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SONGWRITER PROFILE

— DAN KIMPEL

Priscilla Renea

A Hit Songwriter in Artist Country

Across the history of American music, the essential union of R&B and country music possesses significance that cannot be overstated. Priscilla Renea owns this crossroads. With her new Thirty Tigers full-length release, the prodigiously successful songwriter, who has penned hits for superstars like Rihanna, Kesha, Chris Brown, Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, Mary J. Blige, Madonna and Demi Lovato—plus airplay anthems like Fifth Harmony's "Worth It" and Pitbull and Kesha's No. 1 "Timber"—introduces *Coloured*, a captivating collection elevated by Renea's stunning songcraft and bravura vocals.

Renea references her recent performance at an industry showcase. "I made my proclamation: That I am a country singer and every song I've ever written is country." This definition, Renea says, reflects her most innate musical connection. "It is my most natural iteration and where I feel the most comfortable. I grew up on a farm in Florida. My grandmother had three acres. My uncle Kenny is a black cowboy who rides bulls and taught me how to crack whips. His son taught me to use a hatchet and a bow and arrow. I'm a straight-up country girl."

To make *Coloured* on her own terms, Renea headed south. "If I had tried to pitch any of the songs on this record (in L.A.) nobody would want to cut them or they would get A&R'd to death. That's why I went to Nashville, didn't tell anyone, and hid and did this record. I wanted to see what would happen if I put out all of my ideas."

Fortified with an illustrious roster of collaborators, including hip-hop producers and country songwriters, the tracks are a sonic framework for the raw urgency and stunning range of Renea's voice. She notes that she has always been connected to her consciousness of an artist. "People are used to songwriters who aren't artists. I never stopped being an artist just because I was writing songs for other people. That's why people love my songs so much; because I write them from an authentic place."

In imagining her approach to *Coloured*, Renea remembered her childhood performances at military and civilian ceremonies, baseball games, weddings and funerals. "I started sitting back and thinking, 'What is my strength?' Obviously, I can write a hit song, but what is my voice? I went back to when I used to sing the national anthem for everything. Every time I sing the anthem I sing it with a country twang. It just comes out like that."

The collection opener "Family Tree" is built around a harrowingly personal narrative. Rendered with sly humor, "Gentle Hands" is a very detailed request to God for a man to love, while the slow-burning "Let's Build a House" echoes classic '60s country soul. The song cycle wraps up with "Land of the Free" and these dismayingly relevant lines: "Slavery's abolished but it's still alive and well," says Renea, "I grew up in the South where people talk about the Confederate flag, and it's not about hate? Get the fuck out of here."

Renea notes that often her high-pressure gig puts her at the mercy of many whims. "Imagine being in someone else's dream and you can't escape or be yourself and you have to wait for that person to wake up. That's how it has felt for the last 10 years, like I am in someone else's dream, doing whatever they want me to do, and I can't escape."

"I know it's going to sound odd, because I've had success," she continues, but I don't have a choice. I love writing so much that I endured all of the B.S.—people using me, stealing from me, and manipulating me, taking credit for shit they didn't do. That's another thing that made me go into this 'ninja place' to make this record."

Now, two years in the making, *Coloured* arrives as a powerful testament to the fortitude of Priscilla Renea. "This is my voice and it was challenging to find it," she confirms. "I'm comfortable. I'm not trying to show off. I'm simply telling stories."

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