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Episode Title: Margo Price's Outlaw Spirit

Episode Summary:

In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, welcomes songwriter and performer, Margo Price. Today, Margo talks about her grandmother's cooking, rolling into Nashville with all her possessions packed on a flatbed trailer, and how she went from playing gigs at dive bars to singing with Loretta Lynn. She also talks about her new memoir, *Maybe We'll Make It*, which is coming out this fall from the University of Texas Press, and becoming the first female artist to sit on the board of Farm Aid.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins)

Sid Voice Over: Welcome to the Summer Tour Edition of Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, Editor in Chief of Southern Living Magazine, and my guest today is a self-described outlaw who happens to be one of the most talented songwriters and performers in Nashville. Margo Price grew up in the small town of Aledo, Illinois, a rural farming community that would shape her as a person and an artist. In 2016, she burst onto the Americana scene with a soulful, deeply personal album called *Midwest Farmer's Daughter*. The songs have a timeless quality, especially in Price's old-school country voice, but they also tell stories of loss, heartbreak, and the disappearing American dream.

Today on the show, Margo talks about her grandmother's cooking, rolling into Nashville with all her possessions packed on a flatbed trailer, and how she went from playing gigs at the Hall of Fame Lounge to singing with Loretta Lynn. She also talks about her new memoir, *Maybe We'll Make It*, which is coming out this fall from the University of Texas Press, and becoming the first female artist to sit on the board of Farm Aid. All that and more this week on very special Biscuits & Jam.

Sid Evans: Margo Price, Welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Margo Price: Thank you for having me.

Sid Evans: Where am I reaching you right now?

Margo Price: I just got back to my home outside of Nashville. I've been on tour the last, oh, I guess couple weeks I've been out in California with Chris Stapleton and now I'm just back home.

Sid Evans: Wow. So a little down time is gonna be a welcome thing.

Margo Price: Yeah. I think so.

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Sid Evans: (laughs) So Margo, you grew up in a small town in Illinois, not too far from the Mississippi River I believe. Tell me a little bit about your hometown.

Margo Price: Oh, my home town. Well it's a, a small town called Aledo. And it's got about 3,000 some people there. And my folks kinda lived outside of that town and the actual closest little town, I don't even know if it was called a town, but Hamlet was the sign that read that was about a mile from my house. And it said Population 34. (laughs) So it was, it was rural to say the least. There was not that much to do there, besides try not to get in trouble. But, I try to go back and visit like once a year. There is something that's kinda special about it because it's just kinda still seems so untouched by the rest of the world. The Midwest is like that. It just takes so long for everything to get there. (laughs).

Sid Evans: Well, that's a good thing.

Margo Price: Yes, in some ways.

Sid Evans: Do you still have a lot of family back there?

Margo Price: My folks still have a house there. And yeah. I have two grandmothers and some aunts and uncles and cousins that live there.

Sid Evans: So there's still some family gatherings that you make it back for?

Margo Price: I think it's been a minute with just the way that COVID was. But I went back for Christmas and I'm gonna try to get there this year with my kids. We like to go up and just go fishing and go ride around on like the gator. I let my kid drive the gator last year and he was, like, 10 years old. (laughs) I'm like, "This is the way. You will learn to drive young. On farm equipment."

Sid Evans: And now that's probably all he wants to do is drive that thing around.

Margo Price: Yup, yup.

Sid Evans: Well so what about back in the day when you were growing up. What did the big family gatherings look like? It sounds like you had quite a few family members there and probably some cousins and were they a big deal for y'all?

Margo Price: Both of my parents, there were five children on each side of their families. And they were both the middle. They were both the third born and they graduated the same year. They were, like, high school sweethearts and kinda, all-American family in a lot of ways. Family gatherings on my dad's side was lots of uncles, like, watching football and smoking cowboy killers in the basement (laughs). You know, that was the '80's so it was like the way that it was and a lot of light beer was consumed and then my mom's side, they had a love for for other things I guess like they played tennis and my grandfather was a chiropractor and he was really sweet. He looked after all of us. I got into trouble with my cousins. I had one cousin in particular who I actually write about in, um, my upcoming memoir. She convinced me to move to Nashville and she was full of, like, the worst ideas. She just was (laughs) she was the, she was always into trouble.

