

Marian Runk Biography

Dallas-born Marian Runk has taken an unconventional path for a Texas musician.

The now Chicago-based songwriter is a dancer, birdwatcher, visual artist, political activist, writer, *and* musician. The breadth of this creativity is felt in every aspect of her music, from the instrumentation to the lyrics to the album art she creates.

Born to a professional bass clarinetist father and a vocalist and educator mother, Runk studied piano as a child but found her first passion for music in dance.

Dreaming of becoming a professional ballerina, Runk left Texas in her senior year to study at the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre School. Migrating to the Northeast wasn't just about pursuing a dance career. Though surrounded by a supportive family in Texas, Runk never felt she fit in at her football-centric, conservative high school.

"I think I was a little too intense and weird to fit in. At the time, I didn't realize I was queer, but my best friend was a gay ballet dancer, and there were homophobic jokes everywhere. I've always felt connected to Dolly Parton's "Wildflowers" lyrics: 'I just never belonged, I just longed to be gone, so the garden one day set me free.'"

Initially happy to be among like-minded young artists, Runk found herself disillusioned with the toxic environment of the ballet world after a few years in Pittsburgh. Unhappy seeing friends struggling with mental health and eating disorders, when she became injured, she decided to change tack and go to college.

While at Oberlin College in Ohio, Marian was drawn to biology, art, and creative writing, ultimately earning a degree in Biology & Studio Art. She went on to graduate school at Columbia College Chicago, where she completed a Masters in Fine Arts (printmaking and book arts), combining her talents into writing, drawing, and printing comic books.

Runk quickly fell in love with Chicago and found a creative home in the queer community. Central to that community was *Chances Dances*, which began as a queer dance party and expanded to include artist grants, which Marian was awarded for making comics.

“*Chances* was founded by artists and activists, to create an all-inclusive queer space outside of Boys Town. It was my spiritual and creative home for a decade!”

Runk joined a queer choir and began performing at coffee shops, variety shows, art shows, and non-traditional spaces. Runk now sees these performances as foundational to her musical path.

“It was a super welcoming LGBTQ+ choir, we sang pop songs and country songs and whatever we all wanted to sing. These were my first shows as an adult, and they really gave me the confidence to start performing on my own!”

Marian was working at Planned Parenthood, singing along to a Miranda Lambert song, when a coworker mentioned she had a nice voice. That was the nudge she needed. Her thirtieth birthday was coming up, so she decided to treat herself to voice lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music, to feel more confident in her singing.

Strengthening her voice was the last piece of the creative puzzle needed for Marian to start a performing career, and she began writing lyrics almost immediately after starting vocal lessons with Carol Kagy, who's still her vocal coach today.

An old girlfriend let Runk borrow an acoustic guitar and taught her some basic chords, then she started taking guitar lessons at the Old Town School. She believes the school was integral for her being able to pursue this passion as an adult.

“It's been an amazing gift to have a community music school in my city, and I'm not sure I'd be making music as an adult if I hadn't had access to it.”

The love of songwriting Runk discovered in her thirties was born from a youth filled with poetry and creative writing and years singing along with the eighties ladies in the car with her mom as a kid.

Today, she is captivated by a songwriter's ability to turn raw emotion into music.

"Lucinda Williams's songwriting is so perfect, often spare, always poetic, with strong stories and imagery. Patty Griffin's strong storytelling and raw emotion. The Trio album by Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt, and Dolly Parton was my guiding light at age 8, I knew every word and note. When I came back to music in my 30s, I again leaned heavily on that album and deeply dove into the music of their solo careers. Their strength, commitment to music and the songs, longevity, and grace are super inspiring"

As a cartoonist, Runk's work was autobiographical, but in songwriting she feels she can more easily get to an emotional truth through creative storytelling.

"Seventy-five percent of my songs take something I've experienced or witnessed— a kernel of truth— and I can create a story that tells that truth indirectly. That's a gift to me creatively because it allows me to perform and express in a different way. I think many people assume women songwriters are always singing the exact details of their life, but I make a lot of shit up! I feel freer to create characters through song."

Runk finds some of the creative writing techniques she learned in her early college days still useful in her songwriting.

"I love limitations. I love poetry structures that are very rigid, and I love the challenge of making a song that fits into a limited structure."

Two Wires and a Spark is an album filled with precisely the kind of powerful imagery you would expect from someone with such a diverse creative background.

Runk's lyrics cover an expanse of themes, including apologizing to someone who doesn't want to hear it with "More," a portrait of living with an addict on "Making Light Of The Devil," a song about dealing with an onslaught of loss and grief on "Broken and Free," while bouncing geographically from a Chicago summer on "Air of June" to a Megabus ride to Cleveland on "Rust Belt Highway."

The album is a family affair, filled with people from her Old Town School community and the greater jazz/experimental music & folk scenes in Chicago. Long-time mentor Steve Dawson plays guitar, piano, and organ and sings backing vocals on "Making Light of the Devil", Runk's partner Andrew Wilkins plays upright and electric bass. Jackie Boyd - director of the choir that inspired Runk to begin singing in the first place - sings backing vocals on the rest of the album.

Marian Runk's love of dance initially led her away from Texas, and her pursuit of a broader creative life planted her in the Midwest, where she has set down roots in the vibrant Chicago arts and music community. While her life-long fascination with storytelling has evolved from book arts and comics to songwriting and performing, its grip on her grows ever tighter.

Though Runk is inherently creatively diverse, music has been with her since the beginning, and it's where she feels the most artistically at home now, releasing her second album into the world.

"Music has been a constant throughout my life, comforting and healing me in times of loneliness and change. It was especially comforting on lonely days as an only child, and in adulthood it's brought relief when I'm grieving a death or the end of a relationship. Music is magical, and that's why I love it."