

## DIUNNA GREENLEAF

### THE SOUND OF HIS STORY

It is now important to give Diunna Greenleaf the place she deserves on the chessboard of the blues. That of a queen, who is today one of the most impressive singers in activity. A queen who knows how to sing everything, a rare talent. Creative, eclectic, thoughtful, involved in all aspects of her music, the Texan has just released a high-flying album on Little Village, "I Ain't Playin'". Back on his journey.

By Daniel Leon

Diunna Greenleaf recorded relatively little, and only from the mid-2000s. Because before that, she served the cause of the blues by leading institutions, organizing a festival, engaging in the Blues in the Schools program. Much earlier, from her childhood in the 1960s, she grew up in contact with gospel music before discovering blues, soul and jazz. When we discovered her in France in 2007, she took everything in her path with her

charisma, her stage presence and of course her ultra-powerful voice. But on disc, from his third album, we realize that his very extensive vocal range goes well beyond a brutal and angry blues, it is obvious on his previous CD, "Tryin' To Hold On". But the remarkable album, released on his own label, will not have the echo of which it was nevertheless worthy. Eleven years later, she offers another one that will make a mark. Far from her often incendiary concerts, Diunna expresses herself slowly, calmly, accurately and anxious to convince that she defends an essential art.

First of all, how are you? And tell us about your origins...

Oh, that's pretty good, thanks, although I have a bit of a sore throat as the weather keeps changing here, yet normally it's warm in the area.

Otherwise, I'm from Houston, Texas, where my father, a youth vocal coach, taught me how to sing gospel. Of course, it dates back, and when it started I was very young. He had very famous students like Johnnie Taylor and Sam Cooke. I also have an older sister who sang in church for very

long years, and by that I mean in her sixties, and she goes on... My younger sister played piano, organ, saxophone, harmonica and piccolo, but unfortunately she left us in 2005. In fact, I don't really remember my beginnings because my parents were doing gospel and I grew up with that, I very quickly sang in church choirs.

How was your youth?

I was the first black child admitted to my primary school, I let you imagine, I had some difficult times, not with the children, rather with their parents.

What music did you listen to as a child and as a teenager?

All kinds of music, but mostly gospel that I heard all the time, Soul Stirrers, Sensational Nightingales, Swan Silvertones, and singers like Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who were also friends of my dad. I also discovered the blues quite early, because some bluesmen did gospel, or the other way around, but our parents let us buy records of different styles. I discovered artists like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf.

Did you then think of a career in music?

No, I was going to school and I wanted to go to higher education, my parents insisted that I have a good education. I had a degree in university, a master's degree in mass communication because I wanted to inform as many people as possible of the evolution of the situation in the world, particularly that of my people.

How did you come to music?

My parents wanted me to sing on condition that I study, they felt that it would help me to find a place for myself. I started to sing in public after the death of my father, my mother suggested that I pass an audition during which she would accompany me because I was a little hesitant. I thought it would be a way to give them back everything they had given me.

Your involvement is expressed at different levels: president of the Houston Blues Society, producer of the Willie Mae Thornton Blues Festival, founder of the Houston Blues Society Founders Day,

teacher at the Blues in the Schools Program. Is it important to you?

Oh yes, I did that because I believe that the blues also hold an important place in our history. It had to be done. Nobody had really worked on it in Texas, I wanted the bluesmen to be proud of what they created, and that we understand how they built it. Because many people invested in the blues today are not black. These are the rules of the music industry, and if you look at most scenes, we have very good blues artists. But the public does not have the opportunity to see or hear them on a large scale, because the agents, when they bring in black artists, do not always pay them well...

So you are attached to the history and culture of your music?

Yes, I have always considered this history of our music, I have always been part of it, but I am also interested in its future. One thing is certain, we do not have enough control over the business side, if only at the agency level. Do you know a lot of black-owned agencies? No there is not ! And it's not much better on the label side. The

problem lies there. Sometimes agencies make promises to us but they rarely keep them.

"IT'S MY TURN, I'M TIRED OF BEING OPPRESSED OR REJECTED BECAUSE I HAVE NO AGENT. »

Victory at the International Blues Challenge in 2005 was a new step?

Indeed, even if at first, I didn't really want to go, but the group wanted it. Eventually we won, even though Joey Gilmore was declared the winner first and we second. But then we were informed of an irregularity (1), Joey was disqualified and we took first place.

How is it going in Houston, what about the scene? Oh my God... I live in a neighborhood of Houston called Humble, up north. The climate suits me because I am very chilly, I fear the cold. I like to visit places where it's cold, but I always have to go back to where I'm warm (laughs). Regarding the local scene, I always wondered if young people would continue to play the blues. But I have been involved in the Blues in the Schools program for a long time, and I have noticed that there are many

young people who want to play the blues, to discover it, they come to me to ask questions. In my time it was different, we didn't have such programs, now we can really take care of the students, follow them, give them what they need. We also find some who don't know the blues, but when they hear us play it, they really love it, especially since they don't have the opportunity to hear it on the radio.

Let's come to your last CD, "I Ain't Playin'", why this title?

I'm not playing, it's very serious, it's my turn, I'm tired of being oppressed or rejected because I don't have an agent. It is because that I want you to be correct with me. I had some offers for this record quite some time ago, but they differed from those of other artists.

The gestation was long...

