

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO DEBORAH COX

By Shaun Proulx

Toronto-born Deborah Cox thought she'd hit it big when she landed a gig in 1993 as a back-up singer for Celine Dion. Little did she know what was to come. Months into Dion's tour, Cox had to leave when legendary Clive Davis (who had signed the likes of Annie Lennox, Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin and Whitney Houston), personally signed Cox to a major record deal with Arista, where recording of her first solo album began immediately.

By 1995 the awards started and have yet to stop: three Junos, the 1999 Billboard Music Award, a Soul Train Music Award for best R&B/Soul Single (female) category - the first Canadian to ever win - and an American Music Award for Best New Artist in 1998. She currently holds the record for the longest running #1 in Billboard's R&B chart for 'Nobody's Supposed To Be Here'.

With this level of accomplishment all while in her twenties, it may seem as though Cox's meteoric rise since has been based on a winning combo of luck and talent, but the luck part should be replaced by having paid her dues. Cox was performing with bands at Toronto nightclubs until early morning hours when she was only 13 while at the same time attending the Claude Watson School For Performing Arts.

Since signing with Arista the singer and now actress has been wowing fans worldwide with her soulful R&B and too-hot-to-handle dance re-mixes.



For her gay and lesbian fans, she ranks right up there with any other diva you care to mention. In town over the May long weekend for a photo shoot and time with her family, I sat down with Cox in Liberty Village to discuss her forthcoming album, why she is determined to remain accessible to her fans, and the surrealness of it all.



Welcome home.



Thank you.



Do you still consider Toronto home?



Oh yeah. Whenever I come back I just feel really calm and centred because this is my town. A lot has changed though. Downtown Toronto is completely different with a lot more going on than when I was here singing in the clubs.



Your September album release is eagerly anticipated. Here's the question you'll be asked a million times between now and then: what can we expect?



(Laughs) This record has got more mid-tempos and up-tempos. The ballads are very slow-moving, real laid back ballads as opposed to ballads that have a groove. And I think that this is my most personal work because I was involved in a lot of the song writing on this album, more even than the last two combined. I've co-written seven of the songs.



What are you singing about?



I'm singing about a lot of different things. *That have happened to other people!* (Laughs)



So you're no Alanis Morissette digging through her diary for material.



Ha! No, because I'm in a really good place. I'm in a really good relationship, but over the past three years since the last album was out I've seen my sisters go through a lot of things, my friends, a few losses, and it's sort of been a combination of all of those things put into this record. I think the other difference with this album is that I got a chance to write with a lot of my friends, as opposed to producers just presenting me with songs to sing. It's nice to be at that place where you have a little more control and you don't have to do what everyone tells you.



I saw you years ago at the Unity party on Pride weekend. Onto the stage you came wearing this hot turquoise number and everyone went nuts during your performance. I remember watching you and thinking, 'Here's an artist who is going to be major'. Now you're everywhere, including performing at Michael Jackson's 30th Anniversary, or even at events like Al Gore's last-minute campaign stop in Miami or the at the benefit at the Versace mansion for Michael J Fox's parkinson's research foundation. Does any of that ever feel surreal, despite the fact that you are certainly no overnight sensation?



Oh I've paid my dues! You know what? It does kind of seem surreal. The times when it becomes surreal is when I'm performing with artists that I admire. Like when I did the Michael Jackson event last September, and there I am standing next to Michael Jackson, you know what I mean? I was a *huge* fan, posters all over my wall, wrote to his fan club, I mean *faithful* fan. Those kinds of moments are what feel surreal to me. When they asked me at the last minute to fill in for Whitney Houston, that was like: *what the hell?* And it wasn't even worrying about the singing part because I had a good handle on that, it was just: *what the hell am I going to wear! What am I going to look like!*



Every woman's nightmare.



Exactly!



When you were 13 you were performing gigs at clubs that went as late as 1 a.m. and you had to get a letter from your mother giving you special permission to perform at these clubs. You are blessed to have a mother who was that incredibly supportive.



Oh, yeah. And my father, too. The two of them - it was a working class family. My mom had her job and my dad had his. They did whatever they had to do so their kids could pursue their dreams. And my mom was a really instrumental part in helping me to develop confidence to go out there and perform. She used to drive me to my gigs and come back and pick me up when they were done if she didn't stay for the show itself. And she'd do that almost every night.



So what was going through your mind at 13 when you were out there doing this? Did you know at the time that you were starting a journey or was it just simply cool to be 13 and out until 1 a.m. on a Wednesday?



I was incredibly shy at 13, so whenever it came to the point of speaking to the audience I was deathly afraid of communicating. But, if I was singing a song, I felt like this is where I'm *supposed* to be. I knew that the more I did it, the more it would pay off.



Your big break was in '93 as a backup singer for Celine Dion - what was that like?



