





YOLA CARTER

*Yola Carter's unique take on soul/country music is earning her a dedicated international following after just 12 months. With tour dates around the world and a debut album written – *Acoustic* can reveal – it was high time we caught up*

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

Yola Carter is an artist in demand. Since launching her solo career barely a year ago, she's been crowned UK Artist of the Year at the AMA UK Awards, played a much-hyped performance at AmericanaFest in Nashville, and recently jammed with Jools Holland on his Radio 2 Show. Her debut EP, *Orphan Offering*, wowed critics and audiences on both sides of the pond. What's more, the soul/country singer-songwriter managed all this without management to guide her.

"I did my first summer in 2016 and the reaction was just amazing," Carter explains. "Nobody really expects year one to kick off – but it did. I released my debut EP in November almost in response to the press from my live shows. I was planning to release in early 2017, but thought 'I'm not going to get the chance again'.

"When the EP came out I realised that there was a rush on the album – the second you release something you have to start writing the next. I was thinking 'ok, so this is going well, I'm going to have to hammer it out and get an album together. The more the hype gathered, the more I was like 'I've got to get an album out'." And we won't have to wait long, *Acoustic* can reveal. "The album is written," she confirms coyly. "The songs are demoed too."

While appearing like a dream-come-true, the quick success was not without its negatives. With no trusted management in place at the time of her meteoric rise, Carter was left alone in uncharted territory – right on the brink of something potentially huge. "When you have a lot of early success, there's obviously a drawback because you're playing catchup. I always thought the hype would die down and I would get some

time to myself; some time to get management together. But the hype never died down. I can't complain, though," Carter chuckles.

Considering how seriously Carter takes her musical integrity, having the right management in place is extremely important at this stage of the game. "I create art," she says. "I write songs from a real place. It's really important early doors to make commercial arrangements that don't cheapen me further down the road. I'm not allergic to pop music, but any move towards pop music has to be right. If I'm ever making records for the accountant then something has gone very wrong."

Carter's music is best described as soul/country. Her voice is rich and soulful, beautiful yet powerful. The music, however, is firmly rooted in the country genre. "A lot of people think mixing country music and soul music is unusual, but that's only here in the UK. In the USA it's completely different. In the South especially, mixing soul and country is really common."

Regardless of unusual, Carter certainly is unique. Her attitude, stage presence, and songs all feel authentic and original. How did she arrive at the sound, though? "If, like me, you're born just outside of a city, in pretty much a white-bred small town, you're looking for role models that sound and look like you. As a very young child, I grew up with nothing like that. I ended up searching back in the decades to the 60s," she says.

"I was looking for music that spoke to me. The bands I got into as a teen helped me find where my voice belongs. My peers that looked like me sang R'n'B – there's no raspy vocals in R'n'B, though. So it became a journey of great self discovery. In my teens I had a lot of



friends who were older than me who had record collections that I could delve into. And I started to realise that soul singers did country records and country singers did soul records. The genres were intertwined.”

Heavily influenced by 60s country, Stax-era soul and gospel ranging from The Staple Singers to Otis Redding, Carter was beginning to find her musical direction. However, early life was not always easy. Raised in a small seaside town in the South West, Carter’s real-life story is both heartbreaking and inspirational. Coming from a poor, broken home and a parent suffering from mental illness who banned her from making any music, her experience of growing up was one of truly living below the breadline. In a working class community in denial of its status, where discrimination and even violence fuelled by racism were not unusual, writing music quickly became an outlet and a means of expression, and touring a means of escape.

Carter’s story naturally finds its way into her music; she is unafraid to address difficult issues in her songs. “A lot of people don’t ask me about the vulnerability behind my songs,” she says. “There’s this stereotype of the ‘strong

black woman’. Every soul singer from the 50s had the ‘strong black woman’ thing – but they were all in abusive relationships.

“It’s essential for me in life – and songwriting – to have a percentage of vulnerability. In one way, it gives balance to my life; that vulnerability gives you a sense of strength. When I choose to be vulnerable I choose to be strong. It’s essential to my life that I choose that balance. I write songs to give myself an easier time in life, both for me and everyone else. I have sacrificed myself in my music. I honestly think if it doesn’t hurt – how much does it matter?”

“I’ve had people coming up to me and saying ‘I didn’t realise I was in an abusive relationship until hearing that song’. Songwriting is liberating. It’s cathartic and it’s therapeutic and it means a lot that my songs help other people in hard situations.”


Carter (born Yolanda Quartey) began touring internationally straight out of school with Bugz in the Attic. She later toured with Massive Attack, most notably headlining Glastonbury Festival’s Other Stage to 60,000 people and broadcasting live on the BBC. Other notable supports and live collaborations since have

included The McCrary Sisters, The Fairfield Four, Willie Watson, Jan Howard, James Brown, Elizabeth Cooke, and the legendary Stax Band.

Carter began her journey into Americana music performing with band Phantom Limb, in her hometown of Bristol. After self-releasing a debut album, they eventually disbanded, leaving Carter to focus on her own projects. Carter then combined her skills to write, record and produce her debut solo EP *Orphan Offering* – setting her on the road to fame.

The latest accolade in her already glittering career is appearing as the special guest on Jools Holland’s Radio 2 show in June. “It was awesome,” Carter enthuses. “I met Jools at the Americana Awards before I was due to perform. I said ‘we’re going to be on the show’ and he was really pleased. We did the live session in his studio in London and it was just the most easy going thing. It was a great jam, Jools was really into the music – his band are off the chain. We played live and got on really well, I don’t think this will be the last time Jools and I play together.” ■

***Orphan Offering* EP is available now.**
Info: www.yolacarter.com



***“It’s essential for
me in life – and
songwriting – to
have a percentage
of vulnerability...
When I choose
to be vulnerable
I choose to be
strong”***