

Syleena Johnson & The Rebirth Of Soul (Interview)



Syleena Johnson has been holding the mantle for soul music since she became a fan as a young person. Her almost two decades as a solo artist seems logical because of her father, Hi Records soul legend Syl Johnson. But the creative spirit was something Johnson came into after making plans to practice medicine. The shift into a music career proved to be enduring and a real fit for the edginess of her blue-toned voice. She is always associated with the “All Falls Down” collaboration she did with Kanye West in 2004. Newer fans are quick to talk about her time on the reality series *R&B Divas: Atlanta*. Music is her foundation and she’s shared her journey within a discography that has addressed many aspects of her womanhood, relationships and humanity up until the present. In 1995 she recorded *This Time Together: Father And Daughter* with her dad and they have come full circle with 2017’s *The Rebirth Of Soul*. Their new project is a collection of soul covers from the ’50s and ’60s recorded live with some of Chicago’s most respected musicians. In this interview Johnson explains the story behind *The Rebirth Of Soul*, her path to music and being one of the hosts of TV One’s new talk show *Sister Circle*.

“You can not have a Rebirth Of Soul album without Aretha Franklin”

How did you and your father get around to recording *Rebirth Of Soul*?

We actually did six years ago. This album has been sitting in the can six years. I was pregnant with Kingston and my dad

asked me if I wanted to do a covers album. My dad came up with the concept and it was weird because I already recorded *Chapter 5* and he suggested live instrumentation and I said fine if you put it all together Iâ€™ll show up. I picked some of the records. Otis Redding “This Heart Of Mine” which is probably my favorite Otis Redding song ever.

What did it feel like to record live for the first time?

It wasnâ€™t the first time Iâ€™ve been doing this a while with my dad but what was the first time was recording live with musicians from this era. And having to recreate with them and that was tough. But I welcome the challenge because you know one thing about my dad is that he brings out the best in me because he really believes in me as an artist. He really believes in me as a vocalist he gave me the confidence to know that I could go in and complete these songs.Â

Was it hard to become a singer with a father who is so well-esteemed?

You know I didnâ€™t want to become a singer itâ€™s weird I really didnâ€™t set out to be a singer I wanted to be a psychologist or a doctor. He used to tell me I couldnâ€™t sing he would tell me to shut-up I canâ€™t sing. I didnâ€™t think I could sing really but I knew I could I didnâ€™t think I was at the level. He used to tell me to shut-up because he was on the phone with record executives and they wanted to know who I was and he felt like I was too young.



What was your memory of “Is It Because Iâ€™m Black” growing up with Syl Johnson for a father?

I didnâ€™t have any memories of that song because that song was done a long time ago. When I got into my career I remade it on my fourth chapter. I donâ€™t think I was born when that record came out I was born in â€™72 and it was out before

that. My dad told me about the impact because I wanted to recreate it for my fourth album which was *Chapter Four: Labor Pains*. I put it on *Rebirth Of Soul* simply because of the time weâ€™re in and I think itâ€™s very relevant right now itâ€™s happening all over again.

Did your father ever have any problems because of that song?

He did, they shelved his whole album because of that record because he recorded an album on the Civil Rights Movement during that time the whole album was about it. And then, â€œIs It Because Iâ€™m Blackâ€ was published in *Time* magazine thatâ€™s how impactful it was.

What happened in your household to let you know you had a soul legend for a father?

We didnâ€™t think about it any other way thatâ€™s our norm so it wasnâ€™t like â€œWow my dad isâ€ It was how we were raised he was just dad. When we heard his records we didnâ€™t exactly understand what that meant like I didnâ€™t understand any of that until I became an artist myself actually till I got older.

What is your most positive memory about making this record with your dad?

The most positive memory was when I was in the studio and there was a harpist behind me I had never been in the studio with a harpist and they were all playing at the same time and that was very cool. The string quartet was playing at the same time and to see my dad's charts for their part was just amazing to me. I did music theory in college and we had to create charts which was very very difficult but I wouldâ€™ve never thought I would never saw it happen like that. [youtube id="YbKmWZ0oCG8"]

You mentioned Otis Reddingâ€™s â€œThese Arms Of Mineâ€ but are there any other songs that are personal to you?

I really love "Lonely Teardrops" I just love it the sound of it. I really love "We Did It." It's a record my mom wrote with my dad and I remember that record her but apparently that's my mother and father's thing and that's something that's never glorified but my mother wrote a lot of his records because she was his wife she never really got the credit for it. My mom wrote a lot of his records and I'm a writer and I guess I get a lot of stuff from her. And anything Etta James I love obviously Etta James is from Chicago the song "I Think I'll Go Blind" is my favorite Etta James record and "Chain Of Fools." I picked "Chain Of Fools" because it's a good record but I love Aretha Franklin. You can not have a *Rebirth Of Soul* album without Aretha Franklin. My dad picked "The Monkey Time" and "Make Me Yours." He actually picked "Lonely Teardrops" He picked "Monkey Time" for sure because I didn't know that record he said that was a huge record. I picked Otis Redding's "These Arms Of Mine" that song came from *Dirty Dancing*. The scene in *Dirty Dancing* where she comes into that room and they have that rendezvous with Patrick Swayze. *Dirty Dancing* is one of my favorite movies so I always loved that record from that time.

"I put it ("Is It Because I'm Black") on Rebirth Of Soul simply because of the time we're in and I think it's very relevant right now it's happening all over again"

You keep yourself busy with something all the time. Now you're one of the hosts of *Sister Circle*, How do you like doing television compared to making music?

It's difficult to try and compare. I like TV. TV is very fun because it's extremely easy it's so easy it's ridiculous

the only thing about TV is that it's very meticulous it's very structured which makes it easy. Whereas music you spend long hours you have to put so much energy into it you really fall face first into music. I like to use the term being pregnant. I feel like I'm pregnant with a record everytime I hear someone else's music I get the stomach flutters I get the wanting to cry the immense urge to want to sing. So music is a much different beast to me because it really is all I've known my whole life. In this interview with you, I just had an a-ha moment like wow this has been my whole life so TV is like an hour every day. It's fun, you wake up in the morning you get dressed up and then you just go talk. No one wants you to sing there is no pressure like music is way more work.

How do like doing *Sister Circle*?

I love it one of the best parts of my day besides my children. The cast, the producers, and the make-up team and wardrobe we're all a family. We really are and every day of my life I see these people five days a week. So it forces you to work on yourself and work on your emotional intelligence when you're around others and your kindness and consideration for others. It just forces you to be a better person. You'll either be a better person or the person that everyone is trying to be better for you don't want to be that person! So it's good work it's good emotional work it's just an all-around good time. It comes on everyday 9AM Eastern Monday through Friday on TV One.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

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