's actual oxygen. I quit smoking, quit drinking, and then started writing like nobody's business. I'm now writing four good songs a week. They are a crazy, eclectic mix from your happiest, sappiest songs to your gnarliest, creepiest.

I've got enough confidence in myself now that I really believe I deserve money for my art. I know it sounds stupid, but for the first time in my life, I feel worthy. 