



dear john

Q A

What are the pros and cons of working as a backing vocalist – and what qualities are required?

In pursuit of an answer to this week's question, I interviewed Morgan Neville, director of backing vocalist documentary *Twenty Feet From Stardom*, back when it was still 'just' an Oscar-nominated film and, in this country at least, still relatively unknown. I am delighted that in the interim it has become an Oscar-winning documentary, and that thanks to subsequent publicity the formerly 'unsung heroes' whose stories are featured are at last getting the recognition they have deserved. The film's UK release reminds us that in this part

of the world, the backing vocalist role is equally important, but often equally neglected in terms of information. With that in mind, I asked Morgan about the unique overview of the backing vocalist's world he has gained from interviewing so many greats in this field. When it comes to practical career tips, there is no greater expert than Susaye Greene, one of the film's featured singers and a member of two of the most successful groups of all time, who has worked at the top of the industry on both sides of the Atlantic.

what the experts say...



Morgan Neville

Director, writer and producer Morgan Neville is a documentary film-maker specialising in cultural and historical subjects. Prior to *Twenty Feet From Stardom*, his productions have included the critically acclaimed film *Hitmakers*, a documentary about the rise and fall of songwriting in New York's Brill Building, the award-winning feature *Shotgun Freeway: Drives Thru Lost LA*, and *Pearl Jam Twenty*.

"I'm delighted that the success of *Twenty Feet from Stardom* has reminded people how influential singers such as Darlene Love, Merry Clayton and Tata Vega have been, but one of the things I learned from putting together the film is that not every great singer necessarily wants the spotlight that comes with being 'successful'. One example we feature is Grammy award-winner Lisa Fischer, who has an amazing voice and has worked extensively with the Rolling Stones, Luther Vandross and Tina Turner. Although she made a very successful and well-regarded solo album, *So Intense*, she has ultimately chosen to continue working as a backing vocalist because she finds being a celebrity intrusive and just wants to sing.

"While being in the background may not appeal to every performer, it can be worth considering if you have the right mindset and if your aim is a long-term career. Oren Waters, from the famous Waters family group, which has backed artists such as Paul Simon and Michael Jackson and sung on soundtracks including *The Lion King*, told me that over the years the group has sung for hundreds of big names who have now faded away. But the Waters themselves are still singing and earning a living."

Susaye Greene

Susaye Greene majored in drama at the High School of Performing Arts in New York, made famous by the hit movie *Fame*. She worked with Ray Charles as a Raellette and a featured vocalist, going on to join Stevie Wonder's Wonderlove, duetting with him on his *Songs in the Key of Life* album. She has also written for Michael Jackson and Deniece Williams. She was the last member of the Supremes signed to Motown Records, and continues to be active in both the recording and book publishing industries.

"My mother, the pianist and entertainer Viviane Greene, coached and nurtured my vocal talent from an early age, teaching me proper breathing for sustained stamina for classical tunes, voice and diction, and arranged dance lessons for me. Some of the most important things in background singing are a good blend with the other singers and the ability to catch on quickly. You should be able to pick up melodies on the spot and retain them.

"When I travelled with Ray Charles, he depended on my being able to remember everyone's parts, and to bring others up to speed. You need a good ear, because you need



to sing harmonies well, retaining your part, in tune. You need to be dependable in many ways. You are supporting professionals – you're on their time and their dime.

"When you step out front, as a soloist, you are leading the way and the experience is in your hands. I was blessed enough to be hired as a soloist by both Stevie and Ray, as well as to sing in their groups. It was tremendously satisfying as an

artist. Also getting to write with Stevie was extremely important for my development as a songwriter.

"The UK is a smaller place than America, making it easier logistically for an artist to get to the right people to help with their career, with some research and determination. In the UK, there is an openness to the idea that artists should not fit a mould and be more organic. Consequently, new sounds come out of the UK. In America, there is abounding talent, yet record companies seem to be signing copycats of the last big thing. Living in England for many years, I observed the individuality of people, and how that was nurtured and encouraged. The best piece of advice I ever got was to be prepared. Ray said to me, 'Do as many genres of music as you can and love, because when one thing is not popular, another genre may be. That's why I sing R'n'B, jazz and even country. That is what has helped me to have longevity.'

dear john sums up...

As with most hit ideas, whether in movies or music, discovering compelling stories in the lives of excellent singers who have always worked behind the scenes now seems like a no-brainer. But one of the challenges Morgan told me that he had when first putting the movie together was the almost total lack of previous information and documentation of the contributions of the singers he was researching. It occurred to me that *The Stage's* readership is probably in a unique position to redress what is a similar state of affairs on the UK front. Who are or have been the greatest backing vocalists in the UK? If you have worked with somebody or followed the career of somebody who hasn't had the recognition they deserve, please do let me know via the usual email address below. And yes, it is perfectly acceptable to nominate yourself. After all, if there is any lesson to be taken from the success of *Twenty Feet From Stardom*, it is that every backing vocalist deserves backing in their own right.

John Byrne is an entertainment industry career adviser. Email him at dearjohn@thestage.co.uk. Details of career advice sessions, workshops and copies of *The Right Agent Right Now* ebook and other resources are available from www.performingcareers.com. *Twenty Feet From Stardom* is currently on UK release with updates via Twitter @20ftFromStardom and via Facebook. Susaye Greene may be contacted via her representatives Sydney "Big Dawg" Colston at bigdawgproductionsinc@gmail.com, Kristen Wright-Matthews at theadagency@gmail.com for bookings, and July Nasri at julyuniversaltalentla@yahoo.com for film