

LIFE Music, August 2017: The glamorous life of Sheila E.

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By Peter Jones

Sometimes even the best dance-music artists are not in the mood to dance.

The double whammy of Prince's death and the ascension of President Trump has been enough to turn Sheila E. into a wallflower, at least for the time being.



“I was actually working on another record—it was a dance record,” she said. “But at the time, I didn’t feel it in my heart to release a dance record.”

Instead, Sheila followed her heart right off the dancefloor and into a pensive backroom of social consciousness, shelving the nearly completed happy record until another day.

In its place comes *Iconic*. While influenced by recent events, the forthcoming release is also rooted in family history—for this daughter of a onetime Santana percussionist, who grew up amid racial turmoil, as the granddaughter of Mexican immigrants in a mixed-race Hispanic-Creole family.

Last year, as Sheila grieved the loss of her friend and mentor Prince, the rise of Trump's ostensibly anti-immigrant rhetoric was more than she was ready to handle.

"I couldn't turn on the television—and I didn't," the singer-percussionist explained. "I didn't know what was going on, and here comes Donald Trump and all the bullying. I was already hurting, mourning the loss of my friend, and then I felt the country was going backwards in time with how we treat each other. I didn't understand it."

Before long, Sheila was revisiting an assortment of older material that spoke to her new sadness, confusion and frustration. The handpicked set of songs, largely from the 1960s and '70s, would include Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues," Sly and the Family Stone's "Everyday People," George Clinton's "One Nation Under a Groove," and even Burt Bacharach's "What the World Needs Now."

Iconic also signaled a departure from typical funding mechanisms. To get her labor of love off the ground, Sheila turned to like-minded fans for crowdfunding, which has included not just the trading of money for signed drumsticks, but the opportunity to play on the record.

"It's been amazing. I actually took my drummer off so this guy could play," Sheila said of a fan who contributed his skills—along with a check. "He was pretty good."

Sheila E. will perform music from the album as well as a cross section of her own material when she plays a free concert Friday, Sept. 1, in Civic Center Park as part of A Taste of Colorado.

"He turned to me and said, 'Do you know how to play rock and roll?' He was very condescending. I killed that song and I got off the drums and threw my sticks up. Ringo looked at me and said, 'Well, I guess she just shut you up, Greg.'"

Born in 1957 in Oakland, Calif., Sheila Escovedo was a drummer prodigy in a family where musical dexterity was a requirement of birth. Her father Pete led the family's successful Escovedo Brothers before getting tapped by Carlos Santana. Her uncles had played on the edges of Latin, punk and alternative country. Her godfather was music legend Tito Puente.

"We loved having music in the house. My dad played music every single day. There were jam sessions in the living room," Sheila said.

Her mother, Juanita, a black Creole factory worker, would also be a significant influence. An accomplished multi-sport athlete, Juanita was an inspiration for Sheila's aerobic stage presence.

"I got all the sports and the music together, which I thought was an incredible combination," she said. "I started playing classical music, but I wanted to be an athlete. I was a track star. I was training to be in the Olympics. But that place of music—I had never experienced anything like that in my life. I felt that was heaven for me."

With few woman percussionist role models, teen Sheila's destiny was sealed by none other than Karen Carpenter, whose angelic singing was often accompanied on television by the arguably odd juxtaposition of her drumming.

"When I first saw her play drums, I turned to my dad and said, 'Daddy, how come I don't have a TV show? I play drums,'" Sheila said.

After a successful stint in her father's then-band Azteca, young Sheila graduated to a fruitful career as a studio and concert percussionist, accompanying the likes of Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross and Lionel Richie, the adopted father of

her niece, Nicole.

In 1978, Sheila's life changed forever when she met Prince, the artist who would become her mentor, collaborator and sometime fiancé. It was Prince who suggested she drop her last name in favor of the singular E. He also wrote "The Glamorous Life," Sheila's Latin-infused breakthrough hit.

"There is so much people won't know about him, which is OK. It's his life," she said of Prince.

Even with success as a solo artist, Sheila was a determined band member, touring as part of Prince and the Revolution well after her solo stardom had risen.

In 2001, she became the first woman to join Ringo Starr and the All-Starr Band—and with new wave singer Howard Jones, Sheila was among the band's first members to not emerge from the classic '60s-'70s rock fraternity. In addition to fronting the All-Stars on "The Glamorous Life," Sheila played drums and percussion with Ringo, backing up the other "Starrs" on their own solo spots.

At least one band member was skeptical. Guitarist Greg Lake, formerly of King Crimson and Emerson, Lake and Palmer, got his progressive-rock pretension handed to him when Sheila showed her chops on one of Lake's own synth-laden numbers.

"He turned to me and said, 'Do you know how to play rock and roll?' He was very condescending," Sheila said. "I killed that song and I got off the drums and threw my sticks up. Ringo looked at me and said, 'Well, I guess she just shut you up, Greg.'"

Starr returned the favor recently with an appearance on the forthcoming *Iconic*, for which the two play a drumming duet on a medley of the Beatles' "Come Together" and "Revolution."

"'Ringo,' I said, 'you just play whatever you want,'" Sheila recalled.

The singer-percussionist looks forward to taking the new album on the road, where she is expected to bring her signature energy to whatever material she performs in concert.

"What you see is honest. I get to do what I do and I love it so much," Sheila said. "To share the gift of music—what a way to go to work."

Sheila E. performs Sept. 1 at A Taste of Colorado. Other artists on the weekend's free concert bill include AJR and Rick Springfield (Sept. 2), Kongos and 5 for Fighting (Sept. 3), and Lauren Duski and .38 Special (Sept. 4). For more information, visit atasteofcolorado.com. Contact Peter Jones at pjoneslifemusic@aol.com.