Otis Clay was to sing on a part, but fifteen days before coming, he died (in 2016). Later, Mike Ledbetter was to replace him, but he also died (in 2019), of epilepsy at home. So I was extremely determined. The managers of Little Village

approached me, for them this record should have been released a long time ago. I asked who was involved. There was Kid Andersen, I said "OK, I love Kid", Jim Pugh, I said "OK, I love Jim Pugh", D'mar (drummer Derrick "D'mar" Martin) , I said "OK, I love D'mar" (laughs)... When they added that bassist Jerry Jemmott (2) wanted to work with me, I couldn't believe it, I screamed de joy, I listened to Jerry since my adolescence! I told them "yes, yes, I agree!" »

Your voice allows you to sing everything... I got that from my mother, she could really sing anything, she was an absolutely wonderful singer. My father was known because he taught singing, was part of a gospel group, frequented many artists in Houston... But my mother, we did not know her magnificent voice as well, she only sang in church and home for us. She was asked to sing a song, she sang it, then another, she did it too. She was not lacking in talent.

**“MY MUSIC IS THAT OF PEOPLE, THOSE AND THOSE WHO WORK EVERY DAY. »**

Listening, with this production and these arrangements, I had the feeling of being in the studio with the musicians, how do you do it?

I was looking for that, it was a great experience but I want to say something: we recorded all the songs in one take, except for two of them. First Running like the Red Cross, which I performed in 2020 for the 150th anniversary of the British Red Cross, but I had never recorded it. I wrote it before Hurricane Harvey hit in 2017, I was flooded and my notebooks were destroyed. There were two or three versions of the song, I had to sing it from memory and I only remembered one verse... On Answer of a hard working woman, I had a little trouble writing on this theme, that of a woman who works too much to take care of her man. But I'm delighted with the work done with Kid, obviously for the musical part. Jerry Jemmott also encouraged me, explaining to me that the answer suggested in the title was humorous, but that it was a good song, that it had to be done.

We also find Sunny day friends and Back door man, these are your songs, we already know them...

Yes, I recorded them on my previous CD "Tryin' To Hold On", which is eleven years old. But I wanted to redo them differently, for example Sunny day friends is in a more jazzy register, so that people feel the versatility of my music. For the other songs, I wanted to highlight great artists from Houston, like Joe Medwick and Johnny Copeland. Johnny was a very good friend, when he was really sick I sang for him several times here, I wanted one of his songs on this CD. Noel Hayes (executive producer) also played a big role in choosing the songs, he knew I could sing them but he also wanted others to know them. I have an audience that follows me for jazz, another for gospel, a third for blues, which some people ignore.

With your mastery of different styles, how would you qualify your music?

(Long reflection) It is the music of people, of those who work every day.

What do you feel ?

It was a relief to finish this CD because everything was not always easy with the pandemic and my sister who was suffering from cancer. Always go out with a mask, put on gloves, oh my God... So yes, I'm happy with the result, especially since it's not yet available for sale (3), it's already number 1 in several rankings... number 1 even before being officially released! It was really a shock, I couldn't believe it, but it makes me so happy.

TO LISTEN

"I Ain't Playin'" (Little Village, 2022) \*\*\*\*\*

"Trying To Hold On" (Blue Mercy, 2011) \*\*\*\*

(1). You cannot participate in the IBC if you have recorded a disc at the national level in the ten years preceding the event. However, Gilmore had produced for Ichiban the album "Just Call Me Joey" nine and a half months earlier. He will return in 2006 and will win, this time without discussion.

(2). Born in 1946, this very famous studio bassist accompanied in the 1960s and 1970s the greatest of blues, soul, funk, jazz, including King Curtis,

Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, Freddie Hubbard, George Benson, Wilson Pickett, Gil Scott-Heron, Ben E. King, Archie Shepp and B.B. King! He continues his activity as a session musician while leading a solo career since the 1990s.

(3) This interview was conducted on April 7, 2022, a month and a half before the official release of the CD, on May 22.

MY REVIEW IN THE SAME ISSUE:

DIUNNA GREENLEAF

I AIN'T PLAYIN' \*\*\*\*\* The foot  
Little Village

MULTIPLE BLUES

Long taken by associative tasks in the blues, Diunna Greenleaf began her recording career relatively late, in 2004. Her first three albums were already excellent, but we knew this superb singer was capable of releasing a landmark record. So it will be at Little Village. You have to believe that the planets have aligned in favor of this "I Ain't Playin'", just like the satellites which revolve around the lady: Kid Andersen (guitar and of

course production), Jerry Jemmott (bass), Jim Pugh (keyboards), Derrick "D'mar" Martin (drums), not to mention a rich horn section (trombone, sax, trumpet) and guests like Sax Gordon and Alabama Mike. The arrangements are sumptuous, bring a lot of relief and give the feeling that we are present on the spot, surrounded by the musicians (Never trust a man, I wish I knew how it would feel to be free, I don't care, Damned if I do). From then on, thus "conditioned", Diunna can spread out her entire vocal palette (contained voice on Running like the Red Cross underlined by choirs, vocal maturity on the soul blues If it wasn't for the blues, jazzy register with Sunny day friends on which she tries her hand at scat, rage on Damned if I do, breadth and tension on the slow blues Let me cry...). It's very simple, Diunna Greenleaf does what she wants! And let's not forget his well-written compositions, including the amusing Answer to the hard working woman, and Sunny day friends which aims to bring hope. Passing with total mastery from blues to soul and gospel, even making a small detour to jazz, Diunna Greenleaf and her accompanists quite simply sign a stunning record.

Daniel Leon