

Rita Coolidge looks back and looks ahead

She's in O.C. to perform her '70s hits, along with new music exploring her American Indian roots.

By **STACY DAVIES SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER**

Everyone knows Rita Coolidge. Her big hits "(Your Love Has Lifted Me) Higher and Higher" and "The Way You Do the Things You Do" still fill the classic rock and adult contemporary radio waves and "All Time High" is a favorite on the love-songs stations. What you may not know is that Coolidge is one open, straight-talking, cool lady – and there's much more to her than her commercial success.

The Cherokee soft-rock singer comes to the Orange County Performing Arts Center this week with her standards as well as new material that explores her American Indian roots. She spoke recently about what she's been doing lately – and also talked about the good old days.

Q. We haven't seen you out here in a while. Have you been touring?

A. Yeah, I work everywhere. Just put me on a plane and

give me a microphone! I've

been working Japan and Canada and all over the country. It's not like I'm a local girl.

Q. What kind of show can we expect? You have such a wide range – rock, R&B, pop – and your first hits with (former husband) Kris Kristofferson were country .

A. Well, I'm not doing a country show – we'll eliminate that one right away. When I started I was pretty far away from country. The only country records I made were with Kris, because, well, (laughs) he couldn't bend out as far as I could – pop and rock 'n' roll were just such a different area for him. It was great music; I think rock was more my thing.

Q. You started out as a session singer in the California rock genre, back in the '60s and '70s. What was it like backing up Eric Clapton and Stephen Stills and all those great singers?

A. It was as much fun as it sounds like. In the early '70s, when I was doing a lot of session work in L.A., everybody just kind of came by the studio. It wasn't exactly a party, because there was work to be done, but there was an atmosphere of really having fun. We didn't have record companies breathing down our backs telling us what kind of music to make – it was entrusted to the artist. And that was wonderful. I enjoyed putting together groups.

Q. These days, so much is done electronically that we've seem to have lost the need for a lot of the naturalness in the studio. Do you try to create that atmosphere when you record today?

A. Oh, yes. There are still a lot of people who record the way they always have. Like Bonnie Raitt – she's not going to have an electronic session, she's too organic. Or even Luther Vandross. I've been on sessions with him and he's been on some with me, and there's really this camaraderie – a kind of "singers' society" where nobody's better than anybody else. I mean, I know they're better! (laughs) But it's just about people having a great time and using their gifts.

Q. You sing in so many genres, do you have a favorite?

A. It depends on what day of the week it is. Last night, I was watching Jonny Lang on Jay Leno, and I'm absolutely crazy about this kid's music. He's just amazing – he sings like Joe Cocker and Al Green, and plays like Eric Clapton. He's the prettiest boy out there and has no attitude, too – he's just the purest little light I've seen in so long. It reminds me that people are still doing it the way it's always been done.

Q. That's true, but we still have a lot of the Britney Spears, new bubble-gum music predominating, unfortunately.

A. I know, but thank God Norah Jones cut through like a steel feather last year at the Grammys. That, to me, was amazing. I wore her CD out.

Q. You started a group called Walela a while back with your sister and niece dedicated to exploring your Cherokee roots. I was surprised at how varied the album is – not traditional American Indian music at all, but very "world music contemporary" with even a little reggae thrown in on tracks like "Muddy Road." Are you having fun with this new music?

A. We are. It's just been another wing of music to hang on to. We really started with Robbie Robertson about eight years ago – he did the Red Road Ensemble, which was music by and of Native Americans for the Ted Turner series "History of the Native American." Robbie had called me in to hang out and play and sing, and we spent a few days listening to music he had recorded of peyote singers and some Enya, and we formulated what he wanted to do. Then he asked if I would bring my family in to sing and that's where Walela was born. We like to call Robbie our fairy godmother, which he doesn't mind as long as we don't say it too often!

Q. So, music runs all through your family .

A. Very much. My sisters and I started when we were 2. And my daughter Casey is recording demos with her husband, Red Wolf, in the Smoky Mountains. She's really into mountain music and all those organic instruments and was working with Willie Nelson's daughter Amy for a while. And that music is so fresh and so not what I do, and so amazingly great.

Q. When you took time off from recording in the '80s, what were you doing?

A. Well, I was still working with my band. But at some point, I felt like the records were driving my life –and they were. There was this formula that went on: make a record, go on the road, make a record, etc. And I didn't feel like I had paid a lot of attention to communicating with an audience, and I wanted to focus more on that, instead of having someone write me out dialogue. It actually came from a man who I'd all but shoot the TV if he came on, Sammy Davis Jr.

Q. You're kidding !

I'm not! I thought he was so jive. ... And then I sat with him at an AIDS banquet benefit in New York with Dionne Warwick and Sinatra, and we started talking. And he said, "What are you doing?" And I didn't really know. I said I was probably going to make a record, I guess, and he said, "Girl, you don't ever have to make a record – you're a singer. That's all you have to think about. Just take your craft and go to the end of the world and work and have a ball playing music for people. Don't let the studio drive you." And it just hit home. He was exactly right. And I realized that he was just the coolest guy.

Q. What's next? **A.** Universal is putting out a box-set anthology in February, so I'm still trying to get through that. I had to listen to 25 songs before I could write my "thank yous," and it was just a week of emotions I couldn't believe – like taking a journey through the past. And I'm excited about this gig in Orange County.

Q. Are you going to include some of the Walela songs?

A. I am. When I opened at the (Café) Carlyle, I included "Amazing Grace" and "Cherokee," and it was one of the things the New York Times actually liked about me! They said I looked good, which was nice, but the most interesting thing to me is that they said I wasn't "polished." And when I heard that, I thought "hooray" because that's never what I want to be. Critics want the show to be consistent like a record you hear over and over, but that's not my goal. If I do repeat myself I get a little upset. I like the experience to be unique each time, for the band and for the audience.

Rita Coolidge

Where : Founders Hall, Orange County Performing Arts Center, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa **When :** 7:30 p.m., today-Saturday **How much :** \$56 **Call:** (7 1 4) 740-7878 **Online:** www.ocpac.org



RITA COOLIDGE: She credits Sammy Davis Jr. with shifting her focus from recording to performing.