

Now Hear This!

Angela Johnson [New York]

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by **Christian John Wikane**

The Trans-Continental Soul of Angela Johnson

When Angela Johnson performs at the Blue Note, the world famous jazz haunt in the heart of Greenwich Village, she transforms the club into a den of first-class funk and sizzling soul. Perched behind her keyboard, Johnson directs her band with a raised arm and open fist, her foot tapping in time to one of the tightest rhythm sections in New York City. That Johnson is considered a definitive voice of contemporary soul by audiences everywhere from Atlanta to Australia is no surprise; her first two albums on Purpose Records, *They Don't Know* (2002) and *Got to Let It Go* (2005), earned rave reviews by soul music aficionados the world over. Now, in the tradition of Quincy Jones's classic multi-artist productions, Johnson assembles a roster of top-notch talent including Rahsaan Patterson, Maysa Leak, and Claude McKnight on her first "producer" project, the aptly titled *A Woman's Touch*.

Part-time house diva and full time soul music icon, Angela Johnson has already achieved acclaim as a performer, but now she's ready to challenge the gender assumptions about R&B producers with a collaborative album that might be one of the year's early bests.

Origins

After spending a delightful afternoon in conversation with Angela Johnson, discussing everything from the first gig she ever performed in New York City to the purity of her young daughter's observations about music, it's apparent that *A Woman's Touch* is the album Angela Johnson was born to record. A child prodigy who composed original melodies on the piano at three years old, Johnson grew up on a healthy diet of gospel and funk in the suburbs of Utica, New York. In grade school, she added violin to her repertoire while honing her musical talent at St. Paul's Baptist church in Corn Hill, just outside Utica.

Johnson recalls, "I lived in a predominantly white neighborhood. I went to schools where a lot of the black kids were bussed, but many of them were my friends because they all went to church with me. I really had a very

regular life. As a teenager I got into cheerleading very heavily. At one time I thought that I was going to do it professionally, but once I realized I was not going to get money from it...that only lasted for five minutes!" she laughs.

With nary a pom-pom in sight, Johnson auditioned for SUNY Purchase and was accepted for both voice and violin, bringing her closer to that Mecca of performing arts: New York City. During her studies at SUNY Purchase, she met fellow music major and future founder of Tortured Soul, John-Christian Ulrich. Both students performed in the university's gospel choir and developed a mutual admiration for each other's considerable talent. "He heard my voice and said, 'Listen, I got some songs that I have written and I would love to hear your voice on them,'" recalls Johnson.

The pair's musical simpatico evolved into Cooly's Hot Box, a full-fledged acid jazz/funk band formed with other music majors at SUNY Purchase. Local gigs in Westchester, New York, eventually gave way to remix productions by Basement Jaxx, Armand Van Helden, and Roger Sanchez, one of the premier producers in house music. Anyone who spent just a little bit of time on the strobe-lit dance floors of New York and London clubs during 2000-2001 may fondly recognize the deep bass lines and soaring vocals on intoxicating tracks like "Smile" and "Make Me Happy".

Johnson, however, is quick to make an important distinction, "People always thought Cooly's Hot Box was a house band, and that was never the case. The thing was our music was always remixed. People never actually heard the originals and (they) would refer to our music from the house mixes." An album of the remixed tracks, *Make Me Happy* (2001), was released through the Scotland-based Sole Music label, while the original, more funk-infused tracks were released on *Take It* (2002), which was, for all intents and purposes the debut of Cooly's Hot Box. Shortsighted comparisons to the Family Stand and the Brand New Heavies belied the band's very unique sound, typified by Johnson's "Happy Feelings" and Ulrich's wrenching ballad "I'm in Love With You". As Cooly's Hot Box brought their feast of funk to clubs throughout the US in promotion of *Take It*, Johnson was also wrapping up a project that had been incubating for years.