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Sid Evans: The black sheep?

Margo Price: Yeah. Yeah. She made me look good. So that was the (laughs) maybe why I kept her around. But, uh, we got into a lot of trouble. She convinced me to move to Nashville when I was about 20. So I dropped out of college and moved here to pursue the dream.

Sid Evans: Yeah, and I wanna get to that. I wanna talk about the book as well. But before we do that I gotta ask you just if there was a cook in the family or someone that was kinda famous for their cooking. Was there an aunt or a grandmother or your mom?

Margo Price: Yes. My grandmother, well both of my grandmothers loved to cook and my mom works really hard. My mom was a schoolteacher and so after school we would go to my grandmother's and she would make us dinner nearly every single night. Her name's Patricia Louise and she just was the glue that, like, kinda held everybody together. And she helped my mom take us a lot of places and stuff and getting emotional 'cause she's actually, she's having surgery this Thursday, but she was just always there, always cooking for us, always taking care of us and very musical you know, that side of the family, they all sang and, and she drove me to a lot of my piano lessons and stuff.

And then on the other side of the family my grandmother, Mary Price, she just, she loved to cook and entertain and they had a farm up until I was about three. But she was just a very hardworking woman and they always had like a pork roast going or something in the kitchen and cornbread and, and lots of meals and just lots of people gathered round and, and having a good time. (laughs)

Sid Evans: It sounds kinda Southern to me.

Margo Price: (laughs) It was, but it was Midwest. But yeah.

Sid Evans: So Margo, you grew up going to the Lutheran Church I believe. I mean was that big, a big part of your childhood? And I'm also wondering if that was where you maybe started to learn to sing.

Margo Price: We went to the Lutheran church for the beginning of my life and it was, like, from what I understand, it's like a bit Catholic because we did lots of sinning so lots of repenting (laughs). We did communion every week and I was a acolyte. Wear the robes and light candles and help pass out the wafers and getting into the communion wine (laughs) and whatnot. And then after a while our pastor, he passed away and we ended up going to, on my father's side they were Presbyterian. So I got confirmed as a Presbyterian we went to church, like I said, we did get confirmed and I did acolyte and I did sing lots of hymns and definitely was where some of my love for music began was, was in church. But, they didn't go every single Sunday. We would go, like, maybe once a month, twice a month. So there was always like a, a guilt about that. We were like the bad family (laughs) that was hanging out in the balcony, playing hangman or something.

Sid Evans: Well, I'm very familiar with that sneaking in to the back of the church thing. We, we did plenty of that in Memphis. I'm very familiar with that.

Margo Price: Oh man, I have always wanted to go to Al Green's church in Memphis. Have you been?

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Sid Evans: I have been and it is a must do.

Margo Price: That's always been on my bucket list. So I gotta make my way to Memphis and, and do that.

Sid Evans: I don't know if he's still doing it, but he probably won't be doing it much longer if he is.

Margo Price: I know.

Sid Evans: So I, I think, (laughs) You need to go do that.

Margo Price: Incredible.

Sid Evans: So Margo, let's talk about your book. you have a memoir coming out this fall with University of Texas Press. It's called Maybe We'll Make It. And you're not even 40 yet. But, it does seem like you've lived several lifetimes from reading the book. Why did you decide to tell this story now?

Margo Price: Well, I, I am a huge fan of reading music memoirs myself. It's like the, a large piece of my reading as an adult has been that. And they've been really inspiring to me, while I was coming up. But I think, reading Patti Smith's Just Kids was, like, the tipping point where I was like, "I want to write about the struggle that I went through," and I wanted to write about all of those times before I forgot the stories. (laughs) It started as almost an exercise in therapy because I got pregnant with my daughter Ramona and I just needed to work in some capacity. And I came off the road from a time of heavy, heavy, heavy touring and I did not know what to do with myself. So while my son was in school, I would just go every single day to this little café in East Nashville that has changed names now. But I would go there every day and write and write and write. And then I just, like, tweeted that I was writing a book and then Jessica Hopper reached out from the University of Texas Press and she was like, "Can I read it?" And I'm like, "Sure." (laughs) I was very worried about anyone reading it so I was just really self conscious about it. And then they were like, "This is amazing. We would love to help you bring this to fruition." And so over the course of a few years, they helped me mold it into what it is now.

