"I never wanted to be a singer or be in the music business - I wanted to be a flight attendant so I could travel the world for free." So says GWEN DICKEY and it's a surprising admission given that the super-talented and magnetic Mississippi-born singer - who fronted soul-funk aggregation Rose Royce between 1976 and 1980 - was the voice that shined brightly on the group's memorable Norman Whitfield-produced international hits 'Car Wash,' 'Wishing On A Star,' 'Love Don't Live Here Anymore' (the latter song was also covered by Madonna, Faith Evans and Beyonce) and 'Is It Love You're After.' Touring with Rose Royce, Gwen fulfilled her wish to travel and see the world but the pressures of stardom caused her to quit the group after the band's fourth album, 1979's 'Rose Royce IV: Rainbow Connection.' Initially reluctant to return to the music business, in the '80s Gwen slowly began rebuilding her career as a singer with a series of soulful, dance-oriented singles.

Today, in 2015, Gwen is still in demand as a performer, particularly in the UK, where she's been a popular live attraction for many years. On Sunday 15th November, Gwen appears on the bill of the keenly anticipated 'Great Voices Of Soul' concert at Wembley's SSE Arena and ahead of the gig, she talked to SJF's Charles Waring about her music, career, and, of course, her time as a member of the influential Rose Royce...
that are hiding from the press, I know exactly how they feel. I was very shy and reserved, it was very stressful. I don’t think I handled it very well (laughs). So those people...

What was the experience of being an instant star like?

Yes, overnight. That film probably changed your life instantly, didn’t it?

What do you remember about recording that album and attending the movie premiere?

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You went under the name Rose Norwalt for a time, didn’t you?

It was Joe Harris, the leader of the group The Undisputed Truth. They had a girl in the group at that time who had recently gotten married and they had been touring a lot and she and her husband wanted to start a family. It was going to be her last tour and they tried to find a female singer. I became the lead singer.

Who actually discovered you?

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Did people assume that you were the Rose part of Rose Royce?

People actually thought my name was Rose Royce. Once I started introducing myself as Rose Royce, everyone thought that was my surname. Now I find that people are saying “people want to know what your surname is as you keep telling them that you’re not Rose Royce. It’s Rose Norwalt.” His partner was called Walter so from Norman and Walter I came up with the name Rose Royce. “Don’t be silly, you’re not going to be named after a car. It’s rose, as in the flower, meaning elegance and class.” Then he looked at me and said “from now on your going to be known as Rose (laughs). But you never think about people knowing me as Rose (laughs).”

How did the band feel when people started thinking that you were actually Rose Royce?

What is it, then, that makes those songs so special?

They’re so special because they’re not just songs, they’re experiences. They’re into you, they’re into you and the music and songs like ‘Car Wash’ and ‘Wishing On A Star,’ etcetera.

Going right back to the beginning, what circumstances led you to become a part of Rose Royce?

In terms of the other people on the bill, have you performed with any of them before in concert?

I’ve had a long association with the British people and you’re very popular over here so how do British audiences compare with ones in the USA?

You’re due to perform at the Great Voices of Soul concerts coming up in November at...
and he was in the studio with Norman for twenty-four hours. When he went home, he opened his bedroom and found that his wife had written 'Love Don't Live Here Any More.' The only things in the bedroom were his clothes still hanging in the wardrobe and his guitar was in the corner and he said he sat down and he wrote 'Love Don't Live Here Any More' in tears. When he told me the story I felt kind of upset when I sang it in the studio.

So what were you doing during that period when you laid low?

I was just a mess because I had spent five years with these guys and they had made me enemy number one because they weren't happy but they wouldn't tell Norman things. They didn't like disapproving me of Whitfield and he and his wife had had an massive argument. She was saying "you haven't been sorry for him. And of course, at that time I was getting so much pressure from the guys in Rose Royce because all the press only wanted to talk to me and the band weren't happy that I was anything to Norman. So I was having to deal with all this madness and I was just stressed out.

Another classic song that is associated with you and your time in Rose Royce is 'Love Don't Live Here Any More.' Is there a story behind it and how it came to be recorded?

It was finished, I called them all to a meeting. They didn't turn up so I packed my bags and I left. In the studio there was a phone and if it rang it would ring there was a light that would keep us there for three or four days at a time without us even going home. You had to come to the studio with an overnight bag because you didn't know when you were going to get home. I was just a mess because I had spent five years with these guys and they had made me enemy number one because they weren't happy but they wouldn't tell Norman things. They didn't like disapproving me of Whitfield and he and his wife had had an massive argument. She was saying "you haven't been sorry for him. And of course, at that time I was getting so much pressure from the guys in Rose Royce because all the press only wanted to talk to me and the band weren't happy that I was anything to Norman. So I was having to deal with all this madness and I was just stressed out.

So Miles Gregory went home one day after being in the studio twenty-four hours with Norman for twenty-four hours. When he went home, he opened his bedroom and found that his wife had written 'Love Don't Live Here Any More.' The only things in the bedroom were his clothes still hanging in the wardrobe and his guitar was in the corner and he said he sat down and he wrote 'Love Don't Live Here Any More' in tears. When he told me the story I felt kind of upset when I sang it in the studio.

Going back to the music, the late Norman Whitfield was a genius in the studio - what was he like to work with?

Yes, but it's not my story, it concerns the late Miles Gregory, who was one of the writers that Whitfield had on his staff at Whitfield Records. As I said, we used to go in the studio and Norman would just let me go and I'd go in and what you hear today is what came out. Occasionally, he would let me go and I'd go in and what you hear today is what came out.

How did he present the songs to you?

While working with Norman Whitfield, he would let you go and you'd go in and what you hear today is what came out. Occasionally, he would let you go and you'd go in and what you hear today is what came out.

Some of the songs are timeless. When you first heard 'Wishing On A Star' did you think it was going to be a hit?

So my old boss Whitfield said: "Well, it's got a great melody it's got a great beat" and I thought "how can you be so sure that's got the potential to be a hit?" But I've had that experience before with Whitfield: when I said yes to a song he said yes to it and he said "the next time you go to the studio and you stay in the studio all this time, you haven't called me one time, I've been worried, where have you been?" He said "I've been in the studio with Norman" and he even took her to the studio and showed her all the songs.

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GWEN DICKEY will be performing at the Great Voices of Soul concert at Wembley’s SSE Arena on November 15th 2015
A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME - EX-ROSE ROYCE SINGER GWEN DICKEY TALKS

Written by Charles Waring
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