With producers Russell Johnson and George Littlejohn, the nerve center behind Purpose Records, Johnson asserted her very own music identity on *They Don't Know*, her solo debut released just months after Cooly's *Take It* hit the streets. "*They Don't Know* definitely was just me experimenting and really getting to know myself as a producer, singer, songwriter, and musician," Johnson says. "I really hadn't heard *myself*. I was always singing Christian's lyrics. I was always singing his melodies. I would add my little two bits to make it my own, but it really wasn't me. *They Don't Know* was just a way for me to express my thoughts and feelings and how I would actually sing a note and how I would deliver it." Indeed, tracks like "No Better Love", "Rescue Me", and "Some Kind of Wonderful" were

rousing numbers that referenced Johnson's roots in the church as much as early-'70s Pointer Sisters ("Yes We Can Can" is a staple in her current set list).

They Don't Know was a bona fide hit across the international spectrum of soul music. Through the UK-based Dome Records and Columbia Records in Japan, Johnson cultivated a worldwide following with both her solo and Cooly's Hot Box projects. So reverent is Johnson's audience in East Asia that she regularly performs five-day, ten-show engagements in cities like Yokohama. Though US audiences are no less appreciative, Johnson's fan base in Japan is especially supportive. "In Japan, they follow you from day one," she says with a tinge of wonderment in her voice. "The day you step foot with your name out there and they get to know your background, they will do their homework and actually know your history. I'm just amazed at that. I always express to them how much I appreciate that, because people really are trying to get to know me and they are very interested in what I do and what I have done in the past."

Collaboration

Around the time of *Got to Let It Go* (2005), the critically acclaimed follow up to *They Don't Know*, Johnson was presented with the idea of a producer project. The concept appealed to her, yet she was hesitant to collaborate with other artists whose creative processes might not have congealed with her own. "All these things that were running through my head were senseless," she laughs. "I was just very nervous about getting with other artists, because I usually work by myself. It's not that I don't want to give out my secret—there is no secret—it's just the way that I work might seem quirky to someone else." Her concerns were allayed once phone calls and studio dates were set with artists who already appreciated her work as much as she did theirs.

The first artist she collaborated with for the project was the inimitable Rahsaan Patterson, an established producer and songwriter in his own right, who was the consummate creative partner for Johnson. She remembers, "I was mad nervous because I'm a huge fan of his. Usually, if I do work with another artist, I like to give them a track and let them write to it, but Rahsaan wanted to get together and actually work from scratch. Everything went down professionally and he was just a kind-hearted person. I thought, 'Wow, if the rest of the project works out like this, then I'll have *such* an amazing time.'" Citing her work with another esteemed writer, Gordon Chambers, she adds, "I love the fact with this album that I'm just learning different ways of how people approach their music, how they write. I take on all of this like a sponge. It's just good for me to evolve not only as a producer, but as an artist, and just learn different ways of approaching things."

"Approach" is the key word when Angela discusses Lisala Beatty and Tricia

Angus, two names that fans will recognize from Johnson's concerts. Those voices, which effortlessly blend with Johnson onstage, are quite unique unto themselves. Each vocalist was given their own spotlight on *A Woman's Touch*. The producer explains, "Lisala's approach definitely is more aggressive. She's actually dropping a lot of science in how she approaches vocals. Her melodic structure and her harmonies are very keen —there's no in between. [Tricia] has quite a bit of range, but her sound is a little bit earthier. There's just more bottom on her voice. She has a huge jazz background, and when you hear her doing her ad-libs or scatting, that's where it all really comes out. They're just amazing people to work with, and I just appreciate that they've always been giving me 110%. I didn't want anyone else to work with them before me!" she adds wryly. An enthusiastic audience at S.O.B.'s in Tribeca sounded their approval for Beaty and Angus's tracks when Johnson previewed some of the new material back in November 2007.