That was awesome, because I grew up with her music here in Canada and to get that gig was like: *oh my God, you've made it to the big time!*



You hit that point where you thought, 'something's really happening here for me.'



It hit me, Shaun, it hit me. Especially because at that time Celine Dion was just on the brink of stardom in the U.S. and so she was doing a lot of U.S. dates. We got a chance to do *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno)Arsenio Hall's show)Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration)and we performed in all these different places in the U.S.. It was my first time being in a major tour like that, and it was so incredible. And I eventually had to leave the tour when finally my demo tape got into the right hands.



When I'm at a club in Toronto and a major diva gets played all the boys and girls go nuts and flood the dance floor, but they go particularly nuts when it's a Deborah Cox song, because it's the diva from Toronto who's out there making it big. How does that make you feel?



Wow. That just)that is really, really gratifying because it's home. It's home. And at the same time, I know that when the gay audience is really into somebody it means something. They *know* their divas. It is such a huge compliment.



Does the term 'diva' bother you?



Oh not at all.



It seems to me that despite your ever-rising star status, you seem determined to remain as accessible as possible to your fans - is that true?



Oh, yeah. I make a point. I try to, at least. I don't travel with bodyguards and I still walk the streets of New York by myself. People are like: what are you doing? I've always been like that. I've never been into the whole huge celebrity thing. I don't quite connect with it and understand it and I don't know how to act like what a celebrity is supposed to act like.



You need a guidebook.



(Laughs) Yes!



Could you reach a point where that's just not possible?



I don't think I'll get to the point where I'm not accessible. I think that I will always remain the artist that is completely genuine about letting the fans know that I appreciate them. It *is* because of the fans. I owe so much to that and I feel always indebted that people buy my records. You don't have to buy my records, you know what I mean? So I really take that very seriously and I will always be like that. There may come a point where I might have to walk with a bodyguard or two but there will never be a time when I'm completely dismissive if someone comes up to me. That's just not my nature and it's not me.



You've said before you like to take your time writing or searching for songs with a timeless quality. You're at a point though when you could really start churning out material at warp speed the way so many others do, being in everyone's face 24/7.



The label holds me back. I have been wanting to put out this new record since 1999, as soon as I was done touring and the last single came out. But then all this stuff happened with Clive leaving the label and that was a bunch of drama. It took a year for all that to calm down and then another year before recording even started again. I feel like they really hold me back from really putting out the amount of music I would like to.



But doesn't building a nice anticipation beat becoming annoying to people by being on the cover of every magazine, endless TV specials, etc.?



That's true. But you know what? Being an artist there's a sense of 'are people going to forget about me? Is this too long?' I mean it's been three years. So there's always that in the back of your mind, too, because there's so much other music out nowadays. You can be forgotten. It's scary.



I've seen you perform alongside other female artists of your genre who take to a more flamboyant and in-your-face style, wearing basically no more than a band aid at times, whereas you continue to remain a cooler, down-to-earth and composed presence in contrast. Would you say that's a reflection of who you are as an artist and the road you want to travel?



It's a bit of both. I really want people to hear the music first before they see the exterior, because that's what it's about first. But that's just me personally. With some performers it's like: Girl, put some clothes on! I try to be comfortable and I try to be me.



You had a starring role in the feature film *Love Come Down*. How does the tedium of shooting a film compare to performing live for you?



Performing live is the ultimate for me. Absolutely. With an audience being there it's something unspoken that you can't even describe. But the film side is really interesting because it's getting into character and a whole process in itself that I never even explored before, and it was wonderful getting the opportunity to do that in *Love Come Down*.



Your received some wonderful critical reviews - did you expect that?



That was good, because I was thinking, 'I hope I don't make a complete idiot of myself.' But with acting you've gotta do what you can do and hope for the best.



And think about what your face is going to look like on a 40-foot screen.



(Laughs) Exactly! I was deathly afraid of seeing every pore, but it was cool - once I just let go of my inhibitions.



Any other film roles in the works?



I just changed agents, which was another thing, but I've got another role in a movie. It's a little too early to talk about right now because they're not going into production until September. But that's something I'm going to continue doing.



Since 9/11 a lot of people have learned that there are parts of the world where, among so many other things, music was banned. Don't you think that if there's ever been a time in the world for music to bring us all together it's now?



Absolutely. I think and hope with this album - not to be preachy - but that it's a comfort for people who are maybe going through things. I absolutely think music is *needed* and should never be banned. To say it's a universal language sounds like a cliché but it really is.



There seem to be never-ending reminders about the frailty of live - one of the most recent being the tragic death of TLC's Lisa 'Left-Eye' Lopez. What are your thoughts about that?



Senseless. Careless and reckless. She was a person who spoke a lot about death, too. You speak those kinds of things into existence. I'm a firm believer that what you're living is what you say.



And what you think.



