

LEGEND Thelma Houston *headlines PrideFest*

By Holly Hatch

After performing for 43 years, grammy legend R&B singer/performer – and sometimes diva – Thelma Houston returns to Denver to headline at this year's PrideFest celebration. From performances on *American Idol* to headlining the official inauguration dinner for President Barack Obama alongside Cyndi Lauper and Melissa Etheridge, this is one entertainer that shows no signs of slowing down her music career. Her hit single "Don't Leave Me This Way" topped music charts in 1975 and continues to be the biggest hit of her career. Houston visits the stage in Denver to show her support for the LGBT community. She spoke about what it means to be a diva, her humanitarian efforts and the tricks that power her timeless vocals.

You are headlining this year's PrideFest in Denver. What does this opportunity mean for you?

Well, it's always fun for me to perform for a live audience. I love it. I'm really looking forward to this. It's been a couple of years since I've been able to do a whole Pride tour, so I'm really excited about this year.

Can you give us a sneak peak of the songs you may be performing?

Well of course I'll be doing the BIG one, "Don't Leave Me This Way." I could never perform without doing that song. And then, if it's ready, I might introduce something new, so, we'll see about that.

Are you the "diva" you've been deemed?

Unfortunately for some people the word "diva" holds a negative connotation. It means one is self-centered and high maintenance. However, in the opera world, a diva is thought of as a very well respected person who has studied the craft and knows what she's doing, so I tend to look at it in this light. I'm someone who has paid my dues and put in my time as far as developing my craft. Ya know, I don't have to have white candles and white flowers in my room at all times (laughs).

You've been performing for 43 years, what can you say about the differences between when you started to present day?

When I first started performing, I had the opportunity to build an audience by traveling and through live performances; I was able to build my own platform or support group. Nowadays it's done through television and videos. Also, when I started, I had time to perfect and hone my craft, now, artists put out music so quickly, they pretty much have to be perfect from the get-go. It takes time to understand your craft and own it and enjoy it. I'm finding that the audiences are the same in that they love entertainment. They want to have a good time and people respect me.

You are a big humanitarian in the fight against AIDS, when did you get involved and what do you hope to accomplish?

I got involved long before these organizations even had names. There was a time when we had no idea what this disease was. We just knew that a lot of our friends were dying from it. Today, I quietly do what I do to support and help the cause; we've made great strides in it, yet there is still a lot to be done. I try to put my energy into these causes at whatever level I can. I'm a mentor to young women, and I stress the importance of protection and education.

You tour around 150 dates a year, how has that been?

I had children when I started professionally in this business. So I haven't left home for long periods of time. When I tour now, and stay somewhere for a few months, it feels like a vacation. It's not grueling. I exercise and stay in shape. I have no desire to retire. I want to be able to do it for as long as I want to do it and as long as people are receptive and want to see me perform. I never plan to just stop working. Nowadays, with the quality of information about how to keep healthy, we are able to stay healthy to do our callings for longer. I'm enjoying it as much now, and probably have a deeper appreciation for it. I'm lucky that I have been able to earn my living at doing something that I love. It really fills me with such gratitude. I'm just thrilled.

Have you developed tricks or tools to keep your voice so strong and healthy?

You learn that you have to protect it, as much as you can. I know that being physically active is very, very important. Working out works the vocal chords, just like any other muscle. And, I've been training with the same (vocal) teacher for more than 25 years now. Right now, I'm more focused on trying to build up my arms and work them out so they look good in my sleeveless dress (laughs).

Are you excited to visit to Colorado?

I love the state of Colorado. I ran a 10k-race, years ago, in the Mile High City. It wasn't my fastest time, believe me. But I always have very fond memories of Denver. I'm excited and very much looking forward to it. I want everyone to come out and rock-out … and show 'em how the old school rolls. ●

Houston performs at 3 p.m., Sunday, June, 19 on PrideFest's main stage.

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