

## INTERVIEW

# Chaka Khan still isn't slowing down

Outspoken R&B singer seizes spotlight with stage role and two Grammy nods

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Don't bother Chaka Khan with the all that trendy "50 is the new 40" talk. The renowned singer-songwriter — who proudly turns 55 on March 23 — is not feeling it.

Currently on Broadway playing Sofia in the Oprah Winfrey-produced adaptation of *The Color Purple* and the recipient of two Grammy Award nominations this year, Khan is, however, feeling reflective about her career.

"I've never understood what this youth obsession is all about and what a mid-life crisis is exactly," she explained recently from New York City while taking a break from her seventh rehearsal of the week. "Being over 50 is not a time when you should be laying down... it is a time to be getting up and getting busy!"

True to her word, Khan is kicking it into high gear. Khan's performance schedule this year mirrors her days fronting the famous-for-always-being-on-the-road '70s funk band Rufus, and the driving force is her most recent disc, *Funk This*.

The record has Khan (real name Yvette Stevens) covering songs from artists such as Dee Dee Warwick, Carly Simon and Prince alongside new gems and has nabbed a Grammy nomination for Best R&B Album of the year. One of the disc's shining moments, a gospel-funk-rock fusion song called "Disrespectful," sung with Mary J. Blige, grabbed major clubland attention this past December by topping the *Billboard* dance charts, earned Khan a second Grammy nod for Best R&B Performance by a Duo or Group.

"I'm definitely going through a rebirth. After I finish with my run with *The Color Purple*, I have a world tour planned, a one-time reunion gig with Rufus for charity. And then I'll be getting back into the studio to record another album, which will be out in 2009."

Although Khan is thrilled to be on the turntables — "It's about time my music is back in the clubs!" — she is reserved about musical recognition. "I'm honoured by both Grammy nominations. But a Grammy doesn't define me," Khan says. "It may be easier for me to say this because I've won eight Grammys already, but I make music for reasons that are a lot more spiritual and meaningful than an award."

When trying to describe her "need to perform," Khan explains her job is more of a vocation. "It was my calling to do this. Do you know how they say there is nothing you wouldn't do for the one you love? Well, my music is my man."

Like any long relationship, Khan and the music industry have had ups and downs. But unlike smile-and-stick-to-the-script performers, she's candid about the challenges. "I almost quit so many times because I hate the business side of things. It can get dirty. And, you always have to worry about how you look. I had a (stylist) who wanted me to look very soft, sex-kitten-like, like some porn chick. I (always) refused to go there."

While many performers are anxious about changes in the recording industry because of music downloading, Khan is optimistic. "I'm glad things are shifting and artists — not labels — are having more control over their art. My previous big record company (Warner Music) has vaults of my recordings that haven't seen the light of day that people need to hear. This includes Robert Palmer's original recording to "Addicted to Love" — which they took my vocals off of! We are working on getting it (and other tracks) all back now."

The only major letdowns Khan admits to involve a duet, "Dreamland" with Joni Mitchell for the Canadian's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* album in 1977 ("She is my hero so it was so sad... at the time it seemed like the biggest disappointment of my career. She was very uptight and possessive of her music.") and singing at the Republican National Convention in 2000 ("Although it was really done for my foundation for autism education

... it might have done more damage than good to my spirit.")

However, Khan insists the good outweighs the bad, citing career highlights she "could go on and on about," including playing Sofia in the production of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (the same role Winfrey played in the movie version).

Khan turned down the role when Steven Spielberg asked her to be in the acclaimed film more than 20 years ago.

"Everything comes full circle,"

Khan says. "I wasn't ready to play Sofia then but I am now... I discovered I have so much in common with (the character). We're both strong, matriarchal, self-sufficient types who have no time to play games with people or be manipulated."

Much like Khan's presence in popular music, the role of Sofia in Walker's novel is pivotal. But please, implores Khan "don't ever use clichés such as diva or legend to describe me — I prefer the word innovator."



Grammy winner Chaka Khan says she's definitely undergoing a rebirth.