

Donny Osmond

2007 Biography

There were some nights during his triumphant starring run as the villainous Gaston in the Broadway production of *Beauty and the Beast* when Donny Osmond's mind was racing. No, he wasn't trying to remember his next line; rather, he was thinking about the album he was in the process of recording. Backstage. In his dressing room. "It was totally bizarre" he laughs. "I would perform my role onstage, and then I would run back to my dressing room and fix a vocal I didn't like. Sometimes it was just a word; other times it was an entire verse or chorus. Talk about living a weird duality. But hey, that's how important this record is to me -- it invaded my every thought."

The album is called *Love Songs of the 70s*, and once you hear it, you'll know why. Donny gave it his all -- he could perform vocals to completed musical tracks in his dressing room whenever he liked, a ritual he followed each afternoon -- and, as it so happened, some nights as well. Describing himself as a "Type-A perfectionist," Donny admits his that work habits might have confounded his co-stars. "But when a record means as much as this one, you do whatever it takes to make it special."

True to its title, *Love Songs of the 70s* is a collection of some of the most memorable romantic pop and R&B ballads of a golden, multi-platinum era. Just a casual glance at some of the songs will transport listeners back to a special place in their lives: "Laughter in the Rain," "Oh, Girl," "If," "Let's Stay Together," "How Deep Is Your Love," "You Are So Beautiful," -- these are some of the priceless selections Donny has chosen for this remarkable set. (iTunes will feature a bonus track, Donny's stirring rendition of "When I Need You.") "That's what's so amazing about these songs," says Donny. "They're time capsules, capable of moving you in so many powerful ways. What's more, if a song is truly a classic, as these certainly are, their importance grows through the decades because of what you, the listener, bring to them. I've always loved hearing these songs, and I especially love singing them."

To listen to *Love Songs of the 70s* is to lose oneself in a feast of emotions. True, the songs are all certified winners, but the real revelation is Donny himself. His voice is richer, more expressive. It's a voice that belongs to a singer who hasn't just experienced these songs on tangentially -- he's *lived* them.

Starting with a list of "about 200 or so," of his favorites, Donny narrowed his song selection to "the 13 that I felt I could really throw myself into all the way. That's the thing about doing a record like this: each song is already a star, but can I make it my own somehow? Can I find some new light and shading that nobody's ever found before? That was the real challenge in making these choices."

Framing each song properly, with every number receiving a singular sonic texture, was paramount in Donny's mind; and yet he wanted to make an album that maintained a feeling of unity, one that wasn't simply a collection of super singles. Impressed with

Mike Mangini's work on Joss Stone's *Mind Body & Soul*, Donny gave the producer a call. The two hit it off, discovering they shared a love of the same music and had similar ideas for the kind of album Donny should record. "Mike was incredible to work with. He put together an amazing group of musicians to play on the record, and that's a big part of why I chose him in the first place -- I didn't want computers making the music, I wanted a live band. You can hear the difference. To me, the logic was simple: live musicians played these songs back in the day, and that's how they should be performed now."

Using a software program called Nuendo to record his vocals was Donny's one concession to modern technology. The singer was pleased to how receptive Mangini was to the unorthodox manner in which he wanted to work. "I was prepared for a battle," says Donny, "because let's face it, tracking vocals in a Broadway theater dressing room behind locked doors -- that's far from the norm. But Mike was cool. He said, 'Well, Donny, you've made a couple of records in your lifetime [this is his 55th] ...I guess you know what you're doing!'"

Not that the album didn't present its challenges. Donny offers Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" as an example: "I had it on my iPod and I listened to it every day, thinking, Okay, how do I sing this? How do I interpret it? I can sing it like myself, the way *I* want to sing it, but there are certain licks and inflections that Al sang that are essential; you really can't separate them from the lyrics. So I decided to leave those licks in. I didn't care what anybody said -- they stayed. Because, really, when you do that song, you're paying homage to Al Green. There's no two ways about it."

Give Donny this much: he knows how to present a song. In fact, he's been doing so since age five, when he first appeared with his brothers on *The Andy Williams Show*. "Singing is pretty much the first thing I knew," he admits. "Growing up, I was surrounded by music from every corner, so inevitably it was going to rub off." Joining his brothers' ensemble was also pretty much a done-deal. "I'm sure there was very little discussion about it," Donny laughs. "'Whose the next kid in line? Donny? Okay, now you're in the band.' Basically, that's how it happened."

It happened in a big way, too. During the early to mid-Seventies, Osmondmania, in America and the U.K., resembled Beatlemania "to almost the smallest detail. Fans chasing us everywhere, being locked in our hotel rooms, police escorts, girls hiding in our closets -- we lived our own version of *A Hard Day's Night*."

By this time, Donny was the unequivocal star of the group, the one who sang the solos and elicited the biggest screams. "It was uncomfortable at first," he admits, "especially given the fact that my brothers started the group. But when a band becomes successful, you don't mess with what works. True, we were singing teenybopper stuff, but it was selling -- selling more than anyone could have imagined."

These were Zeitgeist times, but after his four year run co-hosting the phenomenally successful TV show *Donny and Marie* on ABC (remember, he was the one who was "a little bit rock and roll"), Donny found that his clean-cut, bubblegum image had become a

liability. "Not only could I not get arrested, I was downright radioactive," he says. "I was uncool to the max, a prisoner of my teenybopper past."

A rough decade followed. "Throughout my twenties and into my thirties I would apologize for my career, for all of the cheesy music I was a part of. But it wasn't until my late thirties or early forties that I realized I didn't have to apologize. I thought to myself, You know what? That music was great for what it was, people loved it, it was incredibly successful -- why should I feel bad?"

At a charity function in 1988, Donny met an unlikely ally: Peter Gabriel. The mercurial musician -- and fan, as it were -- took Donny under his wing and gave him and his producing team carte blanche to record at his studio in Bath, England. The result was "Soldier of Love," regarded by the recording industry as THE comeback of the 80s, and Donny's first smash hit in more than a decade.

"I could never repay Peter for his help and belief," says Donny. "For a guy of his caliber to give me the 'thumbs up' -- it meant everything." Still, for all of his struggles, Donny says he wouldn't change a thing. "All things for a reason, as the saying goes. I think the best thing to ever happen to me was losing my career the way I did. My fame, my money -- all gone. I could have crawled into a cave, or maybe I could have gone to some Holiday Inn lounge and sung 'Puppy Love' for the next 20 years. But the fact is, I had to come to terms with myself. I had to say, 'Hey, I'm a singer. It's what I do. It's what I love. And then I had to get on with the process of reinventing myself."

And that he's done, becoming, over the years, the toast of Broadway, a TV talk show host (again with sister Marie), a TV game show host ("Pyramid"), a revitalized recording star with a string of recent hits, a best-selling author (his recent autobiography debuted at #1 on the UK best seller chart), and the unrepentant co-star of "Weird Al" Yankovic's smash "White and Nerdy" video. "Now, *that* was a blast to be a part of," laughs Donny. "At this point in my life, I can't take myself too seriously. The video is proof enough. I think Al's going to put the outtakes up on YouTube. I hope he does."

But the reinvention of Donny Osmond couldn't have happened without deep reflection. "The biggest thing for me was not being afraid to look back," says the singer, "and realizing that I'm a part of people's lives. People grew up with me, and I with them. And we all grew up with the same songs. That's what makes this new album so meaningful to me. It's a gift, really, from the songwriters and singers who made this music 30 years ago. It was my expressed goal to pay tribute to them."

And what a tribute it is... After one listen to *Love Songs Of '70s*, Donny Osmond has never sounded better.