

# UNSUNG HEROES: SASS JORDAN

Interview by James Gaden

A criminally underrated vocalist with a back catalogue that will 'Make You A Believer...'

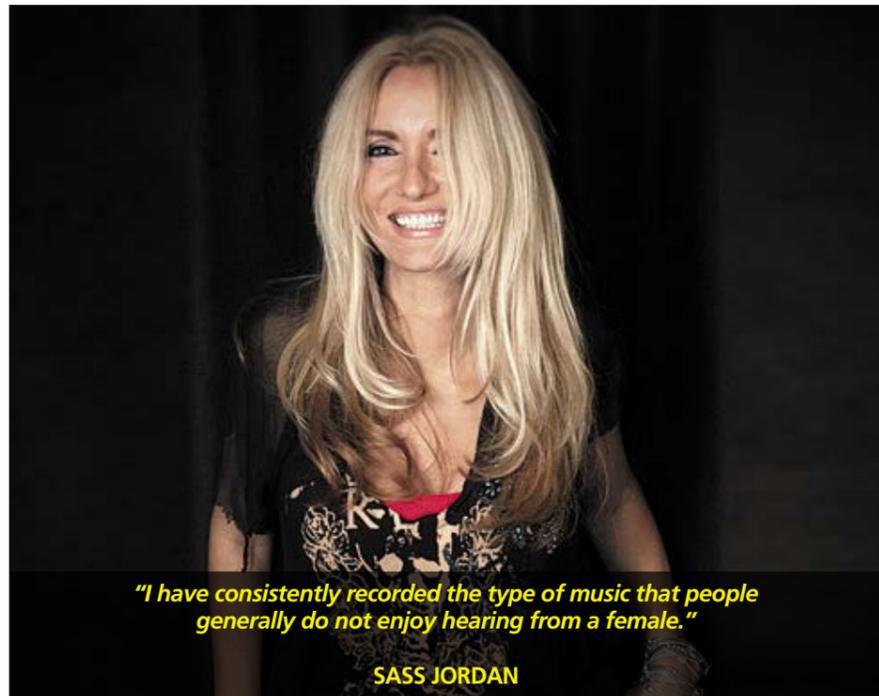
Canadian singer Sass Jordan has enjoyed platinum success in her homeland, however here in the UK she holds a very low profile, which is a great shame due to the strong back catalogue of work she has released. That's no surprise as music was something that called to her very early on in her life.

"I started at the age of fourteen first playing in bands, my first band started with us all sitting in the park, smoking dope, sat with a couple of acoustic guitars. We're talking about 1975 here. We'd sing stuff like The Eagles, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne... all the stuff that was really popular at that time. I also learned to sing harmonies by singing Fleetwood Mac songs. Then I started being in bands and started to get *paid* to perform. When I was seventeen, this band needed a bass player and had a gig in three weeks. I couldn't play a lick of bass, and I learned to play the songs... but I was bloody awful," she laughs. "Fortunately I did have some talent and I got better, obviously! I ended up being the bass player for about four years. I became bass player and co-lead singer, the band was called The Pin Ups, after a Bowie album I love. That was the start and I never stopped. I decided to go solo about 1981 because I was fed up with the politics of being in a band. But because I couldn't play a chorded instrument, I needed the right people to write songs with, so that journey took ages and ages.

"I also did a video show, which I hosted in Montreal where I grew up," Jordan continues. "This was before MTV or any of that stuff, so bands would come on the show, I think it was about 1983, 84, and this was the only TV outlet for them in Canada, so we got some huge acts like Bryan Ferry, Def Leppard, INXS, Phil Collins... I interviewed people, because I thought it was a way to infiltrate the venues and situations that these people found themselves in, to prepare me for when I was the one being interviewed for when I was on the other side of the microphone. That was the plan. I did it for about three years and I was abso-fucking-lutely dreadful for the first few! It never occurred to me to do even a spot of research about who I was going to be interviewing... I'm such a piece of work, I can tell you, oh I'll just float in and wing it - I don't know the name of your new record, I don't know why you're here, oh, what an asshole! But I sorted it out eventually - after Paul Stanley from Kiss yelled at me! He shouted 'This is our tenth anniversary so why are you asking us about the beginning?' I learned my lesson and rightly so."

While being on TV was a valuable experience, it wasn't useful in getting a record deal to make her own music. That came from a more old fashioned route - being spotted performing live.

