

## Music

# Georgia on her mind, but Brum in her belly

Singer Julie Dexter tells **DAVE FREAK** why she's looking forward to returning to the Midlands for the Mostly Jazz Funk and Soul Festival this weekend

BIRMINGHAM'S Mostly Jazz Funk and Soul Festival has always championed local talent, and this year is no exception, with appearances from such Birmingham artists as Sam Redmore, Echo Juliet, The Atlantic Players and Julie Dexter - although Julie has slightly further to travel than most of those locals, as she's over 4,000 miles away, in Atlanta, Georgia.

"I moved to the US in 1999 after visiting and falling in love with Atlanta on my first visit. It was almost like the Birmingham of America," explains Julie. "I'd been to New York, LA, Washington DC, Florida, Chicago, but never wanted to live in any of those places.

There was something different about Atlanta though, it was almost like a home-from-home feeling, minus the obvious differences.

New York is like London, a fast-paced, busy busy, concrete jungle. Atlanta is like Birmingham - a little more laid back, friendly but with still enough city life that there's lots to do. It's also very green with lots of trees and nature everywhere.

"Also Atlanta has such a vibrant music scene which really appealed to me as a musician," she adds, name-checking such artists as TLC, Outkast, India Arie, Indigo Girls and John Mayer. "By the time I moved here, I already had a following due to radio stations like WCLK and WRFG, who were playing my music.

"And of course there was the weather. They call it 'HOTlanta' for a reason!"

Born in Grove Lane, Handsworth, - "right across from Handsworth Park" - Julie

moved to Kings Norton when she was about four years-old, attending Primrose Hill Primary School, Turves Green Girls' School then Joseph Chamberlain, before moving to London to study at Middlesex University. Although passionate about music from an early age, it took her a while to find her voice.

"I started with recorder, violin, clarinet and really didn't take singing seriously until when I got to col-

lege and took my first jazz class. I discovered singers like Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Cassandra Wilson, Abbey Lincoln and Betty Carter for the first time, and went from being a classical clarinetist to an aspiring jazz vocalist in my second year at Middlesex University.

"Jason Yarde (saxophonist) was also at Middlesex at the time and already playing with The Jazz Warriors. He invited me to Gary Crosby OBE's Sunday jam sessions at the London Jazz Cafe and there Gary later formed Tomorrow's Warriors, of which Jason, Daniel Crosby, Robert Mitchell, Vidal Montgomery and myself were original members. That's where I truly started honing my skills as a vocalist and songwriter."

Singing with the seminal Tomorrow's Warriors, and Gary Crosby's Nu Troop, Julie was spotted by Courtney Pine, and joined him for tours of the UK, Japan and Europe. But despite being hotly tipped in the UK as an artist to watch, the temptation to move Stateside proved too much.

Launching her own Ketch A Vibe Records, she's since released a string of acclaimed albums, while her Ketch A Vibe single was featured in national radio ads for then Democratic Presidential Candidate Senator Barack Obama.

Now a mother - "I have two amazing children," she says, with pride, of her offspring, now 17 and 11 - she describes herself as "a full-time musician and a full-time educator."

"I teach by day and sing by night," she explains. "I have been working for Atlanta Public schools as a full-time substitute teacher teaching grades K-12 [ages 5-18] for the past six years. I also do workshops and teach vocal masterclasses throughout the country.

"Music is my first love, but I so enjoy working with young people as it keeps me in touch with what is going on in the world. When you teach you give back, when you give back, you learn more, when you learn more, you can teach more."

Despite an established life in Atlanta, she tries to return to Brum as often as she can, and was last here just before Covid broke. Asked what she misses most about the city



Singer Julie Dexter

of her birth, she quickly cries: "My Mom - Alva Dexter shout out! - and my two brothers Paul and Nigel Dexter are top of that list. My family and friends period. I have some friends that I have known since childhood and it's always good to connect with them as I've known them the longest so there's no hiding there," she laughs.

"And I know it's more of a UK thing, but I miss fish and chips. We used to have some of the best chip-pies in Brum in my opinion. I literally crave them like once a month - I'm serious! I try to prepare for the little weight gain when I come home 'cos I know I'm going to be chowing down, all combinations, chips with scallops, curry sauce, mushy peas,

beef and onion pie, quarter chicken, the whole nine! And of course there's the chocolate.

"I don't do American chocolate. Ask my Mom, I bring an empty suitcase every time I come home and fill it up with Twix, Snickers, Cadbury's, etc, Walkers crisps and all the good sweets, and my family literally fight over them till they're all gone (not the ones I've hidden though).

"When I'm done touring I might open up a fish and chip shop as I have yet to find a place that settles my cravings," she jokes.

■ Julie Dexter is at Mostly Jazz Funk and Soul Festival, Birmingham, on Sunday.

## SOUND JUDGEMENT

The latest album releases reviewed

### MERCURY - ACT 2

Imagine Dragons

★★★★☆

Las Vegas

rockers Imagine

Dragons present the sequel to last year's Mercury - Act 1.

Act 2 opens with lead single Bones, easily one of the best singles of 2022 and the highlight of the album.

The track is an instant hit, blending catchy piano with frontman Dan Reynolds' harsh vocals on the pre-chorus refrain. The mood often shifts between tracks and the tail end of the album contains several slower songs.

Ferris Wheel is a particularly sweet and romantic tale.

Surprisingly, this lengthy 18-track work doesn't contain any bad songs and sees the Dragons continue on their path to world domination.



### TOAST

Neil Young And

Crazy Horse

★★★★☆

Neil Young

finally releases

Toast, an album he shelved in 2001 as it was too sad. That's quite the statement, with Young no stranger to heartache and break-up songs, not to mention Tonight's The Night's raw grief, but these seven tracks all bring the darkness.

It won't get the party started, but Toast adds to Young's formidable legacy and deserves to be heard.



### LEAP

James Bay

★★★★☆

The title of James Bay's third album was

inspired by a quote from the 19th century American naturalist John Burroughs: "Leap, and the net will appear."

If his 2014 debut, Chaos And The Calm, was a collection of easily digestible folk ballads, 2018's Electric Light saw the 31-year-old proudly embrace his commercial pop ambitions.

His new album, recorded in Nashville before the pandemic struck but tweaked and added to throughout lockdown, is not so much a leap. Instead, it is a concentration of the sounds and themes of his last record.

Bay strips away the sonic experimentation and focuses on delivering classic pop songwriting with glossy production courtesy of Grammy-winner Dave Cobb. And he does so successfully.



"I bring an empty suitcase every time I come home and then fill it up with chocolate"