

## RUBEN STUDDARD

For almost six months, millions and millions of television viewers watched the Fox network's hugely successful "American Idol" show and week after week, they voted.

On May 21, 2003, the final vote was cast: Ruben Studdard - nicknamed the 'Velvet Teddy Bear' by the legendary soulful diva Gladys Knight - emerged as the winner of the intense competition with over twenty-four million callers logged. Two months later, in the midst of a hectic national tour with fellow 'Idol,' competitors, the 25-year old native of Birmingham, Alabama calmly reflects, "I got over stage fright early in life so I never got nervous doing the show, week after week. Having a career in music is what I've always wanted to do so this is the fulfillment of my dreams!"

Born Christopher Ruben Studdard, known to his family as 'Chris' and now known to the world as the soulful young singer carrying on a musical tradition that includes artists such as Donny Hathaway, Stevie Wonder and J Records labelmate Luther Vandross (all three considered primary influences), this genial giant is putting finish touches to his much-anticipated debut album. With J Records' chairman and CEO Clive Davis serving as the record's executive producer, Ruben is working with an enviable list of hitmaking producers that includes Harold Lilly (whose credits include work with J Records' stars Monica, Deborah Cox, Angie Stone and O-Town) and Warryn Campbell (Luther Vandross, Sisqo, Kelly Price), superstar R, Kelly, Ron Lawrence (known for work with Aretha Franklin, Mary J. Blige, J Records' Tyrese and Jimmy Cozier). With the first single, a stunning version of U.K. band Westlife's "Flying Without Wings" (produced by the Underdogs and Face) already a chart-topping smash, Ruben says his first CD promises to be "something that everyone can listen to. I want it to be a real representation of who I am musically and so far, everything is going really well in the studio."

That Ruben is handling a busier-than-ever tour schedule and sessions for his all-important J Records debut in the easy-going manner that he's become associated with comes no surprise giving his lifelong love and passion for music. The youngest son of two educators, Emily and Kevin Studdard Sr., Ruben recalls singing for the first time at the Rising Star Baptist church in Birmingham at age three. "My mother was in the local choir. I went to pre-school church and it was a teacher there who first heard me sing. I was doing solos at a young age - my first one was "I'm Yours, Lord." I continued singing in church and in school and at some point, I took piano lessons. I did ok with the piano but I was a very good tuba player!" Ruben laughs.

During his years at Huffman High School, Ruben played football and went to Alabama A&M University on a football scholarship but it was music that constantly called to him. "I listened to all kind of music at home," he recalls. "My mom and dad had a lot of albums. I remember my mom particularly loved Donny Hathaway - songs like "For All We Know" and "A Song For You." I heard a lot of gospel music too: I used to listen to the group Commissioned and Fred Hammond was a major influence." With both parents as teachers, "my mom was really into me getting my education! She knew that I loved

music, of course, so she'd say 'I know you can be a wonderful music teacher!' I just knew that I wanted a career in music: I was a voice major in college and after I left in the spring of 2000, I gave myself five years to make it as a singer."

In addition to being part of a local gospel group, God's Gift, Ruben also sang in and around Birmingham with the jazz and R&B band Just A Few Cats. "We did local clubs, concerts, the whole nine. We were the most popular and sought after group in the city," Ruben says. "We hadn't recorded a demo but we were planning to." Fate stepped in when one of the group's background singers, Sherita Duff asked Ruben to go with her to an audition for the second season of "American Idol" in Nashville: "She just wanted me to come along so she wouldn't be there by herself," he remembers. Figuring he had nothing to lose, Ruben entered the contest himself and was one of the local finalists to end up in Hollywood for the coveted much-viewed show.

On that initial audition, he sang Stevie Wonder's "Ribbon In The Sky" and although famed 'Idol' judge Simon Cowell put him through some grueling questions after his performance, Ruben proudly announced to his family that he was heading west. As "Jet" magazine reported in a cover story on Ruben in June, he flung open the doors at the show and "greeted his family with a robust 'Alabama is going to Hollywood, baby!'"

Week after week, Ruben impressed the show's avid viewers with performances on songs like "Superstar" (originally recorded by The Carpenters and later revived by Luther Vandross) and the Oscar and Grammy-winning Peabo Bryson/Regina Belle duet "A Whole New World," which remains his personal favorite 'Idol' performance. Along the way, he elicited praise from such industry veterans as Neil Sedaka, Lionel Richie and the Bee Gees' Robin Gibb who told Ruben that his version of "How Can You Mend A Broken Heart" was the best he'd ever heard.

Facing stiff competition from the likes of runner-up Clay Aiken, now signed to RCA Records, Ruben took the rigors of exposure before millions of viewers every week in stride: "That exposure before so many people was amazing," says Ruben, who built up a solid fan following during the contest, always acknowledging his home state of Alabama by wearing a t-shirt adorned with the state's area code "205." The state declared March 11 'Ruben Studdard Day' and as he told "JET" magazine, "I'm from Alabama and it's hard for us to get 'Hollywood'. If you are who you say you are and you're real, it should be hard to change your personality overnight."

Exhibiting that same 'realness' onstage, the combination of Ruben's warmth as a performer and his show-stopping vocal skills have been winning over audiences night after night since "American Idol's second season aired in May and he hit the road. "It's been a real learning experience," he smiles. "I've been having a wonderful time but the toughest part of it is the schedule! But then I remember, I asked for this. I guess you have to watch what you ask for!"

One thing Ruben Studdard is clearly asking for is longevity. "I don't want to be a one hit wonder. I want to keep making good music. That's why this first album is important to

me, why we're checking to see what my musical flavor is." Working with J Records' Clive Davis "is real cool" says Ruben and being labelmates with Luther Vandross "is amazing - I mean, this is someone that I've grown up listening to so being with the same record company, man, I'm really happy."

Noting that his friends and family have been totally supportive ("they haven't changed and nor have I!"), Ruben Studdard looks to the future with quiet confidence, validating all those millions who voted for him. As 'the velvet teddy bear' prepares for another show and another session to complete his album, he sums up where he's at after a whirlwind year of fulfilling dreams by simply saying, "I'm just doing my thing - and loving it!"