"I got involved with a local promoter who



was a big deal in Montreal and the East Coast of Canada, he brought Pink Floyd over, he was called Donald K. Donald," explains Sass. "He caught wind of The Pin Ups because we were quite popular, but that was mostly because of our image, we had the skinny ties and were a bit New Wave. We would do Blondie stuff and Tom Petty, because he was considered New Wave at the time if you can believe that, but our shows were always sold out and the big promoters used to check us out. Donald took a shine to me and signed me to his label and they paid me as a developmental artist, which allowed me to survive... which I have definitely paid back over the years from lousy subsequent deals!" she laughs. "It did lead me to people I could write songs with though. I met Bill Beaudoin and we wrote the 'Tell Somebody' record together. It came out at the end of 1988 and the timing was amazing. The record dropped just as Much Music, which was a new Canadian video channel, was launching. So the song 'Tell Somebody' had a video made and it was on *all* the time, every clothing store, every youth orientated shop, they were all playing music videos and my song was on *everywhere*, it made you really well known overnight. It was interesting to say the least, going from relative obscurity to being on TV fifteen times a day for twenty four hours - that kinda freaked me out. It wasn't what I was expecting. So I figured the best thing to do was skedaddle, so I moved lock, stock and barrel to Los Angeles. That was about as far away from where I grew up as it was possible to get... although I was born in the Midlands, in Birmingham. I left at three months old so I have no memory of it. I came back once and couldn't understand anybody!"

The gap between a successful debut record and it's follow up was quite a lengthy one, but the relocation wasn't the only reason for the delay, it turns out to be one of Jordan's idiosyncrasies.

"I've never done anything quickly really, the fastest I ever did records in sequence was 'Racine' and then I did 'Rats' within like a two year period. And the other thing I do, apart from having big spaces between records, I get bored doing the same thing and go off on tangents because I'm a fan of *music*. So I'm clearly not doing it to be a big Pop star, because I'm not one! If I had any sort of brains and was aiming for commercial success, I'd have stayed more in one cohesive style, but I've been to the moon and back with musical styles. I have three styles I most enjoy, the Country Bar Room Rock you hear on 'Racine', that Heavy Blues Rock sound on 'Rats' and the roots Rock style I did on 'Get What You Give'."

'Racine' had a tougher, more Rock orientated sound than her debut but that proved just as popular with fans, as the second album also spawned hit singles.

"'Racine' was way more me," Sass explains. "'Tell Somebody' had a lot of machines on it, that's not really my thing but that was the budget I had at the time and the people I was working with. It's great for what it is, but it's not really the sort of music I love. It went platinum in Canada, so I'm really grateful for that, but I don't really like drum machines and synths. 'Racine' means 'roots' and I wanted to make a record that would really explore the roots I had, listening to things like Rod Stewart and The Faces, that type of frat boy, seventies, drunken

racket that was fun, heartfelt and just fucking great. Singers like Rod Stewart, Maggie Bell, Joe Cocker, even Robert Palmer when he was in Vinegar Joe. That was what I was trying to do, because I hadn't really heard a female do that, except for Maggie Bell... but nobody had really heard of her apart from me! I know why now, because I have consistently recorded the type of music that people generally do not enjoy hearing from a female." The singer bursts out laughing at the notion before continuing. "I'm not saying *nobody* likes it, but for most people it's probably too aggressive, too confident. Sure, we have Beyoncé and girl power, but that's not the same thing, I'm talking about a mature female doing this type of music."

The style of the music was not the only hurdle in Jordan's way, as she found out the so-called 'male dominated Rock scene' was exactly that.

"Our culture is highly patriarchal and getting me on the fucking radio was a nightmare. Stations would tell my label or my PR 'sorry, we can't add that song because we're already playing a female'. A female - singular. I'm not fucking kidding, that was the main reason, because they were already playing Melissa Etheridge, there wasn't room for another woman on the station playlist, because it was a Rock station. Insane! When I released 'Pissing Down' off 'Rats' they got really uppity - 'women don't say pissing!' was the general reaction. Fucking hell, that was the early nineties, that's how recent that sort of thinking was going on."

Jordan channelled that anger to great effect on the hard hitting 'Rats' album which saw her partner up with guitar player Stevie Salas to write the material. She also attracted a host of top quality musicians to appear, including Richie Kotzen, Brian Tichy, Carmine Rojas, Tal Bergman and George Clinton.

"That's probably my favourite record I ever made," Sass states proudly. "The only thing I like more was the S.U.N. album I made with Brian Tichy, that I think is even better. So yeah, 'Rats' would be my favourite album I've put out under my name."

