

Bringing the joy

Nominated for a “Best Blues Album” Grammy three times in a row sets Ruthie Foster apart from her musical peers
By Jan Sikes

RUTHIE FOSTER HAS BECOME AN ICON in the tightknit musical community of Austin. A three-time Grammy nominee, she’s sang duets with Bonnie Raitt, stood onstage with the Allman Brothers at New York’s Beacon Theater and traded verses with Susan Tedeschi. Nominated for a “Best Blues Album” Grammy three times in a row sets her apart from the musical herd found in Austin today. Add six wins as “Female Artist of the Year/Koko Taylor Blues Music Awards” and you’ve found a true artist.

Growing up in the small rural Texas town of Gause, Ruthie knew at a young age, she would need to share her talent beyond the local worship services at her community church.

Pure magic and raw honesty describe Ruthie’s powerhouse voice. She always marched to the beat of her own drum. Joining the Navy was one way for Ruthie to blaze her own trail. It was during her time singing for the Navy band, *Pride*, that her love for performing blossomed. After leaving the service, Ruthie signed a development deal with Atlantic Records and moved to New York City to pursue a career as a professional musician.

No pop star

BUT, IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG for Ruthie to realize that the label demanded that she hand over her authenticity in exchange for being molded into a pop star. So, she walked away from the deal and returned to her Texas roots.

Solidifying her place as an up-and-coming singer/songwriter, Ruthie began a musical partnership with Blue Corn Music and released her first al-

bum in 2002. She subsequently released six more albums over the next twelve years.

And now, she’s released her eighth album, *Joy Comes Back*, also on the Blue Corn Music label.

With every artist and every new album, we look for what is unique or different and I didn’t have to look long to find it on *Joy Comes Back*.

I’ll let her tell you in her own words.

RF: “Well, I try to put out new material at least every couple of years. I was doing a lot of touring and it was getting really close to that time, when I realized that I wasn’t ready to go into the studio and record. I was, however, doing independent projects at a small studio there in Austin for a friend, my producer, Dan Barrett.

“So, the CD came about when I decided to do more listening than writing. I was wanting to hear great songs. Dan introduced me to a lot of new rising songwriters – a couple of them were from right there in Austin. It took two and a half years to gather up the material that spoke



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to me on a deep personal level that I wanted to put on this CD, but the result is *Joy Comes Back*.”

Out of the ten tracks on *Joy Comes Back*, only one is a Ruthie Foster original. She goes on to explain how she chose the music.

RF: “At different points in my life over these two and a half years, where I was coming from personally, was how I chose the songs. I was coming out of a long-term relationship and then having to keep working a lot during that time. It was all very difficult. I found it almost impossible to write, so I spent a lot of time trying to dial in the type of songs that I would have written myself. Some of them I wish I had written.”

Ruthie had a daughter who was five at the time, so she was not only splitting a household but also custody. Music was her therapy.

“War Pigs”

“WHEN I FIRST HEARD ‘GOOD Sailor,’ that was written by Grace Pettis and Haley Cole from Austin, I fell in love with it. It talks about redemption and that’s where I was in my life. Another one was ‘War Pigs’ that I had been sitting on for a while. It was written by Tony Iommi, Ozzy

Osbourne, Geezer Butler and Bill Ward. I like to play around with the Dobro when I’m at home by myself and I got some friends to come into the studio and help me really rock it out a little bit acoustic style. ‘War Pigs’ is more of an experiment. Put Ozzy Osbourne in the room with Son House and see what happens.”

Those friends she refers to are Dennis Bee on drums, Daniel Barrett, percussion, Larry Fulcher on bass, Daniel Barnett on keys, Simon Wallace with his phenomenal harmonica and Ruthie on Dobro.

Other contributing musicians are Willie Weeks, Joe Vitale, Warren Hood, Brian Standefer, Eric Holden, Frank LoCasto, Nicholas Ryland and Red Young as well as core members of Ruthie’s touring band.

“Open Sky,” penned by Ruthie garners reflective hope for new love.

Joy

BUT, OF ALL THE SONGS ON this album, “Joy Comes Back,” written by Sean Staples is one of emotional nakedness that offers hope and positivity with a touch of southern gospel. “I want to be ready/I want to be ready/when joy comes back...”

In these troubled times, we

need songs like this that uplifts.

RF: “Sean Staples lives in the Boston area and is another friend of Dan’s, the producer. Dan lived in Boston for a while himself so he has access to a lot of great songwriters from that area. I really liked this song when he sent it over and Sean opened up the opportunity for me to write a verse or two and to share the credits, so I wrote the last verse. ‘When your spirit gets low, I know it’s gonna rise again.’ That’s simply where I was in life.

“I had a really hard time with my relationship dissolving, but by the time I got to the end of the record or maybe somewhere in the middle, it became about setting my intentions for keeping a sunny day ahead. Something good is on the way. It’s gotta be. I just had to keep my head down and keep moving forward and that’s what that song said.”

If you need to hear music that will make you feel good, hopeful and uplifted, go to YouTube and type in “Joy Comes Back—Ruthie Foster.” There is no way you can watch that video and not get happy!

“Working Woman” is another one written by the talented Grace Pettis. It is the ultimate tribute song to the power of a focused woman! “She’s overtime and un-

derpaid/She’s kicking ass and taking names/She’s punching that clock/She’s climbing that ladder/She’s spinning those wheels/She can do your job ten times better and do it in heels.”

Chris Stapleton penned “What Are You Listening To,” and Ruthie’s version is a heartfelt, soulful rendition.

“Loving You is Sweeter than Ever,” written by Ivy Jo Hunter and Stevie Wonder couldn’t be more perfect for Ruthie’s vocal style.

The sweet strains from a Mandolin played by Warren Hood opens “Richland Woman Blues” written by Mississippi John Hurt.

Another powerful tune on this album is “Abraham,” written by Shawnee Kilgore. A simple declaration that sums up the entire concept of karma, and is Ruthie’s life and love philosophy. “When I do good/I feel good/When I do bad/I feel bad/That’s my religion.” And Ruthie admits that she had so much fun recording this song as she got to be her own choir on the chorus.

And last, but certainly not least, “Forgiven,” by Deb Talan closes out this phenomenal music from Ruthie Foster.

RF: “Strangely enough, the song that actually started the album is ‘Forgiven.’ It says it all about where I was and opened me up to even going back into the studio to play – to record. And, I’m glad I did. It turned out to be a fun and challenging project.”

You’ll find blues, folk, soul, rock and gospel on this album. Ruthie Foster music is an adventurous trip where stylistic limitations don’t exist.

For tour dates or more information about this gifted artist, visit her website at ruthiefoster.com. Whatever you do, pick up this music from Ruthie and be uplifted! ■

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