

# BELTING OUT THE BLUES

Three-time Grammy nominee, New York-born singer **Shemekia Copeland** is a force to reckon with in the industry. **Rhea Dhanbhora** finds out more about her music and the inspirations behind her sound

An expressive singer with several stories to tell, Shemekia Copeland has been treating audiences across the world to her soulful, attention-grabbing vocals since she was in her early teens. The daughter of famous blues musician Johnny Clyde Copeland, tells us that the blues were "just something I grew up with in the house", and has since carved a solid niche for herself in the music industry, with several awards and accolades to her name. Attendees of the first ever Mahindra Blues Festival in 2011 will remember her as the opening performer, and she was back again this year, lending her stunning sound to the seventh edition of what is quickly becoming a staple and one of the most popular jazz and blues events in Mumbai. We spoke to her about how far her music has come, as well as what she thinks of the current industry. Here are some excerpts from the conversation.

■ **How would you say your music has changed, from albums like *Turn the Heat Up to Outskirts of Love*?**  
The subject matter of my music has changed completely. When I started out, I was a 17-year-old. It's been twenty years, and so my experiences and views on life have evolved.

■ **You've collaborated with R&B legend Ruth Brown and other well-known faces like Robert Randolph, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Billy Gibbons... who would you like to collaborate with next?**  
I'd love to work with John Prine. I also think Allison Kraus is great.

■ **What should the listeners who are familiar with your earlier work know now, about the new style and sound of *Outskirts of Love*?**  
The album is about people who are outsiders. The subjects are outside of love, the law, society. People on the fringes...

Shemekia has performed twice at the Mahindra Blues Festival in Mumbai



■ **The line, *Country music ain't nothin' but the blues with a twang*, from your performance of 'Drivin' Out of Nashville' comes to mind, and your dad was a blues musician from Texas. Is combining the two genres something you would want to do?**  
I love country music. The blues and

country basically both address the same topics. Hardships. Love. Poverty. And, a good time on a Saturday night!

■ **Speaking of your father, could you tell us a little bit about what performing with him was like? Do you think that you would have been a different kind of artist if his style hadn't influenced your own?**  
I started performing with my father as he was getting sick. So, at first, I thought I was helping him. It was only later that I realised he was helping me, teaching me. I would be a totally different person if he hadn't been such a big influence.

■ **You've performed at several notable blues festivals across the world. What elements do you think Mahindra Blues (and other fledgling festivals) can bring in from them? Do you see a younger crowd more appreciative of the blues today or think that the genre needs more of a push in the music industry?**  
The genre definitely needs a major push to attract more young people. Mahindra does a great job and Mahindra Blues is one of my favourite festivals in the world. It is already first class in the artists it presents, its promotion and the general vibe.

■ **Congratulations on your Contemporary Blues Female Artist nomination! You've gotten so many under your belt,**

## QUICK QUESTIONS



- **Musicians you would love to collaborate with** Robert Plant
- **Favourites from your own collection** *Outskirts of Love*
- **An album that was the easiest and one that was the hardest for you to make** My first album was the hardest. The last was the most fun.
- **Your favourite place to perform** The White House
- **Your favourite post-performance ritual** Tea with honey
- **Tell us something amazing** I just gave birth to a beautiful baby boy on Christmas Eve!

**including three from the Grammy's. Is every time as exciting as the first?**  
Absolutely. It's always a thrill!

■ **What do you think of music as therapy? Has writing and performing it helped you in any way?**  
I think music can definitely heal the soul. It has and always will help people through sad times and make good times better. I also benefit from the people I meet through the music and from hearing their interesting stories.

■ **What would you say are the most popular themes or inspirations for the blues?**  
Love is universal. So are struggles, whether they are social, political or personal.

■ **Can you tell us about some contemporary blues artists you would peg as having a promising future. Who should people be adding to their playlists?**  
Gary Clark Jr., Doyle Bramhall and Vaneese Thomas.

■ **What stood out for you at the Mahindra Blues Show this year?**  
I played at Mahindra a few years ago and couldn't wait to come back. The fans are awesome. Mumbai is a fabulous city. And, I was looking forward to seeing my friend Billy F. Gibbons perform!



Shemekia's new album, *Outskirts of Love* is about people on the fringes