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Brenda Russell

COMPOSER OF MANY COLORS

After 25 years as a successful singer/songwriter, Brenda Russell is taking her career to a new stage—literally.

TOGETHER WITH VOCALIST/SONGWRITER ALLEE WILLIS AND PRODUCER/DRUMMER Stephen Bray, she's been tapped to create the Broadway musical adaptation of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*. After years of painstaking preparation, the show is slated to open in Atlanta this year, with a Broadway debut planned for 2005.

“It's awesome to get this project!” exclaims Russell, whose songs have been recorded by the likes of Barbra Streisand, Mary J. Blige, and Donna Summer. “They auditioned a lot of writers for this gig, and we got it! It's a four- or five-year process, which is short compared to most Broadway productions. Some musicals spend ten years just trying to raise money! We were lucky, because the producer already had all the financing in place. We only had to write the music—not go out and sell the idea.”

The songwriting team was especially pleased to receive positive feedback directly from author Walker. “The producer sent her a CD of some songs we wrote,” remembers Russell. “She sent back an email saying she was loving it—singing along in her car and everything. Getting her to love it was definitely our biggest win.”

This isn't the multitasking Russell's first brush with the stage. “Actually,” she says, “I started in theater. My first job when I was a teenager was performing in the Toronto production of *Hair*. Both my parents were musicians and songwriters. We had music all the time around the house, and I grew up reading the sheet music for show tunes. Now I see it was my destiny!”

Still, Russell reflects, the songwriter's life can have its challenges, especially for those who focus on songwriting's traditional side. “It's very difficult right now for mature writers who write real songs. Much of this change is due to radio formatting. People don't change—they still want to hear songs with lyrics and melodies, and they want that even more as they grow older. But it's rough right now for writers with integrity. This Broadway opportunity is a huge blessing, because I get to explore sides of my musicality that I never would have been able to explore in writing for records. I get to paint with broad strokes, using lots of colors, and nobody is trying to fit it into a radio format.”

Despite her own vocal talents, Brenda has racked up some of her biggest successes writing for other vocalists. “I've been writing for other singers for a long time,” she notes. “Even back in the '70s, when I was in a duo with my former husband Brian Russell, Chaka Khan and a number of other artists were recording our songs. By the time I made my first solo album in 1979, a lot of artists started coming to me for songs I'd originally written for myself. Eventually I started to realize, ‘Hey! There's a whole other career here!’”

The *Purple* project has forced Russell to revise her songwriting methodology. “I used to write songs more spontaneously,” she says. “I might not write much for a while, and then work for several days straight. But now that I'm working on the play, I can't be that sporadic. It's like having a real job—every day, you get up and go to work.”

And the work can be brutal. “All three of us are very critical and meticulous,” says Russell. “I tell you, we are one tough room. If a song can get past the three of us, it's damn good! By that point, our producers are usually flipping out over it.”

Brenda's secret songwriting weapon is her Yamaha portable digital keyboard. “Some of the first ideas I came up with for the show were created on my little PSR9000,” she says. “I love it. I take it with me when I travel. And I love all the sounds—they're really, really good. It's easy to operate, which is great for me. I'm not a technical whiz—I just want to write the song! I'm not much of a drum programmer either, so it's great to use one of the PSR loops to put down a basic feel. That helps me get established with my ideas.”

Despite the daunting task of completing a Broadway score, Russell is already at work on her next solo album. “I've signed a deal with Dome Records, out of London,” she says. “I've been working with producer Ron Spearman in San Francisco, and with some British writers and producers. It's been very exciting, going back and forth to England to record and write. And I took my Yamaha with me, of course!”

