

AFTER a transatlantic musical career singing and writing for the likes of Shola Ama, Yana Johnson has returned to South London to become an award-winning businesswoman, launching a range of cosmetics for black women. She tells CEDRIC PORTER about combining the practical and spiritual

Q. WHEN did you come to South London?
A. I was born and bred in Birmingham and came to Greenwich University in 1991 to do a degree in environmental science. I had family in Forest Hill and stayed with them.

Q. You also went to live in the US?
A. The university had this Camp America exchange programme. I stayed with my aunt in New York and found a job. I was learning to be a bit more free with my expression. I was learning if I could trust myself if I came up with an idea. In America people just go off and do it. I learnt it's okay to have ambition, that I didn't need somebody's permission to explore myself and my art.

Q. How did you get into music?
A. I made demos of 20 songs and sent them out to people. Kwame of D-Influence heard it and he got me signed to Freak Street Records which was a subsidiary of Warner Chappell. It was the same label as Shola Ama and I wrote three of the tracks on her second album In Return. Twelve of my songs were released in Japan and my CD Bring It On sold 40,000 copies.

Q. What happened after that?
A. I went back to New York and worked on the counter in Eight Ball Records in Manhattan which is a big dance label store. It led me to eventually meet Roger Sanchez who is a mega DJ and I ended up helping run his office. I also met Ibo, who is a very well-known producer and in demand as the engineer for the big name artists like Mary J Blige and Missy Elliott. He's my mate. But there were issues with the management when I had a second album Music In Me out in Japan and it didn't do as well. The contract wasn't renewed. Back in the UK I signed to Urban Star and did a cover version of Gwen Guthrie's Ain't Nothin' Goin' On But The Rent with Rishi Rich. It really created a storm.

Q. What turned you away from the music scene?
A. The music industry is run by these big egos. One of my best friends asked me along to Brooklyn Tabernacle Church when I was about six months pregnant. I was prayed over and the choir was fantastic. When I went back to America, my aunt wasn't very well and everything I was running away from I had to face - probably more because it wasn't my country. I got to a low point where I really called out for help and that got heard. Being baptised as a Christian brought me peace to focus and look for answers.

Q. How did you get into the beauty and make-up business?
A. I met this girl who told me all about the business. I realised not only could it be fun but that the market for black and Asian women is under-represented in the UK. American [black] women look fantastic all the time but a lot of the cosmetics they use aren't available over here. I wanted to give these people permission to transform themselves and love themselves. European foundation is very pink-based and doesn't match our [black] skin. The brown goes a bit chalky.

Q. You found you had a flair for business?
A. After university I started to do a master's

THE SKIN YOU'RE IN: Yana Johnson has found success with her beauty range for black women Photo: OSMAN DEEN/17959/1/P

degree in international business but left to do music. For my first album I was the executive producer and learnt as I went along. When I started my Yana Makeup business my business plan was written after the business was set up. I was just following instincts.

Q. When did you move back to the UK?
A. I moved back to my flat in Greenwich a year-and-a-half ago with my daughter Gabriella who's now five - she's beautiful. I opened a shop on Deptford Broadway and moved to Morley's in Brixton in July. My business plan on the Aspirations Finance Challenge lifestyle exhibition at Olympia which meant I had a free exhibition stand. And I won the European Federation of Black Women Business Owners entrepreneur of the year award last year at the West End Hilton.

Q. Have you got back into music?
A. I had to take time to renew. I had worked with Double R who was the producer for the album by Romeo of So Solid which was in the Top Ten last year. He became a Christian and asked me to go along to Junction Community Church in Battersea. I have to do some growing before I can start singing.



A TOUCH OF CLASS: Yana applies a little magic to Kamara Collymore at her Brixton shop Photo: OSMAN DEEN/17959/2/P

Q. You are featured on the New Soul Deep CD of women gospel singers?
A. Carlton Smith and Roger Russell wrote the music and I was the voice and wrote the lyrics for the track Incredible.

Q. And you've come back to South London?
A. South London has always been home and there is very little I dislike. I love the tranquility - Brookmill Park in Deptford and Brockwell Park Lido in the

summer. Walking or driving through Forest Hill and Dulwich after dropping my daughter off to school in Blackheath, it's like being in the countryside in the middle of the city. I like the idea of villages in the city like Blackheath and Dulwich. On One Tree Hill in Honor Oak you look down and see the whole city and that is so beautiful.

Music and back again

MY SOUTH LONDON