And what you think, absolutely. Ultimately it's what you set yourself up for. There is a lesson to be learned from that situation.



This issue of **GayGuideToronto.com** will come online June 1st, the same day Fashion Cares hits the runway for the 16th time in support of ACT. You performed at the 2000 event. Tell me your thoughts about where we stand now in the fight against AIDS.



We still have so much work to do. So much work to do. Not only here in North America, for example, but in places like Africa, too. When I went down there a couple of years ago and I just saw the epidemic, and these children left homeless and orphaned because a whole generation is being wiped out. Ultimately it's affecting entire populations. Why haven't we found a cure for this thing?



Tell me about your experience recording *Same Script, Different Cast* with Whitney Houston.



That was great. It was recorded right after the Arista 25th anniversary in L.A. She was one of my idols and to be in the studio with her and going back and forth, again another surreal moment. I don't have any photos of the session or anything, because it wasn't about that. It was really about me and her connecting on a personal level and a musical level and being able to share our gift together on this incredible song. I wish it was a single and I wish we'd done a video for it, but again, it too was caught up in the transition of Arista and J Records, so it got lost in that transition unfortunately. But on an experience level I would say it was one of the high points in my career.



Has the press been fair to Whitney?



(considers) No. Because I think that they constantly set her up, in the sense that they don't believe that her marriage to Bobby is really legit and true. I mean, she loves him and he loves her. They adore each other. I think the other personal stuff that might be going on in her life, I think the press instigates a lot of it and lies about a lot of it. Because a lot of it is not what's going on.



Have you picked up a paper and read something about yourself that was all made up?



Oh yeah, I read somewhere that I took out a couple of ribs. (Laughs) I thought 'what are these people are talking about?' I've heard that I've had work done, but I'm deathly afraid of even needles, so I would never go under the knife. And certainly not to do work on my nose or anything, that would just effect my sound. This is what God gave me and I'm sticking with it, dammit!



How did it make you feel when Halle Barry, Denzel Washington and Sidney Poitier were honoured with Oscars?



Let me tell you what happened. I stayed up, I'd just gotten off a flight, and I thought 'this is the Academy Award show that I have to watch, I have to see Halle Barry win', because I knew she was going to win. And I fell asleep! I fell asleep and I missed her whole sob thing!



I fell asleep too. I missed her whole breakdown and I can't find it anywhere on the net to watch what all the hullabaloo was about.



No! You can't find it anywhere! So I missed history. Caught Sidney's speech, which was incredible - *love love love* Sidney, and Denzel is just the ultimate man, but I really wanted to see Halle and I slept through the whole damn thing!



Who inspires you?



I would say my mom, my sisters, and children. When I'm around kids I just feel like there's something much deeper and more profound that I should be doing outside of this business, and Lascelles, my husband. He inspires me.



Tell me about the force that your spiritual beliefs play in your life.



It's basically just about living with principles, and I believe it's about love. Love is what breaks down anything. Anything. And I've done it and I experienced it. And that I *know*, you know what I mean? I try to live my life on those principles. Love people no matter what it is. A lot of people say 'You're a Christian, why do you perform in gay clubs?' and I say 'Why not? I don't hold any prejudices against gays or lesbians, anyone.' But again, people don't know me, they don't live with me, they don't know what I'm about. They only see what's out in the world in terms of my work, but it's about love. And no judgement. It's just about love.



Do you marvel at your life?



I take it day by day and I'm very grateful each day. I know it's not promised. In the Aaliyah plane crash I lost my hairdresser, who I was really really close to, and then 9/11 happened)all these reminders)



Or Kevin Aucoin's death early in May of a brain tumor.



He died of a brain tumor? I thought I heard something yesterday but I wasn't sure because I'd caught the very end of something on him. So he did) We were supposed to hook up and do a photo session. I always wanted Kevin to do my face. See, there's no time to waste. I'm so grateful to just be here and I can share things that make me happy with somebody else.



Tell me your biggest dream.



My biggest dream is to do my own tour and to do all my songs, meaning doing the R&B songs with the hip-hop re-mixes and the dance re-mixes, all in one show, as opposed to doing one kind of show at a gay club in New York, and then having to do an R&B show somewhere else. To be on one stage, the Air Canada Centre or Madison Square Garden and do all the songs.



That's just a matter of time.



It is just a matter of time, and I'm going to do it, despite what people have to say. It's about bringing people together and I think what better way than doing all these different formats in one show.



This is for our Pride issue - your gay and lesbian fans here in Toronto are uberfans - any message you'd like us to give them for you for Pride?



Live life and love. Love unconditionally. Even when it might appear like someone may not like you because of your lifestyle, love 'em unconditionally because love is what's going to break down that barrier of their mistake in stigmatizing you. And stay off the drugs. Put the dang drugs down! You don't need it - let the music move you.



Thanks for being so much fun to lip-synch to.



Oh my pleasure!

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