

FRANK ZAFFA...

TONI ZAFFA talks about her past, present and future - from Highland dancing and musicals to potentially conquering the planet with her heartfelt of blues...

Rising star in the R&B scene, **Toni Zaffa**, is sensational. Her talents as a singer and performer are attracting some big names in the blues scene to share the stage with her - this just adds up to an overall blues-powered night out.

Musicians in the Toni Zaffa band are **Paul Demarco** (and/or **Ralph Francis** (drums), **Phil Grove** (keyboards), **Rory McKibbin** (guitar) and **Tim Partridge** (bass). With this sort of support a killer evening is virtually guaranteed. Zaffa is supposedly new to the blues scene, even though she has a history of performing that goes back quite a way, but we'll let her tell the tale...

"I started in musicals in Queensland about 14 years ago. I started singing when I was ten, and I dabbled for a while, and then in my early 20s I got into musicals and theatre productions.

"I also was into dancing - jazz ballet, tap and even a bit of Highland dancing, but don't say

anything about that, though (sorry - couldn't help it!). I love doing theatre as well, but it has to have music with it. What's attracted me to the live R&B circuit is that I get a lot of energy from the people, and that's basically what I work off - I get my adrenalin from the crowd.

"I had a blues band called **The Blues Nile** about ten years ago and that was short-lived. It had some of the guys out of the **King Bees**, **Nick Churkin** and **Harvey Fisk**. After that I went out of music for some time, and then picked it up about five years ago on a professional level. Five years ago I went into training with professor **Phillip Spawm** - he taught **Renee Geyer** and many other people, so I've been with him now for a while. Since he's taken me under his wing I've progressed from three-part harmony work. I've done a lot of front work, but I hadn't done harmony work, like back-up. At one stage **Marcia Hines** asked me to do **Jesus Christ Superstar**, and I auditioned but didn't get it because I didn't know how to do the harmonies. That set me on a path to work with other vocalists so I could get my ears tuned into harmonies, which led me to joining a band with two other girls called **Beehive Or Else** for a few years - they're still going.

"From there I went into some ten-piece bands that played mostly covers - I like the sound of brass, so we used to do **Aretha Franklin** and similar stuff. In my heart, though, I knew I wanted to get back into the blues. I'd been singing **Honky Tonk Women** since I was ten. I was always interested in that black sound for years, so I knew that this was all just preparation for me. I was then asked to do some back-ups for **Ian Moss** at an outdoor concert, and that was exciting.

"After Ian Moss I went out on my own - the **Toni Zaffa Band**. I had to do this because I felt like a

bird with its wings clipped. It seemed like more of a performance when I was doing the other stuff, like I was acting. Now, it's coming from my heart. When I sing the blues it's who I am - I'm alive and being myself, that's what means a lot to me. In the last six or seven months it's just taken off, I've been working with great players, I'm doing the material that I want to do, which means I love singing it.

"I also have a new manager in **Neil Mumme**, who has been really good, and he launched me at **Johnno's Blues Bar** in Cairns about six months ago. That's been the best thing he ever did, because it's just rolled on from there. My next goal is to write material for an album which we're hoping to release at the end of the year, and from there to tour worldwide."

"Your voice has been likened to Etta James, and you even seem to have a very similar stage presence to her. She must have been a big influence on you. Also, your confidence in performing verifies what you said earlier about doing the music you love - being 'from the heart'."

"There's a saying that the easiest thing to be is yourself, and that is what most of us fight against. People wear masks - all of us, including

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myself. That's why I think I'm doing well now, because the mask is off and I'm just being myself, and people like that. And Etta has been a huge influence on me - her and **Anne Teagles**, with **Aretha** and **Tina Turner**."

What's your favourite record?
"Etta James' last one, *The Right Time*. It's the



Toni Zaffa: one from the heart

best she's ever done, every track is great.

The best R&B concert you've seen?

"It would have to be **James Brown** at the **Holdern**. Very funky."

Very funky indeed, and so is Toni Zaffa, so remember Saturday 17 July at the **Birkenhead Point Tavern**. Also on the bill is the **Shane Pacey Band**, **Tim Gaze** and **Josh Clayton-Smith**. Big Night.

WRITTEN BY THE LEGENDARY CHUCK