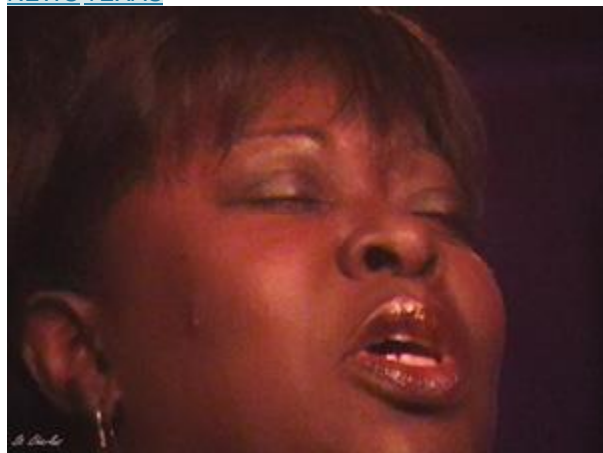


Diunna Greenleaf: Electrifying, Essential and Thoroughly the Blues

BY PAUL J WOLFLE [JULY 24, 2014](#) [AMERICAN SINGER-SONGWRITER](#) [BLUES FOUNDATION](#) [BLUES MUSIC](#) [AWARD](#) [BLUES MUSIC](#) [DIUNNA GREENLEAF](#) [GOSPEL MUSIC](#) [HOUSTON BLUES SOCIETY](#) [MUSIC](#) [NEWS](#) [TEXAS](#)



In Europe they call her “The People’s Queen.” She is the winner of the 2014 Blues Music Foundation’s Koko Taylor Award. Inspired by R&B legend Mama Thornton, she fronted a Muddy Waters tribute band while leading her own high-powered group, Blue Mercy. Whether the song calls for a sexy growl or a mournful moan, this Texas-born artist has it covered with “Diunna’s Style of the Blues.” A thrilling performer and an international singing sensation, she is Diunna Greenleaf.

About Diunna Greenleaf

Diunna has been influenced by some of the greats, including celebrated soul goddess Aretha Franklin, spiritual six-string star Rosetta Tharpe, “Twistin’ the Night Away” legend Sam Cooke and her own parents, gospel veterans Mary Ella and Ben Greenleaf. But that tells only a fraction of the Diunna Greenleaf story.

Did you know that Greenleaf is the past president of the Houston Blues Society, the first woman to ever hold that position? What’s more, Diunna

started the Blues Society Founders Day benefit and helped organize Friends of the Blues, Montgomery County. Her philanthropic efforts are many. Besides being an award-winning vocalist and professional of the highest caliber, Greenleaf is a true humanitarian, through and through.

An interview with Diunna Greenleaf

Music Interview Magazine spoke with Diunna Greenleaf about her career, the blues, *Tryin' to Hold On*, "Sunny Day Friends" and much more.

Congratulations on being presented with the Koko Taylor Award by the Blues Foundation at the 2014 Blues Music Awards. These awards are generally acknowledged as being the highest honor in the field of blues music. You also won "Best New Artist Debut" in 2008. Who nominated you for this year's award? Tell us about the award ceremony.

Thank you. Well, first of all, we don't know who nominates us. There's a nominating committee and they are scattered all over the world. From what I understand, there are between 120 and 150 nominators, in the United States and various other countries. Every organization or city that has a blues society or blues association gets one nominator. The nomination process goes from 20 nominees in a given category, which is then cut in half to ten, then to five. Those are the five that appear on the final nomination list. The Blues Foundation notifies the five finalists in each category that they are on the list. You never know until the final five that you've been nominated.

Where are the Blues Music Awards held?

They're held in Memphis at the convention center downtown. The Blues Music Awards rival any of the televised awards shows. They are on PBS.

What does it feel like being recognized among the likes of Irma Thomas, Buddy Guy and the inimitable Solomon Burke?

Of course, it feels great. It feels even better knowing these artists. You know, I remember Solomon giving me words of encouragement and telling me that I

had a great instrument. He was very pleasantly surprised and he loved the way I would sing. These artists represent the music in a way that honors the art form.

Your music is rich in gospel, jazz and the blues. You have also mentioned being influenced by artists like Aretha Franklin, Rosetta Tharpe, Sam Cooke and Charles Brown, among others. In a recent interview with Muddy Waters' former guitar player, Bob Margolin, he said "I feel sorry for any artist in the world who would have to follow



Diunna's power onstage." What is "Diunna's style of the blues?"

It's everything I grew up with, especially gospel. You know, my father was a male vocal coach and he had three rather famous students: Johnny Taylor, Cecil Shaw and Sam Cooke. All of them were gospel. Johnny Taylor and Sam Cooke were teenagers in a group called The Highway Q.C.'s. We belonged to the same church in Houston. I never knew Sam Cooke, but Johnny Taylor used to come by and visit all the time. They would always stop by at night and sometimes stay until sunrise. Daddy was a young man working with them, but he was the oldest. There was always a lot of singing and a lot of gospel songs at home.

