

JR Rhodes -- A Bio  
[LONG VERSION]

“Music is my teacher,” says JR Rhodes. “You have to dive into the lessons it teaches. For me, it’s been a process of discovery, a way of going deep and trying to find my way home... Music makes me focus on how we all come together in a spiritual sense. What that happens, it makes me the happiest.”

As a singer/songwriter, Rhodes’ musical journey has taken her to places that are as personal as private dreams and as universal as ancient prayers. Her richly resonant voice is complimented by lyrics that are both emotionally revealing and gracefully poetic. Combining elements of jazz, folk and pop, she grounds her melodies in solid songcraft even as it soars into otherworldly atmospheres. Echoes of everyone from Billie Holiday and Annie Lennox to the Beatles and Motown can be heard in her songs – ultimately, though, Rhodes’ work transcends easy comparisons and defies pigeonholes.

Music has been a part of Rhodes’ life from childhood. Born in Washington DC, she drew inspiration from her mother’s singing and piano playing as well as her father’s record collection. After her parents divorced, she relocated with her mother to Seattle, where she began writing poems and setting them to music. “I would skip school to stay home and write music,” she recalls. “My mother would beg me to go out and play – that’s how obsessed I was!”

Rhodes spent countless hours teaching herself guitar, piano and bass while developing her unique singing style. Mentoring by music teacher Huntley Buyer at Seattle’s Bush School prepared her for studies at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where she gained inspiration from studying with such jazz masters as Bill Lowe and Anthony Braxton while earning a B.A. in music composition.

After a year in England, Rhodes returned to Seattle in 1992 and became part of its burgeoning music scene. She began to perform regularly at the OK Hotel, a legendary venue in the city’s Pioneer Square district. Her earthy yet otherworldly songs and compelling stage persona earned her the admiration of audiences and fellow musicians alike. By the mid-’90s, she had joined forces with bassist Brad Houser (of Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians), who helped to spread word of her remarkable talents further.

Between 1996 and 2003, Rhodes released four CDs of largely original material via her own JR Rhodes Recording Company label. Besides Hauser, these albums featured the stellar musicianship of such notables as drummer Matt Chamberlain (known for his work with Peter Gabriel, Tori Amos and Fiona Apple, among many others), percussionist Mike Dillon (a member of the band Critters Buggin along with Hauser and Chamberlain) and lead guitarist Leif Totusek (an acclaimed Seattle player adept at jazz, rock and African modes).

Rhodes let her muse range across fascinating terrain on these albums, combining jazzy textures with simmering rhythms and warmly hypnotic vocals. From the wailing incantations of “Afriqueen Stare” to the soulful empathy “Sister Please” and the primal longing of “Home,” the songs revealed Rhodes to be a lyricist of evocative power. Musically, her tunes sparkled with

touches of classic R&B (“Make It Right”), gypsy jazz (“Woman of My Dreams”), flamenco (“Friend”) and African soukous (“Depend on You”).

Recording and live shows combined to build Rhodes a local following. In 1998, she earned the honor of performing at the Seattle stopover of Sarah McLachlan’s Lillith Fair music tour. Her work gained further exposure when she placed songs on the compilation albums *Buddhahful Soul* (released by the Urban Outfitters clothing chain) and *First, Last & Deposit* (a fundraising project benefitting homeless women through Seattle’s Noel House Programs).

Through it all, Rhodes never stopped examining why she made music and how it could touch the lives of others. Family heartaches – including the loss of her beloved sister Susan – made it difficult for her to concentrate upon creative pursuits for a time. Still, she continued to develop her talents – in 2005, she completed a two-year film scoring program at the Pacific Northwest Film School. For her final project, she helped to score an animated film by writing music for a 60-piece orchestra.

Re-energized, Rhodes went on to explore Persian music, which in turn led her to delve into African-American spirituals. “It took me awhile to get there,” she says. “I think it’s important for everyone – especially African-Americans – to get into those old songs where you can meet your ancestors and be reminded that you’re never alone. Singing them makes me feel like I’m getting closer to home.”