Sid Evans: Well, it's wonderful and it's beautifully written and,

Margo Price: Thank you.

Sid Evans: ... it's just got a lot of layers to it. And, I wanna ask about how you, kind of, start out the book and talking about the farm and the loss of the farm. I mean your first album was called Midwest Farmer's Daughter. and a lot of that is about how your family lost the farm when you were really young. Why does that farm loom so large for you? I think because it was just a symbol of the loss of the American Dream. And how you could put in your blood, your sweat and tears and generations of hard work into something and then just kinda have it slip through your hands. And seeing how that affected my family, it was difficult to see. And it was, I don't know, it was almost like a vendetta to, like, just pay a homage to it in some way. that it wasn't like for lack of their trying and it wasn't that they didn't work hard enough. It's just that you sometimes get screwed by life. And especially by greed and money and power and my family's white. (laughs) So it was like,

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Sid Evans: Right.

Margo Price: There's so many other people that have a story to tell about how they have kinda been dealt a bad hand.

Sid Evans: Well, it's a powerful story and it led to a really powerful album and now kind of lays the groundwork for this book. And it just seems like a very deeply personal thing for you. You know, there's another part of the book where you're talking about your grandparents' farmhouse. And there's a great line in there where you say "It's not that the house was big, but the love inside it was." And I thought that was a beautiful line. Tell me a little bit about that house and what you meant by that.

Margo Price: Some of my first memories were there. It seemed like from my perspective at the time that they had it all together and that was just gonna be that way. And so when that upheaval happened and I saw my grandmother packing up her things, that was the moment when I kinda came online you know? (laughs). Every year we got together for Christmas in there, so they moved to a very small home on the fringes of Aledo. And my grandpa, I just remember him sitting kind of at a kitchen and, and just staring out the window and looking at all these fields and the, you know, all the farmland was, like, still there. But they had to go kinda like work these really difficult backbreaking jobs in their 50's, so they had this really small house that they moved into and they actually were raising my uncle's children as well. So they had five people in this tiny little house. But every year they got together for Christmas and they gave everybody cards with money and they still cooked the pork roast in the tiny little kitchen and, you know, it was like there was nowhere for anybody to sit. We were all just sitting on the couches covered in plastic and watching football. And, you know, but it was like we were all still there together. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Right. Which is what matters the most, right?

Margo Price: Yeah. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Yeah. Well so, you left all that behind. You left the small town. You moved to Nashville. And you said you were what, 19, 20 years old. There's a moment in the book where you talk about that and you said when you drove into Nashville for the first time, it was like something out of the Beverly Hillbillies with, you know, everything that was, like, stacked up on the back of the car or the flatbed. Tell me about that moment, what that was like for y'all driving into town.

Margo Price: (laughs) Well, there was, like, a little bit of a sting of this humiliation because they had just done the same thing to take me down to the college in Chicago. And it just didn't work out. And so then it was like, "All right, let's put everything on the flatbed trailer again." And my dad literally had bungies and, like tarps and there was just this kid's bed and these ratty old couches and there was a lot of, "Okay, I don't know what you're doing, but I guess we'll just help you cart your shit down the interstate," My parents would just, kinda left me there and it was like, "All right, well good luck." And I immediately, like, wrecked my car. I couldn't find a job. And was just, I don't know. Just floundering. But it was so exciting. And I, I immediately started going out to all these open mics just trying to figure out how I was gonna, like, insert myself into the city. it was exciting, but it was definitely like, "Oh shit. What did I do?" (laughs).

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Sid Evans: (laughs) Well, I wanna ask you about those open mics and some of those clubs and kind of dives that you played in. When you look back at that time, was there a favorite spot to play that was like that before you were playing at the Ryman?