We'll come to the magnificent S.U.N. album in due course. The next album, 1997's 'Presence', was one that frankly I, as a fan of Jordan's, didn't much care for. As I struggled to come up with a delicate way to bring the album up without revealing my own reservations, Sass makes things very easy by cutting me off the second I mention it's name.

"Oh, the worst piece of shit on earth, let's not talk about that. Fucking awful. Awful piece of shite. I hate it."

Not much room for misinterpretation there, so we move quickly on to 2000's 'Hot Gossip', another album which elicits a groan from the Canadian songstress.

"Shit, that was pretty awful as well, another style I was trying, but I was kind of forced into that one though. There are some good songs on it, but the fucking production is just appalling, so lets skip that one too!"



1989 promo shot for the 'Double Trouble' single

Jordan took a break from making records after that to recharge, taking on the role of Janis Joplin in the stage show 'Love, Janis'. She also appeared in the drama series 'Sisters' and the Canadian sitcom 'Corner Gas'. An even bigger show was right around the corner.

"Yeah, I did the 'Canadian Idol' television show, which ended up being for six years. That took up so much of my time. I made the 'Get What You Give' record right at the end of that in Nashville with some amazing players, then I did 'From Dusk Till Dawn' which was quite similar in style for once. I really like some of the stuff on there but honestly, not really where I'm at musically. 'Something Unto Nothing' was next and was way more what I wanted to do. Fucking big, messy, loud, really interesting lyrics, just great."

Something Unto Nothing, or S.U.N. for short, was a project put together by former Whitesnake drummer Brian Tichy who also handled all the guitar duties, with his Whitesnake colleague Michael Devin on bass and Sass on lead vocals. She and Tichy wrote the bulk of the material together and the results were superb, a no frills Led Zeppelin influenced take on high octane Classic Rock. The vocalist can't seem to decide what is wilder, the fact I rate the album so highly, or the fact I even have it at all. Jordan is blown away when I tell her it would be a Desert Island Disc of mine.

"Really? Wow! It's like Garage Blues Rock, it's out of control, not seamlessly put together, it's not really slick song writing... there's some really great shit on there but other parts where we went on far too long, we fucked around but there's something really spectacular about it. It was like 'Nobody is going to hear it so fuck it, lets just do it'... and boy were we right that nobody ever heard of it... except you, you have! We started making another one, we had five songs but we've never gotten around to finishing it, I may well revisit that in the future. It's almost impossible to find the fucking thing though! We

were so lame when it came to getting the album out publicly, it was beyond belief. I've got a super fan who has all my stuff, he couldn't find it. Sometimes it's listed as S.U.N., sometimes it's down as SUN, sometimes it's Something Unto Nothing, and it's different how it's listed on iTunes to how it's listed on Amazon... nobody can figure it out, we didn't really have a proper website, so good luck! There are some YouTube videos though so people can check it out if you want a taster."

That brings us up to present day, which sees Jordan celebrate the 25th anniversary of 'Racine' by re-recording it. Enlisting a new group of superb musicians including her husband Derek Sharp on keyboards and production duties, Chris Caddell on guitar, drummer Brent Fitz and journeyman bass player Rudy Sarzo, the new version of 'Racine' is faithful to the original but just different enough to make it stand out as an entity in its own right.

"It's been really fun doing it, really interesting. It's great, because the fans I have seem really excited," Jordan beams, before revealing she had reservations initially. "At first I thought 'Why would people buy a new version of an old record they already have?' but then I thought it could be quite fun. We've tweaked some of it, so instead of recording it and bringing it up to speed and making it all shiny and compressed and all that bollocks, we went the other way, which really excited me. We tried to make it sound like it was done in the seventies. I gotta say, it sounds fucking *unbelievable* on the vinyl, I can't believe it. It's like a real record!" she giggles. "It's pretty true to the original, it can't possibly be a carbon copy because it's different musicians and the songs are twenty five years old. They were children, now they're adults. I'm different too, I've got an additional twenty five years worth of experience to draw upon. We have tweaked one of two of the arrangements. 'Winding Me Up' is different, I think it's way better on here. It makes more sense now. It's a bit more relaxed and it's even more seventies. The original was a nineties take on the seventies, this is a modern day take on the seventies! We tried to play it like we were in the seventies and recorded it all live, together, in a tremendous studio. It's been very carefully mixed and mastered in order to sound true on vinyl. There's no auto-tune, no fucking around. The only thing we didn't do is we weren't able to record it onto tape, due to cost. It would have cost an arm and a leg to go that authentic, but



there are some plug-ins which help make it sound more analogue. When your record sales aren't what they were, it's not worth it. Styx just made a new record, it cost them hundreds of thousands and it's bloody brilliant, but they can afford the expense, I can't."

