

Charlotte Kelly - Singer

Born 1974 in Coventry. Her parents owned a record shop called Moonshine in Coventry. She sang from a young age, listening to music in her parents' record shop. Had a cleaning job at the Eclipse Club to get money to make recordings. Her stepdad took her to meet Neville Staple to see if he felt she had the talent to be a singer and she jammed with the Specials, not knowing how big in the music industry they were.

At 16 she came to London and first met Jazzy B and Lisa Stansfield and started developing as a songwriter. Then did lots of open mic gigs trying to get signed, this gave her opportunity to practice in public and see which songs audiences related to best. Jazzy B got her gigs like the Roundhouse, and got her a manager as well as lots of festival work, which gave her a much wider audience. Did gigs all over London, pubs, impromptu performances, or sang with live house bands if they knew the music. This felt organic but wouldn't really happen now as singing would be done to tapes. She toured as a background singer for Soul II Soul then got signed as a full-time member of the group and as one of the lead vocalists.

Discusses how passion is the most important thing when performing live. How you communicate that live energy with an audience. Says you need to love what you do and get in the right frame of mind to perform. Describes how she had to sing for a corporate event, a wine party, it was an acoustic event and not a typical audience. Discusses how events like this are important, as if you play events where an audience does not know you or expect to see you, you must find new ways to connect with them and you have to have a desire to have a good time regardless of the audience's vibe.

Talks about how singing live in London have always been important to her and has taught her to be patriotic about where she is from musically. Says performing live in London feels different to performing elsewhere in the country – London comes first.

Describes the atmosphere of singing at holiday camps with Soul II Soul and the smell of what her nan referred to as 'hair lacquer'. Talks about the camaraderie of people who holiday in Britain and how they are up for a good time.

A gig that was really memorable to her was a RNIB gig where she had a conversation with Rod Stewart about Ray Charles, who he knows well. Growing up she was inspired by blind singers such as Ray Charles and her nan used to wake her up to see Roy Orbison. In terms of songwriting, she was inspired by Stevie Wonder. Says she used to always wear shades on stage but now no longer feels she needs to.

Talks about drugs/alcohol in the music industry. Says performers are vulnerable, some of them feel they need drugs/alcohol to enhance their performance and entertain the audience better, plus performers are dealing with adrenalin. Says when you master your craft you need to learn how to manage your own magic.

Discusses how as a woman there is a lot of attention on how female performers dress, comments are made around women being seen as wearing – "too little or too much." Says the music industry is a man's world business wise, but stage wise women get a lot of attention. In terms of any discrimination around ethnicity she discusses how everyone performing is trying to be unique to stand out and this is more important than where you are from.

Talks about the logistical issues involved in travelling/performing when not being able to see well. At her level, tours and transport are all taken care of but for others with sight loss, this is not always the case, and they need to travel independently.

Her most memorable gig was at the Trafalgar Hotel, a roof top gig which was aesthetically beautiful. Relates how she did not listen properly at the sound check about which way to exit the stage so ended up just standing behind the backing singers.

Low points have been where audiences have just not got into the performance. High points are where audiences have loved the show – discusses gig at Albert Hall which is a standout memory.

Discusses changes after Covid and how Soul II Soul did performances to people sitting in cars, doing covid tests etc. Says the excitement for performances was elevated and people were really grateful to see shows and now value their lives and just being with other people more. Talks about how gigs now are more intimate with the Q and A sessions, the band is now more connected with the audience. Also, more connected to audiences because of the internet, mobile phone footage, live streaming, connection is global and instant and now more people get to experience the shows whether they were there or not.

Says retirement is not an option for musicians as long as they love it and are still breathing.

Simone Farr April 2024