Margo Price: Yeah (laughs). That's what I did is I literally sat down. I went and picked up a copy of this paper that was called, All the Rage. It was like a little tiny pocket sized thing and I was like, looked at all the clubs. I went and checked all of them out and I wrote down a list and was like, "I'm gonna play at all these clubs," and the Ryman was definitely, like, kind of at the end. But I started going out to this place that was called the Hall of Fame Lounge. It was a hotel bar. But I could just go up. They would let anybody play. And so you were getting a sampler of all kinds of writing in Nashville. What drew me to the place was, like, people were like, "Oh Townes Van Zandt used to hang out here, you know, Townes was in here." And another time Neil Young came in and my friend got to hang with Neil Young. But you were getting the best and the worst. 'cause it was right on Music Row so it was at a Best Western and the whole place was kinda decorated like Cracker Barrel, just like antlers, and it had charm. It had wood paneling and it was just, it was a really cool place, but there was a lot of older people there. So, like, I was 20 and I'd say that the target audience or, like, clientele there was probably 40 to 65. (laughs) But I made friends with some of these, like, old timer people and they would buy me beers (laughs). Give me tips. Give me songwriter tips.

Sid Evans: And I know you love the, uh, 5 Spot too, in East Nashville. You've played there a bunch, right?

Margo Price: Oh yeah. spent thousands of dollars there just opening bar tabs and, I mean I met half my band there. I owe a lot to the 5 Spot and just East Nashville in general. It's easy to get kind of bitter when you've been somewhere for, I've been here for 19 years now. And so I feel like I have grown the right to be able to hate it and pick at it, you know?

Sid Evans: And complain about the lack of parking and-

Margo Price: Yeah. Complain about all the things that changed when I came here 20 years ago and started this gentrification. But, I got such a sweet spot for that time and that, I mean there were just so many cool bands coming through and so many people. I saw Shovels and Rope play there when they were just first taking off. I remember seeing Jason Isbell play there. Cool people were just coming by and, and playing sets. And then there was so many, like, amazing underground bands and people that were unknown, but that were just full of talent.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Voice over from Sid: I'll be back with more from Margo Price after the break.

(AD BREAK)

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

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Voice over from Sid: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and today I'm talking with Margo Price.

Sid Evans: You know Margo, you talk in the book about how you grew up around hunting and fishing. And it sounds like you still love the outdoors and that it's kind of an escape for you and I wonder if it's still kind of an escape from Nashville sometimes or if you still do that.

Margo Price: You know, we lived in, all over Nashville for about 15 years and I guess about four and a half years ago, five years ago, losing track of time during the pandemic. But, we moved out to the country and we moved out to just a little town that is 3,000 people. And it's kinda just like my hometown. There's one stoplight and, like, a Piggly Wiggly and a Dollar Store. But I got up this morning and I went for a two-mile hike with my dogs in the woods and I feel like, especially being on tour, being in airports and being in big cities and being in all these places, then when I come back home I have kind of a place that I can escape and sit outside and bird watch. Honestly (laughs). I'm getting into bird watching. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Well, we can geek out over that some other time. I, I love that myself.

Margo Price: Okay, good. I mean it's not very outlaw of me, but it's soothing (laughs).

Sid Evans: So Margo, the book is dedicated to your son, Ezra, who you lost to a heart condition when he was just two weeks old. And you've been very open about telling that story starting with your first album. I'm wondering if you hear from fans who feel like you've helped them in some way.

Margo Price: I think that one of the only good things that comes out of a great loss is the connection that you can have with other people who've experienced great loss. And that can come in many different ways. Of course I have bonded with parents who are in the unfortunate space that I'm in when you lose a child. And that has been cathartic to talk to other parents and just to kinda know that there are people that understands just how bad it feels. But there's other people who've talked to me too about, you know like losing their parents very young or just any difficult thing that you go through. And I think that really gave me a greater understanding of the human condition and what we're all going through after you've experienced something really tragic like that. So definitely I think with fans, there is a shared grief and, you know, you can, like, commiserate with other people. It makes it a little bit easier to get through.

