

DANA GILLESPIE – UNDER MY BED CDCHD 1558

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BIG MOUTH * OLD SCHOOL * I'M IN CHAINS * MORE FOOL ME * SEE YOU ON THE OTHER SIDE * VA VA VOOM
* ANOTHER HEART BREAKS * UNDER MY BED * HIGH COST * WALK IN LOVE TODAY * PUNCH THE AIR * BEATS
WORKING

Sassy, self-assured and sensuous, "Under My Bed" pulls back the covers to reveal a dozen new songs from Britain's reigning blues queen.

Sizzling, bold, ebullient, provocative, spiritual, sensual, life-affirming, beautiful, earthy, gifted, different, brave, regal, down-to-earth, celestial. All these words describe Dana Gillespie. Yet none comes close to containing her. Perhaps that's because, in a life in music that's lasted six decades, she has well and truly transcended labels. Yes, she's Britain's premier blues diva, but you'll also hear touches of Stax-era soul, jazz and R&B on this outstanding album. Pop is an industry that tells singers they're old at 23. In blues, it is understood that true artists don't deteriorate, they just get better. Consequently, there is no such thing as atrophy when it comes to Dana's talents. She only improves. She's not retreating into soft-focus "heritage artist" projects like the kind of orchestrated, reheated oldies compilations issued by some of her peers. She still has something to say and the wherewithal to say it.

In 1980, Elton John issued an album called "21 At 33", its title a nod to the fact that at 33 years of age he was releasing his 21st album. By that logic, "Under My Bed" is "70 At 70". "It is my 70th album," Dana confirms. "But that includes all the Indian albums, Mustique Blues Festival albums and the various stage musical albums." Musicals, folk, pop, singer/songwriter, Indian sacred music, rock, soul... the sheer stylistic reach of Dana's work places her in an exclusive group of artists who can successfully try their hands at almost anything. But it is with the blues that Dana finds her true calling.

The songs that make up "Under My Bed" were written over a four-year period with co-producer, guitarist and London Blues Band member, Jake Zaitz. "Jake leaves me what could be described as a backing track of chords and this music tells me what to write and what the melody should be. The music always guides me as to what I should write. The music is my inner voice and it tells me what to do. I hear melodies all around me, all the time, so I'm never alone. I always have a song bubbling away in my head." By this mystical and intuitive approach to writing, Dana ends up with songs that sound utterly natural, as if they've been plucked, fully-formed, from the ether. Each one inhabits its own, completed, fully realised universe.

Dana's lyrics, by turns wry, tart, witty and wise, are full of clever, amusing, original bons mots. In 'Big Mouth', the tight, jive-based opening track, Dana skewers self-important blowhards the world over with the pointed observation, "you talk too much from your north and south". With 'Old School' – as autobiographical a statement as any you'll find on the album – while her band delivers a sultry, irresistible groove, Dana sings the memorable aphorism, "I know all the loud noise comes from the shallow end of a swimming pool". "All these songs are founded on my own experiences. I've met loads of people who fit the "big mouth" mould. And as to 'Old School', that's me all over. I'm really old-fashioned in a way. One could almost say I'm out of date. I'm happy driving a car with wind-down windows and a cassette player!"

There are no shortcuts when it comes to singing the blues. You have to have lived them in order to inhabit the music convincingly. Dana has lived every dotted semi-quaver, every drum fill, every rhyming couplet on this album. "Love has to be the main requirement for singing the blues as far as I'm concerned, as well as lots of life experiences. I'm 55 years a professional singer so I can say that I've notched up lots of useful experiences. Loving, losing, never giving up, moving on and trusting your heart. Very important things for me. I listen to my heart and it never lets me down, but it takes experience to really trust your own inner voice. I hope that I keep on composing and performing till my voice gives out. Once that goes, so will I."

CHARLES DONOVAN