





SOUTHERN BELLE

LEANN RIMES HAD HER FIRST HIT RECORD NINE YEARS AGO, AND THEN RECORDED THE BEST-SELLING SINGLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY. AND SHE'S STILL ONLY 22 YEARS OF AGE. TONY GREENWAY TALKED TO THE COUNTRY-POP SUPERSTAR ON THE EVE OF HER RECENT MANCHESTER CONCERT, AND THE LAUNCH OF HER NEW ALBUM, THIS WOMAN

“People *finally* aren’t talking about my age,” says LeAnn Rimes, when CITY... er... starts talking about her age. “Cos I’m getting a lot older now. There’s not much to talk about on that subject, anymore.” There is, we notice, just a trace of exasperation in her voice. Perhaps this is why country superstar Rimes has called her latest album *This Woman*, as if to underline the point in big, thick, felt-tip pen: ‘I was a child star, but I ain’t no little girl anymore. Please treat me like an adult.’

But hang on just one cotton-pickin’ minute: let’s get this into perspective. LeAnn Rimes is still only 22 years old, which, whatever

way you cut it, isn’t exactly ancient. Releasing a Greatest Hits album when you are 35 is par for the course. Releasing one at 21 - which Rimes did - is, even she admits, “a little freaky to think about.”

Over the course of a decade, Rimes has worked hard to nurture her musical career, and made the transition from child star to adult recording artist with relative ease. Looking back, though, was finding fame at such a young age a help or a hindrance? “It was both, absolutely. But I’ve been in this business for 10 years now and I’m going to push through to the next 10. I’m going to continue to make hits.” And we can believe it because, so far, she’s made an awful lot of them. No wonder she sounds so sure of her herself. >>

Rimes was born on 28 August, 1982, in Jackson, Mississippi. Raised in Texas, she won her first talent show in 1987, sang the national anthem at various sporting events, and grew up listening to everyone from Patsy Cline, Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand, to Janis Joplin, Elton John, Prince and Led Zeppelin.

Aged eight, she became the winner for two weeks on massively popular USA TV series *Star Search*, and had her first hit single, *Blue* (originally written for the legendary Cline who died before she could record it), when she was just 14 ("I was 13, actually," corrects Rimes). Subsequently, LeAnn shifted over 20million albums and opened the door marked 'Global Superstar'. She's won three Grammy Awards, five Billboard Awards and one American Music Award; performed for the Pope, sung at the opening ceremony of the 2002 winter Olympics and written a children's book called *Jag*. Last month she played Manchester, performing songs from the soon-to-be-released *This Woman*, plus tried and tested crowd-pleasers.

It's been a long road - so when she hears those records from the 'child star' phase of her career, she doesn't turn a hair. "I see them as a growing process," says Rimes. "I see them as something that's pure and honest, because I didn't really know what I was doing at the time. All I knew was that I wanted to sing. That comes across in the songs. It was a starting point for me, and it got better as I got older."

When fame came calling, her father, Wilbur, became her manager/producer. "I had a lot of encouragement from my parents and from all of my family," says LeAnn. "And it wasn't ever a 'pushy' thing, either: it was just encouragement. I got a lot of praise from them, and that, in turn, made me feel very confident about what I was doing. I had a great balance in my life." Even so, there was something of a kerfuffle in 2000 when she sued Wilbur, claiming underpaid royalties and an unfair recording contract. This squabble was



settled, however, and Wilbur gave LeAnn away at her 2002 wedding to dancer Dean Sheremet.

Some child stars can't cut it as adult artists; they give in to the pressures of fame and fall to pieces. But Rimes never did. "I'm... weird," she says. "I'm strange in that way. I have a talent; and I love that I've been able to develop it as I go along and make it better. I've also taken some time off to enjoy life and I'm not always in everyone's face constantly. I have a lot of great people around me to ground me; and I have a good head on my shoulders, I think, which is a huge help. And if you (back it all up with) great music then

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hopefully it all comes together."

Along with Faith Hill and Shania Twain, Rimes has been leading the charge to modernise and popularise much-maligned country music; but she's not about to get piercings like Christina or dance around with a snake like Britney. LeAnn Rimes (Motto: "Work like you don't need the money, love like you've never been hurt, and dance like nobody's watchin'") is a lot more clean-cut than that. The raunchy minx act isn't for her.

In the UK, where 'country' is still equated with rhinestones, Stetsons and Dolly Parton's bust, Rimes doesn't play the Nashville card quite so much, releasing music which - while still 'a little bit country' - is more to our rock/pop cross-over tastes. There was *Can't Fight the Moonlight* from the soundtrack of 'babes in a bar' movie, *Coyote Ugly* (in which she had a small cameo role), of course; plus the duet with Ronan Keating from this year, *Last Thing on My Mind*. "That was a great record for both of us, sure," purrs Rimes. "It's just been released in the States, too, so hopefully it'll take off because no-one really knows who Ronan is in the USA, and I think that's such a shame. He's so great and such a wonderful person. We've become really good friends."

Hmmm. OK. This could be a tricky question, then; but why did Rimes want to work with him in the first place?

"He sent me the song, knowing that I was releasing a greatest hits album and wanting to put a few new tracks on the record. He was also recording an album at the time, so it was perfect timing. I fell in love with the song and fell in love with Ronan's voice. We recorded it separately in different studios and only came together to film the video. We had a blast."

The track that really must hang over Rimes' head, though, is 1997's *How Do I Live?*, a monster hit which stayed in the

American charts for a year, and became (at the time) the best-selling single in history. Afterwards, wasn't there lots of pressure on the then 15-year-old Rimes to deliver the goods and have another similar massive hit? And quickly?

"No, I don't look at it that way. Most people have one career song. I've been blessed to have four or five. I don't know if it's the music or me or what it is. People just connect with it - and as long as I can keep that going I'll be OK. I'm not trying to 'beat' *How Do I Live?* in the charts because I just couldn't imagine beating it. It was a once in a lifetime, amazing thing - and now I move on to the next big song." This is a great time, she says, to be a country artist - especially in America. "But it's so funny for me, 'cos in the UK and Europe, my music has been mostly 'pop' and 'rock'. It's progressed from *How Do I Live?* and *Can't Fight the Moonlight* to the Ronan song. And my new album is more along the rock lines than country."

So what does she prefer? Country? Rock? Pop?

"It's great to have variety," says LeAnn Rimes simply. "I grew up singing every kind of music you can imagine. I hate having to choose one thing..." ☺