Sid Evans: Well, and I wonder if it was also cathartic for you just writing this book.

Margo Price: Oh, for sure. I think that's what has drawn me to just writing and creating my whole life, is feeling misunderstood or feeling lonely or just needing to process what's going on. I mean we're, we're literally all just thrown into this existence. Like, none of us asked to be here. And then, you know, you go through things and you're just trying to constantly make sense of it. And definitely writing songs and just writing this book has been a way for me to cope and, I guess that's the hope is that it will reach other people and make them feel less alone as cliché as that sounds.

Sid Evans: Yeah. I wanna ask you about your last album, That's How Rumors Get Started, which came out in the summer of 2020. I'm sure you had a big tour planned and all sorts of plans around that record.

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What was that like for you to work on something like that for probably a couple years and then not be able to tour?

Margo Price: Oh, honestly, it just felt like the cosmic joke that is my life (laughs). I always said that if my career ever did take off that the world would end. And, like, lo and behold, it just seems like it did. I was really upset about it and I have not done a headlining tour since 2018. My career took off and then I kinda went out on a limb. I took a chance kinda putting out a slightly political record. It may be a genre that hasn't always been open to hearing about women's thoughts and ideas on the world. And then I got pregnant and then COVID hit and we were planning on going back to South by Southwest and that was what kind of launched my whole career in the beginning was me going to South by Southwest and then I got booked at SNL through that, literally through playing at South by Southwest. So when all that started to happen, definitely kind of went into a panic mode 'cause I had missed being out there after giving birth to my daughter. So again, I kinda started, uh, just self medicating and drinking too much and lo and behold, the pandemic totally expedited my quitting drinking and my getting sober. So maybe I have COVID to thank (laughs).

Sid Evans: In some weird way, yes.

Margo Price: Totally.

Sid Evans: Wow.

Margo Price: Yeah.

Sid Evans: Well, there's a great song on that album that I love called Hey Child and it sounds like you're singing to someone who's going through a tough time. And there's a line where you say "You've got so many better things to do." What kinda space were you in when you wrote that song? 'Cause this is pre-pandemic that you were working on this. I mean this probably goes back to 2017 or something. Right? So the crazy thing about that song and how it ended up on that record is that Sturgill produced the album, Sturgill Simpson. And we've been friends for a really long time. My husband met Sturgill working at a grocery store, in, like, 2011. And so we were playing shows with him back when his band was Sunday Valley and my band was Buffalo Clover and that was, like, my closer song in, like, 2012.

Sid Evans: Oh wow.

Margo Price: Yeah. My husband and I wrote that song back then and we were writing it kinda to our friends at the time, but we were also writing it to ourselves because we had just lost our son and we were both drinking and we were not in a good head space and our careers were not anywhere. And it was just, like, the group of people that we were running with at the time, we were all partying so hard, we were partying like we were rock stars but things were not going well for anybody. So it was weird. That song was, like, kinda to, to ourselves. And Sturgill was like, "Have you ever thought about re-recording that? No one's heard that song. It's a really good song." And it was like, we were into the Rolling Stones and Southern, like, rock that they were doing at the time. And so that was just like us trying to be Keith and Nick and Sturgill resurrecting it and making me love it again.

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Margo's song, "Hey Child" comes in and we hear the following at full volume then fades out:

*And in the ruins of the nights that we went
Writing numbers on our arms
But when you wake up to find there's nothing there
Don't you know your future's almost gone
Hey Child*

Sid Evans: Oh, love hearing that story. Well, uh, thank you Sturgill for bringing that back around and getting it on the album. It's such a great song.

Margo Price: And thank him for lots of stuff. He's just, like I, I appreciate that he is out there and that he has championed me too 'cause we found kinship in our outsidersness. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Well, speaking of collaborations, I've just gotta ask you about the collaboration that you did with Loretta Lynn. I mean, you've met and collaborated with a lot of Nashville legends over the years but then there's Loretta Lynn. You recorded a song called One's on the Way with her for her 50th solo record. What was that experience like for you?

