

Ali McGuirk [Full Biography] — WATERTOP

Ali McGuirk has never been a church mouse. In fact, these days, she's standing at the pulpit. "I feel like I'm writing lyrics that are preaching," McGuirk said with a laugh, realizing in real time how much her voice as an artist has evolved while writing and arranging her latest album, *Watertop*. "I'm actually delivering a message, not necessarily processing my feelings, but delivering my thoughts on the matter. That felt like a different role to embody as a songwriter."

Par for the course, McGuirk has made an exceptional album. Her 2022 release, *Til It's Gone*, was widely acclaimed and praised as earthy, tender, and introspective. The atmospheric songs earned her adoration and accolades, including being selected as one of *The Boston Globe's* Top 50 Albums of the Year.

This time around, she leans into creating experimental soundscapes filled with her soulful, smoldering sound and aims right for the heart with her songwriting. Altogether, the songs are a microscopic look at our societal values. McGuirk shies away from nothing, exploring the meaning of things like God, empathy, love, and greed.

It's hard to pinpoint one exact moment that led to the freedom you hear in McGuirk's songwriting on *Watertop*. Perhaps the most important of them all, though, was treating social activism—and her care for others—as a spiritual practice. This transformation gave *Watertop* its *raison d'être*, which comes at you quickly with the opening song: a shimmering, soul-forward track called *Love Goes First*. In it, McGuirk sings, "We're trying to hold on to what we cannot hold on to / But it's love / Love is what we need," over a drum machine and a synth-infused groove. McGuirk's harmonies were sung by Cilla Bonnie, whose buttery vocals set the stage for the spirit of this opening track.

"Thematically and conceptually, it's definitely a thesis to the record," McGuirk said of "Love Goes First." Lyrically, it sets the stage for the album. Although *Watertop* dances through a range of emotions, McGuirk asserts that there's nothing more essential than love.

The supporting band across *Watertop* is one McGuirk is deeply bonded with. They began playing together in 2017 when McGuirk released her first record, *Slow Burn*. Since then, the band, which McGuirk lovingly calls her polyamorous musical life partners, has only expanded, now including guitarist Sebastian Falvo. On *Watertop*, the band is tight and cohesive—despite experimentations with genres and tones—in the way only long-time collaborators can be. D'Vibes, (King Fish, Marcus King) an accomplished multi-genre musician in his own right, plays keys throughout the record. His thoughtfully chosen tones marry classic funk to McGuirk's rootsy sound. *Watertop*, grounded in the R&B tradition, pushes McGuirk's sound forward without fully walking away from the essence of her voice.

Across the album's eight songs, most of which were recorded at VT Music Lab and all of which were produced by McGuirk and Ezra Oklan, McGuirk's jazz background readily emerges through her delightfully surprising vocals. However, in crafting *Watertop*, McGuirk expanded on her traditional songwriting method, making the album her most technically complex release to date. Fueled by the playful and experimental nature of sound engineer Jeremy Mendicino and co-producer Oklan, McGuirk pushes her songs into full-blown soundscapes through ambitiously crafted arrangements.

“A lesson I learned from this one is to trust myself, my ears, and my opinions. I want to keep going in this direction for at least another record—learning more about sound engineering and learning that language,” McGuirk said, describing the power she felt in playing such a technical role in the production of the album.

The singer's new focus on experimenting with the parts of a song beyond the melody, chords, and lyrics is unmistakable in her track *Graveyard*. In it, McGuirk belts, “I’ve got my closet skeletons on guard / I’ve got no sleeves because they’re worn too thin / I wear my heart all over everything,” over a siren-like layering of her and Cilla Bonnie’s bluesy harmonies and a gentle, almost trap-like beat. The song is an arms-open, both-hands-extended moment in which McGuirk lays out her own shortcomings to the listener. With “Graveyard,” she excavates themes of addiction and shame as well as her relationship to performing.

Growing up in a wealthy town’s public housing with a working-class family, McGuirk became accustomed to feeling like an outsider. That perspective has colored her world and her music. In *Where Does All the \$ Come From?*, she continues examining the values she was raised with—some that were passed down, others that she came to on her own. While McGuirk sings about money, the surprising and grounding percussion comes from a literal bag of coins played by Brandon Mayes. The track is slinky and smooth, and the artist takes a new kind of risk by directly asking people to examine their lives.

“On some level, if peripherally, this has been something I've ruminated on for my whole life: folks who have set up their life to be able to have their cake and eat it too. And it's a tricky one to talk about,” McGuirk said.

Where Does All the \$ Come From? echoes her powerful opening track. Both are reminders to hold on to what we actually can, not money or things, but love. “It would be incredible if it could make a light bulb go off. That is always the pinnacle of writing: making those connections for people,” she said.

Like her past albums, *Watertop* features a remarkably talented lineup of session musicians. She also decided to bring new singers on board. McGuirk is joined by Dwight Ritscher and Nicole

Nelson of Dwight & Nicole on her track “More Than Enough,” a tender song about the highs of finding your person. Grounded by the creative use of an organ and D’Vibes keys, the song’s percussion literally shimmers. The album also features the highly celebrated pianist Larry Goldings (Bonnie Raitt, John Scofield, Norah Jones), who was featured heavily on “Til It’s Gone” and brings his unique virtuosity to “When I See You.”

Elise Leavy, a singer-songwriter from Lafayette, Louisiana, is featured on the intimate track *Wedding Song*. “She sounds like she could sing any song from the Great American Songbook, and at the same time sounds straight from out of Laurel Canyon,” said McGuirk. The two sing back and forth to one another, “Would you like to be my friend? / You can hold my heart right in your hand / And I’ll forever sing your song.” Bringing back the style she nurtured on ‘*Til It’s Gone*, she flexes her folk songwriting ability.

When McGuirk read Joseph Fasano’s poem “To Those Who Call Themselves Christian But Justify The Order Of The World,” she was stunned. Fasano’s digging questions are poignant: “My god you think / that’s what love is?” And they inspired McGuirk’s return to classic rock on her final track of the album. After spending seven songs exploring, she conjures up her most direct position yet. “Call It What You Want,” she says, is a genuine declaration of her stance on life and human nature.

“I think I’m in more of a place where I want to say some stuff,” said McGuirk. Themes of justice and love have run through her songs for years. But now, she says, she’s ready to genuinely add to the conversation.

While the writing on *Watertop* is more pointed than before, McGuirk remains an exceptionally sophisticated and animated lyricist. At first listen, her words aren’t always what they seem. But the richness of her voice, the lucidity of her production, and the power of her delivery will guide you to the truth.

Ali McGuirk [Short Biography] — WATERTOP

Ali McGuirk has never been a church mouse. Her 2022 album, *Til It’s Gone*, was met with widespread acclaim and praised for its “earthy tenderness and smart introspection” (*Boston Herald*). She now returns with a new album, *Watertop*, that elevates her signature soulful and smoldering sound to new heights—this time, the production is richer, and the message is unflinching.

It’s hard to pinpoint the exact moment that led to the freedom in McGuirk’s songwriting on “Watertop.” Perhaps it was when she began treating social activism—and her care for others—as a spiritual practice. This transformation gave *Watertop* its *raison d’etre*, which comes at you quickly with the opening track, “Love Goes First.” With *Watertop* McGuirk takes a magnifying

glass to the complexities of human and societal value, unraveling the meanings of care, empathy, love, and even greed. At first listen, her words aren't always what they seem. But the richness of McGuirk's voice, the lucidity of her production, and the power of her delivery guide you to the truth.