

Tom Jones is back better than ever with a new CD

by *George_Varga*

Tom Jones hasn't quite done it all, but this former ditchdigger with the volcanic voice isn't done yet.

Born in the Welsh town of Pontypridd, Jones has been knighted by Queen Elizabeth, appeared on "The Simpsons" (as himself) and duetted on his albums with such diverse musical admirers as Portishead, Van Morrison, The Pretenders, Tori Amos and Barenaked Ladies.

Music legend Tom Jones is back with his new CD called "24 Hours." Photo courtesy of Soren Solkaer Starbird. A former pal of both Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra, he has also collaborated with Tina Turner and Janis Joplin, co-headlined with PJ Harvey and Lou Reed at England's famed Glastonbury Festival and belted out the seductive Randy Newman song "You Can Leave Your Hat On" during a very revealing scene in the 1997 movie "The Full Monty."

Jones, who scored the first of his 19 successive U.S. Top 40 hits in 1965 with "It's Not Unusual," is also a consistently reliable concert attraction. Jones even plays at smaller venues like the intimate Belly Up Tavern in San Diego.

"This tour is to showcase '24 Hours,' my new CD, and we think it's good for us to gauge the reaction to the new songs in smaller places," said Jones, whose 2000 album, "Reload," sold more than 5 million copies despite never being released in the United States. "You get a better idea about the songs and the way they are coming across."

The new album, his first U.S. release in 15 years, was produced by Future Cut, two English producers who have worked with Lily Allen and Estelle.

"One of the songs I did, 'If He Should Ever Leave You,' was based on a track that they sampled from 'I'll

Never Let You Go,' a song of mine from the '60s," Jones said. "They told me they wanted to do stuff similar to what I did in the '60s, but bring it up to date."

Jones has already incorporated six songs from "24 Hours" into his concert repertoire and hopes to add more. With any luck, one of them will be "Sugar Daddy," the slinky, funk-fueled song U2's Bono and The Edge wrote for (and about) him. It slyly lampoons Jones' enduring sex symbol status, with verses like: I've got male intuition / I've got sexual ambition / I'm the last great tradition / Let me state my position.

Bono wrote the song after having a long talk with Jones at a Dublin nightspot. At a later encounter in London, Bono had an update.

"He said: 'I think I've got the song. It's called 'Sugar Daddy,'" Jones recalled with a laugh. "I said: 'Is that what you think of me?' He said: 'No. You have to listen to it. It's not a serious song; you're laughing at yourself.' Then he said: 'You're the only one with (the guts) big enough to get away with a song like this.'"

This "Sugar Daddy" is also held in high esteem by such young musicians as Alex Turner, leader of the hot English bands Arctic Monkeys and The Last Shadow Puppets.

Jones' longevity speaks for itself, as does his ability to transcend " through sheer grit and vocal power " the kitsch factor long associated with him and his scores of panty-tossing female fans. He is also able to reconnect with younger audiences, decade after decade, be it in 1988 with "Kiss" (the Prince song he recorded with the English synth-pop group Art of Noise) or in 2004 with "Sex Bomb" (which he made with Mousse T, a German-Turkish DJ).

Like his 44-year-old repertoire of hits, Jones' voice sounds as strong and sturdy as ever, which is saying a lot. What is his secret?

"You can't burn the candle at both ends. I tried â€” and it didn't work," said Jones, who travels with several humidifiers when he's on tour and tries to sleep eight hours a night.

"I tried drinking before I went on stage and I couldn't give my best performance while under the influence," he continued. "Some people can. But I'm glad that I couldn't, because it stopped me. I never drink before a performance."

Jones sounds relatively the same today as he did in 1965 when he belted out the theme to the hit James Bond movie "Thunderball," still a staple of his live shows.

But he looks notably different, as he acknowledged during an interview from his home in Beverly Hills. His once dark head of hair is now all gray and all natural.

"It's an honest look," said the 68-year-old singer. "When I was looking at pictures with my hair dyed, I was thinking that a man of my age can't have his hair this dark. Nature doesn't allow it."

"Every Christmas, I take five weeks off, grow a beard and let my hair grow out. This time, I noticed my hair was a nicer color â€” a lighter gray â€” than in the past. In January, I had a two-week engagement in Las Vegas, so I thought I'd leave it (undyed) because it looked good to me."

Jones laughed.

"I looked at the people in the front row, and they were staring when I first walked out on stage," he said.

"Then, they were saying: 'We love the way you look, Tom. You look great.' I haven't dyed it since."

Talk of Las Vegas brings to mind Jones' friendship with Elvis Presley in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when both frequently headlined in rival Sin City casino ballrooms.

The two singers would often get together after their respective shows, not to carouse, but to sing. And what they sang may come as a surprise to fans of both performers.

"Elvis was more into gospel music than anything else," Jones said. "We used to hang in his suite at the Hilton and sing songs like 'The Old Rugged Cross.' Elvis loved it."

So did Jones, who cites gospel vocal legend Mahalia Jackson as an early inspiration.

"I remember singing 'The Lord's Prayer' in school, and the teacher said: 'Why are you singing this like a Negro spiritual?'" Jones recalled. "And I said: 'I don't even know what that is.'"

"I was very young, but they got the whole school together and I sang 'The Lord's Prayer' in the assembly hall. I wasn't a jock, so if you wanted to attract the opposite sex well, my strength was my voice."

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