

American Eye

Judith Schrut Speaks To Top Jazz Vocalist, Gregory Porter



Gregory Porter, photo courtesy of AirMTM



We are thrilled to welcome Gregory Porter, Grammy-winning singer songwriter and fast-rising star of the jazz world, to American Eye. Known for his rich, warm voice and unique vocal style, Gregory's musical career began as a young boy singing in the California church where his mother was Minister. More recently he's earned non-stop rave reviews and standing ovations at the Hollywood Bowl, Newport Jazz Festival, and gigs across the UK and Europe as his career goes from strength to strength. Judith Schrut spoke with Gregory ahead of his upcoming UK tour, starting at London's Royal Albert Hall.

We understand you blew the audience away last year at London's Bluesfest and you'll be headlining this year's Fest in October. What are you looking forward to most?

I'm just looking forward to being in the Royal Albert Hall with my working band. It's one of those places that was special before I ever went overseas. We Americans have a healthy obsession with anything Royal so to be playing there, knowing all the greats who've been on that stage, is amazing. And it's a beautiful building, the sound is good and there is a false lull of intimacy. I don't know how it's achieved, but it doesn't feel like the huge place it is.

You've been performing in the UK quite a lot recently. Tell us a little more about sharing your music with British audiences.

Yes, it's been extraordinary. The UK was the first audience across the pond to really give my music a boost. A whole lot of energy came out of working with the BBC, with

musicians like Jools Holland and Jamie Cullum. UK audiences just seem to have a special understanding. Maybe it's that you can sometimes see better from a distance, maybe they recognise a soulful expression that's connected to the American history of soul and jazz. Whatever the reason, they've quite nicely embraced me and seem to know where I'm coming from without me saying a word.

What do you like to do in the UK when you're not working?

I love architecture so I find myself just walking around and I know this sounds strange, rubbing walls! I kinda love to touch those big buildings and small cottages built a few hundred years ago. I'm fascinated by pub culture, not only for the beer but the conversation that happens there and the type of people that go there. The food is interesting to me too, especially grotesque titles like 'sticky' or 'bloody' or 'mushy'. I don't think Americans would say it like that!

What essential things would you advise Americans in Britain to be sure not to miss?

Some Americans like package deals when they are here but I would say, try to get off the beaten path. Sure, London's great and it can be scary to get out into the wilderness, but it's a whole different thing when you get out. The country here is just gorgeous, with forests and trees and greenery to rival any beauty I've seen before. I've been lucky to see amazing castles in Kent, beautiful cottages and churches in the Cotswolds, and working class holiday beachfronts in Skegness and Bridlington. I found these to be charming. So I'd just say, get out and do some local things.

Gregory Porter at the Royal Albert Hall,
photo courtesy of AirMTM



Are there any American comforts you miss when you're touring in the UK?

Not too many. I pretty much try to immerse myself in the local place I'm in, so when in the UK I wanna have steak and kidney pie and drink

local beer. But at times, like when my computer is down, I do wish I could figure out the electricity and the bizarre plugs they have here!

You were born in LA, grew up in Bakersfield and went to college in San Diego. What were some of your inspirations from those different environments?

My childhood church experience at Mount Calvary Church in LA and then Bakersfield informs my music now. I infuse soul music into my jazz and that comes from my gospel experience, especially that very Southern gospel sound from Bakersfield. In San Diego I cut my teeth on the jazz scene, at the jam sessions of Gilbert Castellanos. My song 'Painted on Canvas' says "We're made by the pigment of paint that is put upon." There's something in my personality and music from all the places I've lived.

Here at 'American in Britain' we like to promote British-American relations. Tell us who you'd invite to your fantasy cross-country dinner party?

Definitely Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis Jr and Abbey Lincoln, all great inspirations to me. My wife and my brother, Lloyd he's

an actor and always the life of the party. Usain Bolt, Dame Judi Dench and Jools Holland, 'cuz he's a funny guy and he likes good wine! I'd make it a house party with a jazz vibe, where everyone's dressed nice and there's good conversation flowing. I'd do the cooking. I've got some skills with that!

Can you tell us about a moment that changed your life?

Something that changed my life musically as well as personally was my mother's passing. I was studying at college, all set to study City Planning, wear brown shoes and go to work. But just before my mother died she was suffering from cancer at the time she told me, "Continue with your music, it's one of the best things you do...don't forget about it." It kind of gave me the right to take this risky path, to go for the music. That was a life-changing moment for me.

Gregory Porter opens BluesFest 2014 at the Royal Albert Hall on 27 October and will be performing at other great venues around the UK. For further information visit:

www.bluesfest.co.uk

www.gregoryporter.com.
