

Chaka Khan,
1984



CHAKA KHAN

THIS SINGER'S SINGER, KNOWN AS THE QUEEN OF FUNK, HAS DEFIED AND TRANSCENDED GENRE BOUNDARIES OVER THE PAST FIVE DECADES.

BY ELYSA GARDNER

There are many factors that make Chaka Khan's place in rock & roll history indelible, but let's start where we must, with the voice. Imagine honey and fire captured in the same bottle, with all their defining qualities – the sweetness and rich texture, the ferocity and heat – somehow kept entirely intact. Add to this mix the inimitable balance of sensuality, muscle, and elegance that has defined Khan's style – for a great voice alone does not a great singer make – and you'll understand what artists from Stevie Wonder to Prince to Lizzo have recognized for years: Khan is not only every woman, as one of her most famous songs tells us, but a unique and irrepressible force.

It has been so for fifty years. Khan rose to fame in the early 1970s fronting the funk band Rufus, pumping out enticing and exuberant hits such as "Tell Me Something Good" (penned by Wonder), "Sweet Thing," "Once You Get Started," "You Got the Love," "Do You Love What You Feel," and the ecstatic "Ain't Nobody." The latter was one of several studio tracks included in Rufus' 1983 album, *Stompin' at the Savoy – Rufus and Chaka Khan Live*, their swan song and an enduringly essential concert album. Khan's tenure with the group – which came to be known early on as Rufus featuring Chaka Khan, then Rufus and Chaka Khan, in deference to her blazing star power – established her as the Queen of Funk. It's a title

the ten-time Grammy Award winner has rightfully sustained, but one that fails to do justice to the range of her talents or influence.

True, Khan's particular impact on the generations of female R&B singers who have followed her is unsurpassed. Mary J. Blige, the Queen of Hip-Hop Soul, included a rendition of "Sweet Thing" on her first album and released it as a single. Whitney Houston covered "I'm Every Woman" – the first single from *Chaka*, Khan's 1978 solo debut, written by Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson – on the soundtrack for her 1992 behemoth *The Bodyguard*; Khan got a pair of reverential shout-outs at the end of Houston's version and also appeared in the video. Erykah Badu, Fantasia, and the rising jazz star Samara Joy, who won this year's Grammys for Best New Artist and Best Jazz Vocal Album, are among countless others who cite Khan as a source of inspiration.

But like Aretha Franklin and Joni Mitchell before her, Khan has repeatedly defied and transcended genre boundaries – not only as a vocalist, but as a songwriter, arranger, author, entrepreneur, and cultural presence. Her ten chart-topping singles include a Prince-blessed cover of his "I Feel for You" in 1984, the first R&B hit to feature a rap segment (by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's Melle Mel). The track's iconic support crew also featured Stevie Wonder on harmonica, with a sample of his "Fingertips Part 2." Two years later, Khan



was a notable contributor to a pair of the year's biggest hits, backing Steve Winwood on "Higher Love" and joining Robert Palmer for "Addicted to Love." (Khan's vocals were taken off the latter due to a label dispute, an example of the corporate stifling she has lamented with candor, though she retained a credit for vocal arrangements.)

For Khan's 1982 album *Echoes of an Era*, she teamed with jazz giants Stanley Clarke, Chick Corea, Joe Henderson, Freddie Hubbard, and Lenny White on standards by George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, and others. Her artistic partners and admirers have also included Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles, George Benson, and Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. Miles Davis, her early idol, likened the sound of her voice – with its bright, siren-like top, rapturously dusky bottom, and the endless, evocative shades in between – to that of his trumpet.

Like Davis' playing, Khan's singing is at once elemental and sophisticated, and always effortlessly sexy with-





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Live with Rufus on *The Midnight Special*, 1974;
onstage in Los Angeles, ca. 1979; singing with
Stevie Wonder, 2003; with Bruce Springsteen at
the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony,
1991; in the studio with Dizzy Gillespie, 1981;
fronting Rufus onstage, Anaheim, 1976.



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out being coy or overblown. There's a confidence and a playfulness, and a sense of the tension and exhilaration that can make real relationships thrilling, and difficult. Introducing her at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1996, Quincy Jones – another collaborator and longtime champion – described Khan simply as “one of the most soulful creatures on the planet,” about as good a summary as anyone could manage in under ten words.

Born Yvette Marie Stevens in Chicago, on March 23, 1953, Khan was raised by singing parents whose passion for music extended from jazz to opera. “All the greats – that's all we heard around the house; we didn't hear a lot of contemporary music,” she told veteran journalist Dyana Williams in a recent interview for *HITS Daily Double*. Khan discovered Aretha, the Temptations, and Gladys Knight through other relatives, though, and at age 11 sang in her own group, the Crystalettes, later forming Black Sugar with her sister.

After her parents' divorce, her father remarried a civil rights activist who recognized and encouraged a talent for advocacy in her charismatic stepdaughter, who would soon take the name by which she's known today. While a high school student, Khan sold newspapers for the Black Panther Party and worked on the organization's free breakfast program for children. In 1972, after performing with a couple of local bands, she was recruited by a new group, Rufus, who cinched a record deal the following year. By the time the band scored its first hit in 1974 with the Grammy-winning “Tell Me Something Good,” Khan had married and divorced her first husband and given birth to the first of her two children, Indira Milini Khan, who would also become a singer.

Relationships within Rufus were also fractious, and not just creatively; Khan has said that her second marriage caused friction with the other members. “They didn't want me to have a husband,” she told *The Guardian* several years ago. “When the band first went on tour, every night, after a gig, they would all do a walk-through of my room to make sure I was by myself. They didn't

care who it was – no one could come and visit me. They were just very possessive of their little diamond.”

Khan struggled with substance abuse as well, and with slippery managers: “I had nothing but rip-off artists, until just lately,” she told *The Guardian*. She found a key ally in music business legend Arif Mardin, who produced her first several solo albums as well as most of the material on the platinum-selling *I Feel for You* (1984), including the title track, and *Destiny* (1986). Mardin supported Khan in and outside the studio until his death in 2006. Other producers featured in Khan's extensive solo catalog include Jam, Lewis, and Prince – who signed Khan to his NPG label in the late nineties. Those collaborations spawned the adult-contemporary favorite “Through the Fire,” as well as R&B and dance hits such as “What Cha' Gonna Do for Me,” “This Is My Night,” and “Love You All My Lifetime.”

While carrying a career through five decades and ten gold and platinum albums, collecting honors from a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame to BET's Lifetime Achievement Award to an honorary doctorate from the renowned Berklee College of Music, Khan has remained an advocate for the less fortunate. For nearly twenty-five years, her Chaka Khan Foundation has served women and children at risk, particularly kids with autism.

The girl who grew up hearing opera and later recorded a collection of pre-rock standards has also channeled her gifts into musical theater, appearing on the West End in *Mama, I Want to Sing!* and making her Broadway debut in the Tony Award-nominated adaptation of *The Color Purple*. Khan's own story and catalog have inspired a new show, *I'm Every Woman – The Chaka Khan Musical*, being readied for a November workshop in London, with plans to produce it on the West End in 2024.

“The world ain't a thing without a woman,” Khan declared on her 2022 single, the fierce, stately “Woman Like Me.” As usual, she was singing for all of us, but also demonstrating yet again the earthy wisdom, grace, and strength that have distinguished her as an individual artist and icon for half a century – and if we're lucky, will continue to do so.



Chaka in full
song, 2015