

Written by Charles Waring
Wednesday, 20 August 2008 06:10



As promised, here's the second part of www.soulandjazzandfunk.com's recent interview with US soul singer, LALAH HATHAWAY.

What was it like growing up in the Hathaway household?

Pretty regular. My mother really wanted it to be regular. She really made it normal. I didn't realise seriously what kind of impact my father had on the world until I was almost in college. Since all my family did music - I was a student of music from the time I was very small - it just seemed to be normal to me. That's what we all did and so in that way there was nothing really extraordinary about it - it just happened to be what we did.

What about your influences early on in your musical life?

I grew up in the time when the radio was so splendid but it's changed a lot in the States. I really grew up listening to a lot of different stuff for a kid who was eight, ten, twelve years old growing up in Chicago. I had Chaka (Khan), Elton John, The Beatles and The Bar-Kays and Earth Wind & Fire; also Patti Labelle and Jimi Hendrix; and rock bands like Steely Dan, Asia, Journey, Foreigner and Genesis.

Pretty eclectic then.

Absolutely! There was so much on the radio to grab onto and it really informed who I am as a musician.

Do you play an instrument at all?

I play piano.

Is that how you write most of your songs?

It is. A lot of times I get a track or I may have a melody in my head and I can ask someone to help me make the best voicing, but I play well enough to know that I don't play well.

I'm sure you're modest.

Well, maybe, but I play well enough to know that I need to continue practising.

Did you always want to be a singer or did you have any other ambitions as a youngster?

Well, I've always wanted to be in the creative arts field. From a very young age I remember telling my mother I wanted to be a magician. And my mother said: 'no, no, no, baby - you want to be a musician.' But I said 'no, I want to do magic.' I wanted to be a magician and I also wanted to be a dancer. Ultimately I always wanted to do something involved with music and it never even was a question of not doing it. It never came up as 'this is what I'll do now.' It was just always the thing that I had done. I went to performance arts high school and I took piano lessons as a kid and played recitals and that kind of thing. I went to the Berkeley College of Music (in Boston) and so I've always been a student of music in some way or another.

Has it been difficult following in your father's footsteps given the acclaim that his music has received?

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No, no. It's weird - it's one of those things where I'd have to go back and do it again the other way to know but I've never ever seen who my father was as a shadow hanging over me - I've always seen him as a light and I'm quite comfortable to be in that light. For me it's been a blessing and for people to be able to walk up and say 'oh I loved your dad so much,' I'm happy to be able to take that on for them and for him. So it's a good thing.

What's your favourite memory of your dad?

You know, I don't have a lot of memories of my dad because he died when I was ten years old. My fondest memories have really become the people around the world telling me how much they really loved him and how much he affected their lives and to be able to hear these stories because I'm the closest that they'll ever get to get to him. Those are now my really fond memories about my dad, particularly being at Stax and having people tell me amazing stories about him. So those are my memories.

Do you remember the first record you bought?

The first record I ever owned was the soundtrack to 'Jesus Christ Superstar.' I loved that record. I loved that movie. I love Carl Anderson. Yes, that was my first record - back in the days when they were still records.

What do you prefer: vinyl or CD?

I love vinyl. It's kind of troublesome but I remember the experience of opening 'Jesus Christ Superstar' and looking at all the pictures from the musical. It was like having a book. And I do feel bad for kids nowadays....like something happened with my booklet for 'Self Portrait' because of the way that Universal ship the music out nowadays, they don't ship the booklets. And that is frustrating for me as hell because I put a lot of time into that for people to see it as part of the art of the record and so in a way, particularly in the United States where we have a lot of piracy going on, your average kid today never even gets to touch music.

That's true. It's not a physical thing anymore is it...

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It's not a physical thing. They don't even buy it now - it just appears in their I-Pods for free.

How do you feel as a musician about that situation?

I don't have a problem with people having access to music - that's not my problem. I think it's a deeper thing in that people feel so entitled to it. People don't understand when you buy a record off a guy in the street or you just download it that basically it's reaching into my pocket because this is how I make my living. More than that, there's a certain sense of entitlement that comes along with that that I'm not real comfortable with - that they think they're just entitled to it but as a music lover, it's just so sad to me that people will never - this new generation - touch music in the way that I was able to do. Music is like a living, breathing entity in my life and it has meant so much to me that I can't imagine not ever having that experience.

I think what you said about the 'Jesus Christ Superstar' album was right. In those days you could actually read the lyrics. By contrast, today you can hardly decipher anything because the print is so small.

The print on my record is made so you can see it because I am blind as a bat. So I've made it so me and my mum can open that thing up and read it easily. The lyrics are so important. And we don't live in an era anymore where people say who played on this? Not a lot of American journalists asked who played on the record. That's because they're not interested in the musicians.

By the way, looking at your front cover. Where was that shot? It looks like a diner.

It's a diner here in L.A. called Ray's Diner. I think Elton John actually did a cover there as well after I did mine. My concept was that this was sort of my self portrait - I wanted to have just regular, natural looking pictures of me in an environment that you might actually find me in.

Is it one of the places you normally hang out?

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Yeah, it's just a diner. When you're able to look through the whole package, it will make a lot more sense. I hope to have it up on my web site within a week or so.

Talking about your website, have you found that has an artist it gives a greater sense of communication between you and the people actually buying and listening to your music?

Absolutely, 100 percent. And I've re-done my web site recently so that it now has a TV station and it's really cool. I mean I'm in there every day. I know a lot of the people who are there. Since we put it up, June 3rd, we've had like 130,000 hits from unique visitors. There are a lot of people from your part of the world and a lot of people from all over the world. A lot of artists come and it's a great resource for music. It gets a lot of people who really love music in a serious way.

You collaborated with Joe Sample a few years ago on an album. Have you ever thought of doing a jazz album by yourself?

Absolutely. That's definitely one of the records I want to make. I want to make a very traditional kind of jazz album. I also want to make a very traditional kind of Christmas record, which is orchestrated with strings. I really enjoyed Shirley Horn's 'Here's To Life' record and I met Johnny Mandel (arranger on 'Here's To Life') a few months ago. I begged him to help me do some strings for a record. He's just so visual. To be able to do a Christmas record that will live forever would be quite an accomplishment. I think possibly the next project is a live record but I'm not sure. I don't even know what's on my schedule for tomorrow.

Do you have your own band?

I do. I have a great band. It changes a bit in the summertime because a lot of the guys are great players and they go off to play with other people - like one of my backing singers is out with Chaka Khan right now. My bass player is out with Rihanna. Bobby Sparks plays keys for me and he is usually with Marcus (Miller) at some point during the year. Erroll Cooney, who plays guitar for me, is with Stevie Wonder for the summer. They get busy quick.

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What's the Los Angeles music scene like?

I don't think there really is one. There's a lot of good musicians here but there's not really a scene because it's hard to get around here. There's a lot of driving, so it's hard to really make those kinds of connections.

(as told to Charles Waring)

'SELF PORTRAIT' is out now on Stax Records.