Margo Price: I mean she's obviously a massive influence on me. You can look at the title of my first album and, and know that that's like a nod to her. She's meant a lot to me since the moment that I heard her. But I met her I guess for the first time in 2016, 2017 and I was just, like, immediately, like, she was just family or something. And, she's also lost a child and her being there and being able to see that and see that she was a woman who already had children and she made it after having children, like, it gave me kind of a permission to go on and keep doing it. I know that sounds silly, but when I got pregnant for the first time, I just remember a lot of people asking me if I was gonna hang it up, you know? So when she called me to do that, that was surreal. It was, like, of course I will. And she also called me when I was pregnant with my daughter and I was feeling so scared and I just thought that it was gonna, like, put my career to a complete halt. I had all these fears, you know, that were not even real, but she was like, "Oh you're gonna be wonderful. You should just have 10 more babies and you can use Lynn as a middle name if it's a boy or a girl." So Ramona my daughter, her, her middle name is Lynn and, you know, it's because-

Sid Evans: Oh.

Margo Price: ... Loretta gave us the blessing to do it.

Sid Evans: Wow. What a great story. I mean to have one on the way literally when Loretta Lynn calls you about doing that song.

Margo Price: I know. I was like, "Well, it's okay because," I performed so pregnant at her celebration and Jack White and I got to sing Portland Oregon. But I was just, like, I couldn't even put my, my arms around my stomach. I was, like, comedically big. I think Jack gave a toast, like, after that show and he was like, "And congrats to Margo who's 14 months pregnant," or something. (laughs) And I felt like I was.

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Sid Evans: Oh, that's great. So Margo, it came out last year that you had joined the board of Farm Aid. Which I think makes you the first female artist to hold that position, unbelievably. What are some things that you hope to achieve with that organization?

Margo Price: Oh my goodness. Well I feel like they've been ahead of the curve for a long time as far as some really pressing issues that we need to be dealing with right now and obviously climate change and just food equality, food justice is high up there and things that I think that our country needs to be working on. childhood obesity, we've got just obesity in general. these are things that are all connected to farms and food and Farm Aid is really working hard. They are getting grants all the time and they are dispersing them to farmers of color who haven't always been first in line for a lot of these bail-outs and these things that come along to help farmers. A lot of times, it's sad but it's true. It goes, it goes to white farmers. So they're making incredible, um, leaps and bounds. They've, you know, just got like bigger grants than they ever have ever. I'm just really excited about even making the lineup at a festival more diverse. Last year we had Allison Russell and Bettye LaVette and I think it's just gonna keep growing. And, you know, Brittany Howard's played it. There's been so many incredible musicians that have played it over the years and I'm just excited to be in there and continue on a, a tradition heroes, Neil and Willy I've looked up to for forever and just a big piece of it was because they were out there doing work for Farm Aid.

Sid Evans: Well, I know they're excited to have you on that board. and I look forward to seeing what y'all do in the near future.

Margo Price: Thank you.

Sid Evans: So Margo, I usually ask a last question. What does it mean to you to be Southern? But I'm not gonna ask you that question but I will ask you what does it mean to you to be a farmer's daughter?

Margo Price: I love that. I actually love both questions. And I know I, I'm not really qualified to answer the first. But I have spent now equal parts of my life in the Midwest and in the South. This year is my 19 year anniversary of living in Tennessee. And I always say that I was not born here, but I will probably die and be buried here (laughs). One of the things that I love about both of those questions is just being able to have a garden in my yard and do my small part and just grow some good tomatoes and, (laughs) try to, try to grow more better tomatoes than my neighbor so. (laughs)

Sid Evans: (laughs) Well, if you ever figure that out, let me know 'cause I'm still struggling with it.

Margo Price: Yeah. (laughs) I sure will.

Sid Evans: (laughs) Well, Margo Price, thanks so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Margo Price: Thank you for having me.

Sid Voice Over: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Margo Price. Make sure to visit margoprice.net to listen to her music, watch videos, keep up with tour dates, and more!

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