In 2012, Rhodes released *Elixir Vol. 1*, a distillation of the best tracks from her four earlier albums. The songs – remastered by Seattle studio maven Barry Corliss – provided a glance back at how far she’d come as an artist.

2013 has seen Rhodes returning to the live stage for a number of mesmerizing performances. Her sold-out appearance as part of the 12 Minutes Max series at Seattle’s On the Boards featured her striking interpretations of traditional spirituals (along with a version of Eden Ahbez’s “Nature Boy”). “People came up to me after the show and told me the music had moved them to tears,” she says. “There’s something very healing about spirituals; I feel a great sense of responsibility when I sing them.”

This renewed sense of purpose informs Rhodes’ current writing and recording as well. Getting back to core feelings and values is very much her goal: “I think my next studio project will be acoustically focused. Everybody is so tech savvy these days with pitch correction and all the rest, but that really has nothing to do with the natural qualities of music. I want to get back to the basics of song structure and sound, all those things that really get to your heart.”

Rhodes’ quest is to create music that’s inclusive and inspirational. Her path has unfolded with detours and diversions, but always with a destination in mind. “One of my favorite films is *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” she says. “There a line from it that I love: ‘It takes a long time sometimes.’ For me, it’s been that way. It’s taken awhile, but I’m getting closer...”

JR Rhodes’ journey is there in her music. She invites everyone to join her on her voyage of discovery.

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[SHORT VERSION]

“Music is my teacher,” says JR Rhodes. “You have to dive into the lessons it teaches. For me, it’s been a process of discovery, a way of going deep and trying to find my way home... Music makes me focus on how we all come together in a spiritual sense. When that happens, I feel on purpose and it makes me the happiest.”

As a singer/songwriter, Rhodes’ musical journey has taken her to places that are as personal as private dreams and as universal as ancient prayers. Her richly resonant voice is complimented by lyrics that are both emotionally revealing and gracefully poetic. Combining elements of jazz, folk and pop, she grounds her melodies in solid songcraft even as they soar into otherworldly atmospheres. Echoes of everyone from Billie Holiday and Annie Lennox to the Beatles and Motown can be heard in her songs – ultimately, though, Rhodes’ work transcends easy comparisons and defies pigeonholes.

Music has been part of Rhodes’ life since childhood. Born in Washington DC, she drew inspiration from her mother’s singing and piano playing as well as her father’s record collection. After her parents divorced, she moved with her mother to Seattle, where she began writing poems and setting them to music. This led to countless hours spent teaching herself guitar, piano and bass while she developed her unique singing style. Music studies at Seattle’s Bush School and Wesleyan University in Connecticut (where she earned a B.A. in music compositions) furthered her mastery of her art.

After a year in England, Rhodes returned to Seattle in 1992 and began to perform regularly at the city’s now-legendary OK Hotel. Her earthy yet otherworldly songs and compelling stage persona earned her the admiration of audiences and fellow musicians alike. In 1998, she won the honor of performing at the Seattle stopover of Sarah McLachlan’s Lillith Fair music tour.

Between 1996 and 2003, Rhodes released four CDs featuring her self-composed songs. Such outstanding players as bassist Brad Houser (Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians), drummer Matt Chamberlain (Peter Dinklage, Tori Amos), violinist Eyvind Kang (Bill Frisell, Beck) and in-demand guitarist Leif Tortusek helped Rhodes to take her music in fascinating directions that combined jazzy textures with simmering rhythms and warmly hypnotic vocals. In 2012, Rhodes remastered the best of these tracks and released them on a compilation CD, *Elixir Vol. 1*.

Through it all, Rhodes never stopped examining why she made music and how it could touch the lives of others. After completing a two-year film scoring program at the Pacific Northwest Film School, she devoted time to exploring Persian music, which led to her learning and performing traditional African-American spirituals. “I think it’s important for everyone – especially African-Americans – to get into these old songs where you can meet your ancestors and be reminded that you’re never alone,” she says. “There’s something very healing about spirituals; I feel a great sense of responsibility when I sing them.”

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-Barry Alfonso