You have performed with your band, Blue Mercy, throughout the United States and internationally, including the Lugano Blues Festival and Bern Jazz Festival in Switzerland; Cahors Blues Festival in France; and the Olsztyn Blues Festival in Poland. You were selected to perform at the



Ambassador's gala in London and recently returned from a trip to Sweden. What is it about blues music and particularly your brand, that the world craves?

No matter if it's Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Lithuania or Monaco, at Casino Royale, everyone loves the blues. It's the music of the people. Everyone around the world at some time or another has 'the pitch' put on them, you know, hard times, so to speak. And in Europe, they call me 'The People's Queen.' When it comes to the blues, you can say some things that you cannot otherwise say,

perhaps due to social etiquette or some other situation. I don't mean cussing. Sometimes people want to express what they've suffered and what they've gone through. Blues can make us happy or get us through the sadness. You know, I have a Master's Degree in Social Counseling and I find that blues music helps in the counseling of people. It's really good counsel. The blues has gone around the world several times and helped people in despair and different situations.

It's clear that Blue Mercy has deep ties to gospel music.

Gospel and the blues are closely related. Take my parents or Aretha Franklin and her father, Reverend C.L. Franklin, or Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Her mother was renowned in the gospel world. Sam Cooke started out with The Highway Q.C.'s, a gospel group. I mean, that's what we are, we're mercy, Blue Mercy. When you hear Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf, when you hear them howling, I can relate to that; I know what that means. I understand the difference in tones and the different moans. I understand what a grieving death moan is or an inference of sexual desire, or the moan when a woman has a baby. That's what blue mercy is.

Your dedication to the blues clearly transcends the stage. You have promoted the Blues in School Program, Friends of the Blues Montgomery County and served as the first woman president of the Houston Blues Society for three years. What is the Houston Blues Society?



The Houston Blues society is an organization dedicated to promoting the art form known as the blues. The organization's focus understands the art form and acknowledges artists from the genre, especially those who are from Houston. Houston has a great legacy of music, all kinds, gospel, jazz and blues, including traditional African-American music. Look at the people who have lived here, studied here, taught here, played and recorded here. Victoria Spivey had her own record label and was from Houston.

You also are going to be a special guest at the Project Blues Bash benefit in Ohio coming up in August. What is Project Blues Bash and how will you be participating?

Yes, that began about five years ago. It's an organization that takes care of the patient's full circle of needs. Someone can take care of the patient's medical needs but there are so many other things that have to be addressed. The organization first contacted my guitar player, John "Del Toro" Richardson. It provides, among other things, payments for mammograms, blood tests, wigs, meals, transportation for medical appointments and shopping, which all help in the cancer recovery process. The organization does each of these things and more. We go down every year. The sad part is that I know each time we return, someone else is not going to be there. But our shows provide encouragement. We put on a second show the following day in order to raise donations for the project.

Houston has a long history of producing many legendary performers. You previously referred to blues singer-songwriter and Okeh recording artist Victoria Spivey, who eventually had her own label, Spivey Records. What's more, T-Bone Walker, Rodney Crowell, Beyonce Knowles... the list of famous artists who hail from Houston goes on and on. Why is Houston such an epicenter for so much fine music?

The people of Houston take pride in their singing. I know we used to have family talent shows. Look at the Kashmere Stage Band, the musicians behind that great music were merely high schoolers. There were others too, including Eddie "Clean Head" Vinson. Houston has always been a great place for music. All the talent that came through here, the kids wanted to emulate it.



Your current release, *Trying to Hold On*, has been a serious chart-topper on satellite radio and beyond. You wrote most of the songs. What is the story behind "Sunny Day Friends?"

There's a story behind every single song that I write. "Sunny Day Friends" came out of something the late harmonica player and singer Sam Myers told me all the time. He was with Anson Funderburgh and the Rockets. He used to say to me, "Little girl, I want you to promise old Sam one thing, that you'll look out for those sunny day friends." I said, "Don't you mean sunny weather friends?" He said, "Nope. When things are all sunshine and good, they always want to be standing next to you. Let the clouds come up or a storm rises, you can't find them anywhere. Instead of getting in trouble with sunny day friends, find a few true friends." So, I thought about a few people in my own life who were sunny day friends.

Do you have any other projects on the horizon?

Yes, I'm working with my 'brother', Bob Margolin. We're going to be bringing together some new material. Other than that, I'm constantly involved with touring and trying to get all the details done.

In addition to *Trying to Hold On*, Diunna Greenleaf's discography includes the albums *Cotton Field to Coffee House* and *Crazy but Live in Houston*. She also appeared on Pinetop Perkins Grammy Award winning collection, *Last of the Great Mississippi Delta Bluesmen: Live in Dallas*. Assorted clips of Diunna's music can be sampled on Diunna.com.