

PORTRAIT

Corinne Bailey Rae – Put her records on!

Soft, velvety notes come from the speakers. “I would like to call it beauty” – those are the words that reach my ears. “Strained as love’s become, it still amazes me”, the voice sings on. A voice that knows it should produce very long notes when they are full of emotion – soft and velvety. A voice that from the very beginning made fans of Burt Bacharach, Herbie Hancock and Quincy Jones and also captivates me. This voice belongs to Corinne Bailey Rae, a new supporter of *Hear the World*.

The 31-year-old singer from Leeds with a Caribbean father and English mother recorded her second album, *The Sea*, at the beginning of the year. It comes a full four years after her first, which proved to be a surprise success. Her debut album has sold over four million copies so far! Corinne Bailey Rae is one of a new cream of British singers that also includes Amy Winehouse and Duffy – singers who have brought the soul back into pop music.

And that with success. For in 2007 she worked with Herbie Hancock on *River – The Joni Letters*, a tribute album to Joni Mitchell, and won no less than a Grammy for it. She also received three more Grammy nominations in the categories “Record Of The Year”, “Best Song Of The Year” and “Best New Artist”. It seemed nothing could stand in her way – until the catastrophe of March 2008.

But let us start from the beginning. Corinne Bailey took violin lessons as a child, went to school like any other kid and sang – you’ve got it – at church! It was through the director of the youth choir there that she first encountered more rock-like sounds and got to know bands like Primal Scream, Courtney Love’s Hole and heroes like Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin, coming to love them. Encouraged by the applause she received after her first few performances in front of an audience, at 15 she set up her first band, Helen. It was an indie guitar band consisting almost solely of women, and quickly landed a record deal with the renowned heavy metal label Roadrunner – but sadly without success. Helen split up just as quickly and Corinne started studying English literature. To finance her studies, she got a job as a cloakroom attendant in a jazz club – and so immersed herself in another musical world, that of jazz and soul. In quiet moments she went on stage herself in the small club to try it out. It was also in this club that she met her husband, the musician Jason Rae. At just 22, she married the saxophonist, who was to play in her band. Seven years later, in March 2008, Corinne got a call that would change everything: Her husband Jason Rae was dead. He had been found in a friend’s apartment. Cause of death: an unfortunate mix of alcohol and methadone.

At the time, Corinne Bailey Rae was writing songs for her follow-up album. All of a sudden, she found herself in a complete void. She could do nothing. For a year, she was devastated and paralyzed by grief.

“Everyone was asking, ‘What have you done?’ But I had nothing to show them. I didn’t go anywhere. I didn’t write anything. I didn’t work. I sat at my kitchen table for a whole year, people came and people went, life drifted by. It was just bleak.”

She only had a couple of songs finished, including the title track *The Sea*, based on her grandfather’s death in a boating accident. In general, her grief and loss is reflected in many of the twelve songs. Naturally, the new album is darker and more melancholy. Even the opener, *Are You Here*, seems to be specifically about Jason Rae:

He’s a real live wire
He’s the best of his kind
Wait till you see those eyes
He dresses like this different scene
He’ll kiss you make you feel sixteen

She happily describes her love, but it appears in the refrain, the question, full of longing, of where he is:

Are you here
Are you here
Are you here, cause my heart recalls that

There were phases when she did not realize what had happened. Then, the singer once again fell into a deep hole. Working on her new album helped her come to terms with her loss:

“Writing and recording these songs has been such an emotional and necessary experience for me.”



Photo: Bryan Adams

“BEING ABLE TO HEAR AND COMMUNICATE IS AN INVALUABLE GIFT. BEING A MUSICIAN, HEARING IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE AND TO LOSE THAT GIFT WOULD BE VERY HARD FOR ME.”

This is an album which has produced a more mature, but probably also a more melancholy woman. If her voice on her first album was melancholy, on her second her singing seems to have become a little more fragile, but also more intense. This time she wrote all the songs herself in full and also co-produced them for the first time. It seems she particularly liked this, because she is planning to move further in this direction in the near future. She has already taken the first step, by co-producing her guitarist's solo album. Yet it is also collaborations with other musicians that have contributed to her excellent reputation. She recorded the song *If I Don't* with the keyboarder Amp Fiddler for his album *Afro Strut*. Amp for his part remixed her song *Enchantment*. In 2008 she sang alongside Al Green on his comeback album *Lay It Down*. The 1970s Soul legend sang the beautiful ballad *Take Your Time* with Corinne. Help was provided by Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson, drummer for the hip hop group The Roots, and keyboarder James Poyser, who once again gave the album and Green the authentic, warm vintage sound that suits him so well.

Subsequently, Corinne also worked with Questlove and Poyser on *The Sea* – producing surely the funkier song on the album, *The Blackest Lily*. Most of the songs are characterized by a beautiful, sad world-weariness. We also sense the serenity of a woman who has walked a long and difficult path and is now pacing into the future with confidence. The music of *The Sea* flows calmly by, caressing Corinne's voice like a silk scarf. It is briefly interrupted by the two more upbeat and faster songs on the album, *Paris Nights / New York Mornings* and *Paper Dolls*, one after the other. There is a very harmonious, in my opinion sometimes too harmonious acoustic backdrop, which I now and again wish someone would tear up... ideally Corinne herself. But let's not forget, this is only the second work by an artist who has just started treading her own path, developing her own style further and showing the world how much potential she has. She was able to show that this summer supporting soul legend Stevie Wonder.

It is also the great soul singers of the 1970s that are among Corinne's favorites, namely Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, Donny Hathaway and Nina Simone, especially Nina Simone. Five days after Jason's death, Corinne saw the grand dame of “Black Classical Music” – as Nina Simone herself terms her own music – on a recording of the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival, where she played the well-known tearjerker *Feelings*. Corinne was extremely touched by how Nina Simone liberated it from all easy listening, soft rock and kitsch clichés. In the recording, Nina Simone looks incredibly distressed and inexpressibly sad – even though she seemingly has no problem skillfully drawing in the audience in her characteristic way and leading them to sing the refrain. She celebrates the song in a way perfectly fitting of a high priestess of soul and makes it her own. The final lines sung in this haunting and intense performance must have virtually jumped out at Corinne:

“You will stay here in my heart ... No matter what they say ... no matter what the drugs may do ... I will always have my feelings nothing can be stronger cause I know that that is all that there is ...”

Corinne's song *I'd Do It All Again* appears to put this attitude directly into her own words. The everyday worries and doubts that surface in many relationships are evident in the lyrics. However, Corinne Bailey Rae's conclusion sounds more like that of Edith Piaf's *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*:

“So weary, someone to love is bigger than your pride's worth
Is bigger than the pain you got for it hurts
And out runs all of the sadness
It's terrifying, life, through the darkness
And I'd do it all again, I'd do it all again”

It sounds honest and authentic. We believe every line that passes her lips. Incidentally, she says that of herself too, that she wants to be real and sincere in everything she does. The fact that she not only works on her musical career, but is also special ambassador for the charity organization CORD and the main ambassador for the international water and sanitation charity Pump Aid, shows just how committed this woman is. Now, *Hear The World* is proud to count Corinne Bailey Rae among its supporters. *Hear the World's* objective, namely increasing awareness of hearing, is very important to her:

“Being able to hear and communicate is an invaluable gift. Being a musician, hearing is of paramount importance and to lose that gift would be very hard for me.”

I would like to invite you to lend Corinne Bailey Rae your ears, to accompany a strong and extremely sensitive artist on her way. I think it is worth it, for it could be a very exciting journey indeed. Perhaps we'll see each other there.

Matthias Westerveller