A Woman's Touch is also emblematic of the tight-knit independent soul music community in New York, where the camaraderie between musicians creates a wealth of opportunities. "Nobody's trying to be at the top and leave everybody else back," notes Johnson, whose relationship with Marlon Saunders is certainly a meeting of like minds (for one, both were vocalists in acid jazz-based bands before venturing solo). The two connected at a Raul Midón concert at Joe's Pub in New York, though they'd met briefly on occasions beforehand. The musical adoration between the two was instantaneous. Johnson shares, "I love the grittiness in his voice and how he delivers. When he was here recording with me, his eyes were closed most of the time. He was so into it. His body would move all different sorts of ways just to get that line delivered. He's just so theatrical. I was crazy about that, but his voice just topped it off."

The virtual community of MySpace also facilitated the participation of artists on *A Woman's Touch*, including Maysa Leak and Claude McKnight. George Littlejohn, an executive at Purpose, introduced McKnight to Johnson's music and arranged a phone call with the producer. Recalls Johnson, "I came up with a great song and he gave me a subject to write about. He sent me some MP3s of melodies that he had in mind. Basically I just went with what he had given me and came up with a song called 'Here I Stand'. Lyrically, I think that's probably one of my strongest songs when it comes to personal matters of strength and just dealing with everyday issues."

Maysa Leak, who previously recorded Johnson's "All Day Long" on her *Smooth Sailing* (2004) album, instantly fell in love with "More Than You Know", which Johnson wrote especially for *A Woman's Touch*. "Everybody's been wonderful and has made it really easy for me to work with them. I don't know if it's because I'm a Libra," she laughs, "or that everybody's just really cool and they have a lot of respect for me as I do them. It just all came together beautifully."

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

A Woman's Touch is in part fueled by the dearth of recognized female producers in the R&B community. While the work of Kanye, Timbaland, and Akon crowd the airwaves, their female counterparts remain under the radar. It's a dynamic that Johnson, understandably, ruminates about heavily as *A Woman's Touch* is readied for release. "There are so many producers out there that are getting a lot of success and being known for their sound, and the fact is that they're all men! There are no women, and if you do find a woman associated with a producer, people are automatically going to think, 'Oh yeah, the guy did most of the music. The woman probably just did the writing.' I have been dealing with that most of my producer life," Johnson confides. "I'm not really trying to make another statement, stating that 'Women—we can do it too!' It's just that I think women have something else to say. It can't be one-sided. It can't be all about the hardness in a track, even though I'm attracted to that. My drums have to be hard enough for me to really get into it, and the bass line has to really thump. When I do listen to my music, it does sound different than some of my male counterparts that are out there doing the same thing. I just have a different sensibility."

That sensibility translates to one of the best soul music albums anyone will hear in 2008. Johnson anticipates that the reaction will be positive, though some might be shocked by the arrival of a female Quincy Jones. "People are going say, 'Wow. A woman was able to actually put this all together,' [but] I want to be respected as just another producer. I want to be respected equally as the rest of the guys. So far, it looks like I've collaborated with more male than female artists," Johnson chuckles, "but it just happened that way."

Ironically, one of the key challenges Johnson faces with her own producer project is releasing *A Woman's Touch* in a marketplace driven by the sound of producers rather than artists. About her major label contemporaries in R&B, Johnson observes, "It's not who the artist is, it's who the producer is behind the artist that made them sound that way. If you name any of the artists out here, they have not been able to do anything without those producers. I think it's because of the superstardom of the producers that (artists) are able to put out records. Record labels want the same kind of stuff, and that doesn't leave us room for any other kind of music that other people want to hear." Though Johnson has a signature sound, it complements rather than obscures the artists she works with on *A Woman's Touch*. The sum total of talent is nourishment for underfed lovers of rhythm and melody.

Angela Johnson is casting a wide net with *A Woman's Touch* with appearances set in Atlanta and New York for its February 5 release in the US, not to mention dates abroad in the UK and Japan. "I must let you know that this will be the first of many to come," Johnson says about additional producer projects on the horizon. "I just want people to know

that I'm just being me. This is all I know. I love music. I eat, sleep, dream music. I can't speak any other language. This is who I am. I just hope that people appreciate that."

We certainly do, Ms. Johnson!

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