While a new record from her is always welcome, it does beg the question if recording in a studio again has lit a fire to write some new songs.

"Next year I'm on to the new," Jordan acknowledges. "It's going to have a good dose of the vibration of the S.U.N. record. I wish more people had heard that because I think it's fucking brilliant. Especially because it's got a female singing, although sometimes I sound like a man with a high voice! But it's just cool. I'd like to make a live record too at some point, but it would have to be done properly, no corner cutting bollocks, I'd want it to be great so it would have to have a proper budget."

A live album would be most welcome, especially for people this side of the pond, as we have not exactly been overwhelmed by Jordan tour dates, something she is only too aware of.

"Nobody knows who the fuck I am in the UK. I have about ten fans in England and you're one of them!" she laughs, before conceding the real number might actually be as high as fourteen. "It's a financial thing, it's been sadly neglected. If I had the right circumstances to



come over there and build an audience I would have done so, but many things have gotten in the way. I hope we can build something with this new record, see if we can get somewhere with that."

Sass then turns the tables and asks me a question, enquiring how I discovered her music in the first place. I explain that the first thing I ever heard her on was a Rock Opera by Brazen Abbott's Nikolo Kotzev. It was a double album called 'Nostradamus' featuring an all star group of singers. Joe Lynn Turner was Nostradamus, and Glenn Hughes played The King, two of my favourite singers of all time. Jorn Lande was on there, along with Alannah Myles, Goran Edman and Doogie White. Sass played the role of Glenn's wife, The Queen. I'd previously never heard her before and frankly thought in that company she would be slaughtered, but that was far from the case and her performance inspired me to check out her own work. This story amuses Sass no end.

"I love Glenn, he's a good friend of mine. That's amazing, I totally forgot about that record! Nikolo Kotzev actually came here to record my parts, which was nice. I toured with Joe Lynn and Glenn in South East Asia on the Voices Of Classic Rock tour, but it was actually Alannah who got me the role for that record." She laughs again before adding, "That's so amazing that you found me via an album I'd forgotten I contributed to!"

## ESSENTIAL JORDAN

5 releases which any true fan of the artist's work should experience...

### Sass Jordan 'Tell Somebody' (1988)

Although more lightweight and Pop in style than her later work, Jordan's debut album contains a collection of excellent catchy tunes with soulful vocals. The title track, 'So Hard' and 'Steel On Steel' are three standouts, which are nestled up against some gentler tunes such as 'Stranger Than Paradise'. More keyboard orientated than her later work, 'Tell Somebody' nevertheless stands up as a very enjoyable eighties flavoured record.

### Sass Jordan 'Racine' (1992)

Jordan bought in more of a Bar Room Rock feel for her second album which suited her down to the ground, with 'Make You A Believer' an obvious standout. Infectious tracks like 'Winding Me Up' and 'Who Do You Think You Are' show off her voice superbly, while she handles the ballad 'I Want To Believe' in style. If you can't track down the original, the newly recorded 'Racine Revisited' is every bit as good and sonically superior.

### Sass Jordan 'Rats' (1994)

Teaming up with Stevie Salas to write the material, Jordan delivers her heaviest solo record with 'Rats'. 'Damaged', 'Slave', 'Pissing Down' and 'Ugly' are all fearsome, while 'High Road Easy' and 'Honey' shows she can still deliver songs with hooks aplenty. The excellent 'Sun's Gonna Rise' is another high point and the album is packed with quality musicianship, with George Clinton being one of many notable guests.

### Sass Jordan 'From Dusk Til Dawn' (2009)

While Jordan freely admits she made a couple of duds along the way, 'From Dusk Till Dawn' was a step back in the right direction. Not as powerful as 'Racine' or 'Rats', this album still contains some real gems such as the stripped down Rocker 'What I Need' and the exquisite Motown infused 'Fell In Love Again', resplendent with horn section. The breezy Eagles-like Rock of 'Why Did You' is another high point.

### S.U.N. 'Something Unto Nothing' (2013)

A project put together by former Whitesnake percussionist Brian Tichy, here he delivers a thunderous performance on the drums and then pulls double duty as lead guitarist for a batch of Led Zeppelin-esque Classic Rock. Jordan handles lead vocals and gives what may well be a career best performance, howling over blistering cuts like 'Burned', 'Nomad', 'I'm The One', 'Did Me No Good' and 'Mobile Again'. An under-appreciated classic.

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