

RUBY TURNER

Interview by Norman Darwen

Singer Ruby Turner was born in Jamaica in 1958 and came to Britain as a nine-year old child. She first came to wider attention as a singer in the 80s, initially through working as a backing singer with pop group Culture Club, and then in 1986 with her first solo album, *Women Hold Up Half The Sky* which included a very fine cover of Etta James' 'I'd Rather Go Blind'. As a single, it hit the UK charts the following year, and she went on to have several charts hits with soul material. She even reached Number 1 in America with 'It's Gonna Be Alright' in 1990, though she had had a smaller hit there several years earlier with a cover of The Staple Singers 'If You're Ready (Come Go With Me)'. Ruby has worked with Jools Holland's Orchestra since the 90s in addition to having her own career, and she has a new album *Love Was Here*, released on her own label in February 2020:

What are your earliest memories of hearing music?

My first love and appreciation of music was singing with my classmates on rainy days at school when we couldn't play outside - eleven and twelve year olds singing along to the latest Motown hit or whatever was popular in the charts. Little did I know it would be my chosen career.

I believe your grandfather was a gospel singer in Jamaica, can you tell me a little about that?

Sadly I never knew my grandfather. But my dad told me all about him and his gospel quartet, he sang lead vocals. Thanks grandpa.

When did you decide you wanted to be a singer?

I never thought for a moment that music was going to be my chosen career. Theatre was my passion and it was in theatre that the voice was born.

What did working with Culture Club do for you?

Working with Culture Club was an amazing experience for me. It certainly did bring me to the attention of people in the music business.

And you did *The Motown Songbook* album in 1988 - how was it working with some of the Motown greats?

The making of *The Motown Songbook* album was a master-stroke by my record label, Jive, but it was my idea to duet with the Motown artist as I wasn't comfortable about singing those great songs whilst those artists were still touring their music. I had the good fortune to work with Jimmy Ruffin in the studio, but the other tracks were flown to The States where The Temptations and The Four Tops laid their vocals down. The tracks were then flown back to be mixed and mastered in the U.K. I did eventually had the pleasure of singing with the Four Tops at the Hammersmith Apollo, when they came over touring their *Go Loco* album. That

was quite special. (Ruby probably means the *Indestructible* album The Four Tops recorded in 1988 and which contains the hit 'Loco In Acapulco'.)

You worked with blues label Indigo Records in the mid-90s; that really brought you to the attention of the British blues scene...

I signed to Indigo in the mid 90s and recorded two blues albums, *Guilty* (1996) and *Call Me By My Name* (1988). Del Taylor was the label owner. He was Alexis Korner's manager so we knew each other and had a good working relationship. I did enjoy stepping into the blues world, and working with musicians like Norman Beaker and Zoot Money, these were great British blues men. Making those albums gave me a chance to tour Europe, playing at some fabulous blues festivals.

You spend a lot of time touring with Jools Holland & His Rhythm & Blues Orchestra How did you meet up and begin working with him?

I met Jools in the early 90s. Our first show was an event at the Metropole Hotel in Birmingham. I was invited to sing with the big band through his management and my agent. The rest is history, as they say. We've had the best musical collaborations and a friendship that's lasted to this day. Jools Holland is a music aficionado. He's a music lexicon on the blues, boogie-woogie, and gospel, to name but a few genres. He serves the music and it's served us all well.

Do you any any particular special moments working with Jools?

There are so many memorable moments working with Jools Holland and the orchestra. We've toured the world twice - playing Sydney Opera House, The Royal Albert Hall in London, the pyramid stage at the Glastonbury festival, the Queen's Golden Jubilee (**Ruby has sung for the Queen and has been awarded an M.B.E. – a honour that the Queen bestows - for services to music**). So many other wonderful venues and concerts. I'm totally blessed and privileged to be working with this amazing man.

You mentioned Alexis Korner earlier...

My friendship with Alexis Korner I'll always treasure. He was so very kind. He played my very first single on BBC Radio 1 when he had the Sunday evening show. Then he came to see me perform at Dingwalls in Camden in north London. We met after the show and we got on together really great. He had such big plans for us to work together. I did a few shows in Europe and celebrated the 25th anniversary of the renowned Marquee Club in London back then. I miss him very much.

When and why did you set up your own record label, RTR?

RTR was set up in 2005. It was time to go it alone. I waited a long time and tried to get another record deal but that seemed impossible as the industry was changing and the deals were just not forthcoming. It was the best move I ever made to set up my own label. Taking control of my life, it seemed, was most empowering. It was hard work but satisfying being in control of my work and my career.

Tell me the background to the new album, *Love Was Here...*

The new album took 18 months to complete due to work commitments on both sides, tours with Jools and my own shows. I was never going to make another solo album after the last one, *All That I Am*, in 2014. But after meeting and getting to know the production team of Nick Atkinson and Kat Eaton, I realised there was something quite special about them. They had a great attitude, a keenness to work with me that was encouraging to know they were serious and had good work ethics. We were writing and exchanging lyrics via email and the songs were sounding great. I had many working titles that needed developing and so the ideas were worked and became the songs that have made this the album that it is. They listened to what I wanted for this project - the feel, the grooves, the style. That's what made me feel so good about the creative process - having input into your work and not being dictated to... It all came together in a beautiful way - the writing, the tracks, the musicians, the production. I'm happy with that!

You have also worked in theatre and films, do they impact on your approach to your music at all?

My years in theatre did certainly shape and influence my attitude to working in the business. Mine was always to be professional at all times. Your approach to work reflects on you the artist. That, in turn, can determine how things develop further down the line. Your legacy; your longevity! It's all down you in the end.

Have you any ambitions left?

I'm quite happy right now as work is still plentiful and the album has injected another bit of energy into my soul, so I'll just give thanks and enjoy doing this amazing job. Tomorrow is another day.

What plans do you have for the future?

I'm going to gather all my note books and put together all the ideas I still have - a poetry and verses book maybe. Or another album. Who knows?

Ruby, thanks very much for your time.

(www.rubyturner.com)

Norman Darwen