

# Jules Buckley interview

Fresh from his acclaimed collaboration with Florence + The Machine at the BBC Proms, Grammy Award-winning composer and arranger Jules Buckley is returning to London's Royal Albert Hall for a special holiday event. On 12 December, Buckley and his orchestra will present Jules Buckley's Christmas: A Celebration of Aretha Franklin, paying tribute to the legendary Queen of Soul with a festive twist.

## **So, what can audiences expect from A Celebration of Aretha Franklin?**

It's a combination of hits of Aretha's that everybody knows, combined with Christmas music. Essentially we're creating a narrative across her life and work, so it's a collection of some Christmas tunes that are done her way, and some tunes of hers which are the perennials.

## **You performed a tribute to Aretha's music in 2022 with the singer Sheléa. She's back for this concert. How did you meet?**

She's a protege of Quincy Jones, and I met her when I was working with him on a series of arena concerts. We connected and, at a certain point, discussed a mutual love of Aretha Franklin and thought, "Should we have a look at putting something together here?" Of course, Aretha's a singer who has no equal, so it's a daunting task at the best of times. But Sheléa is incredible, she can catch the audience in the right way and she understands Aretha's music.

## **So you're a long-time fan of Aretha Franklin?**

I've been a fan of Aretha's music as soon as I heard her voice. When I was a teenager, I got heavily into soul and funk and was always journeying around charity shops trying to find as many LPs as I could that could add to my collection. And I was often targeting artists like Aretha.

## **You're playing at the Royal Albert Hall once more. What makes it so special?**

It's a 360 hall to start off. If you're there as an audience member or a performer, you get this 360 feeling, so you're wrapped up in the beauty of the room. It has such a romance to it – those red velvet chairs and all the wood everywhere, and this incredible ceiling with these crazy sound diffusers and reflectors that look like weird spaceships. It has such a heritage and has had so many legendary performances in it, so it feels quite hallowed. When you get in there, you feel inspired, and if you feel inspired, you're always going to take your performance to another level. In tandem with that is that the audience, if they're in the stalls and the chairs have been taken out, can feel really close to you, so it can feel very intimate, even though it's a big space. It's one of the most beautiful places on the planet to make music.

**If someone has never been to one of your concerts before, what should they expect from A Celebration of Aretha Franklin?**

If no one's ever been to a gig like this, then they can expect to feel lifted to a higher place through virtuosic musicians and some of the most soulful music ever written. The musicians in the ensemble are just really phenomenal and Sheléa is just one heck of a performer.

**We obviously lost Quincy Jones recently, who you worked with. What did he mean to you?**

He was just the greatest of all. He was a trumpet player, arranger, composer, conductor, producer, mentor, philanthropist, and an all-round legendary human being who led everything with love and joy. He understood how to get the best out of people, which would allow them to take the music to the next level.

**You also have some dates with Pete Tong coming up where you orchestrate dance classics.**

The gigs with Pete are wicked. The audience's energy is always very high and very euphoric. It's like a juggernaut that, once it grabs you, it doesn't stop. Some of the music that we play, they're the most iconic anthems of all time, so to be able to perform them live and to see the reactions of people in the room is incredible.

**Earlier this year you performed with Florence + The Machine to celebrate the 15th anniversary of their debut album Lungs. Are there any other LPs you'd love to orchestrate?**

Hounds of Love, that would be cool. I did reach out to Kate Bush several years ago, and her team were just like, 'Yeah, thanks for the email, Jules'. It was a very quiet 'see you later.'

**What plans do you have for 2025?**

I'm working on my first solo record, which I'll have finished by April/May – that's my main focus after Christmas. It's broadly orchestral, but it's song-based, so there'll be a few guests on it. It's a collection of songs that I've been writing in between projects for over a decade. I think once that album is done, I'm going to move straight onto the next. If it takes me 10 to 15 years to do another solo record, it's going to be a pretty minimal discography!