

Rigmor Gustafsson - Long biography

Rigmor Gustafsson is the singer who stepped out from the vast forests of Värmland and stepped onto the steaming asphalt of New York, only to later up sticks and settle in Stockholm with the mission of taking on Europe.

Her impressive ten albums in her own name all show an incessant desire to try new paths. This has made her one of Sweden's, in fact Europe's, leading and most popular jazz artists, with a long, varied and award-winning career behind her. To name just a few, she has been awarded the Swedish Royal Musical Academy's Jazz Award and Sweden's Radio Prize, Guldkatten, and has won a Swedish Grammy for the album *Alone with you*, where the highly versatile songwriter, Rigmor Gustafsson, stands proudly behind all thirteen songs.

Despite her success, she stands firmly with both feet on the ground. Perhaps not so strange for a girl who grew up on an old-fashioned little farm with a handful of cows, pigs and cackling hens as company. In the small parish of Värmskog in Värmland, residents of the time fell forests, cultivated their own feed for their animals, and slaughtered a pig for Christmas. In short, a self-sufficient lifestyle where the boundary between animals and people, light and dark could at times be paper-thin, where everything was one.

It is perhaps possible to trace Rigmor's absolute love of music to this time of her life. Rigmor's mother passed away when she was just seven years old, leaving Rigmor, her two siblings and their father to take care of life on the farm alone. Around this time, Rigmor got both a horse and a guitar; two friends and companions for life, as they proved to be.

"I withdrew into my own world and liked being alone with both my horse and my guitar. I could sit with my guitar for what seems like an eternity."

The radio was the only real source of music in the home, and Rigmor saw no difference between Elvis Presley or the middle of the road songs on Swedish radio's most popular programme, Svensktoppen.

"You could hum to all of them, and I could pick everything out by ear and strum it on my guitar"

Using both her own and his brother's simple cassette players she was able to record, sing along to and add harmonies to songs. With one tape recorder playing the music, she would record it - adding her own vocals or guitar - on the other. Put simply, she took the first steps of her music career by making her own primitive sound on sound recordings.

However, there was much more to learn. When Rigmor started at the Municipal Music School, discovered she had the somewhat legendary Swedish guitarist, Jan "Janka" Johansson, as a teacher. He was a driving spirit who wanted to get everyone playing and saw no difference between traditional Swedish folk songs, such as Ida's summer song, and cutting-edge fusion with John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra. High and low, old and new, everything was music.

When it was time to move on in her education, Rigmor applied to the music high school and was accepted – on a classical guitar. Here she made a discovery that would change her path: There are clear and distinct boundaries. Classical music is played as it is written. If she was going to improvise and do as she wanted, she had to switch – to jazz guitar.

No sooner said than done! Now she was able to take on Donna Lee and other jazz classics and create her own, unique versions. However, there were other discoveries to be made. A girl who plays guitar? Surely not! Isn't it boys who do that and boys who form bands? Girls play the flute or the piano and sing. End of discussion.

Rigmor had always hummed and sung to herself, not least to master scales and melodies. So, when the day came where she was asked if she could consider singing with one of the boy bands, her immediate thought was "Yes, I can do that".

"It was so much fun! Suddenly I was got to be a part of it all and a whole world opened up for me. From that day on, my guitar became increasingly overshadowed. Song was the only thing that mattered."

After high school, came one year at the Ingesund College of Music, in Arvika. Here, there was a relatively newly formed African curriculum, and Rigmor was the very first to be accepted for jazz vocals.

"The teachers were completely out of date with regard what was relevant right then. They had no idea what to do, so they sent me to Malmö so I could get singing lessons. I also had to make up a lot of things for myself, but it was fun with my classmates!"

One year later she took a new step on her very special path when she got into the Royal College of Music in Stockholm to train as a jazz vocal teacher. At the same time - before, during and after - Rigmor played guitar and sang in a cover band, which hurt both her ears and her back, she sang jazz four nights a week at the well-known restaurant *Kristina i Gamla Stan*, and she joined the girl band *Lady Be Good*, who sailed back and forth across the Baltic Sea with the 'prawn-feast' (*räkfrossa*) ships, this time with a lighter guitar, a Paul Reed Smith, on her shoulders.

"Singing at Christina was like attending a fantastic school, and with the money I earned with Lady Be Good I take off for the USA. Yes, it was intensive but at that time I was able to keep the pace."

When Rigmor graduated from the Academy of Music in Stockholm, she returned to Ingesund College of Music – this time as a jazz vocal teacher. After just a few short days she began to wonder whether she had already experienced all life had to offer. Something the cover band's guitarist said to her rang in her ears: "If you are going to sing jazz you **have** go to New York!"

Again, no sooner said than done! In 1992, she took her first bite of the Big Apple, the pulsating city in which she intended to live for more than three years. She attended the New School's Jazz Programme, and even worked as a waitress for one whole day (!) before taking on a job at a stable she had read about in Miles Davis' autobiography.

"It was a really dirty job but I got to ride in Central Park! And I didn't need to go to the gym."

While living in New York she also formed her very first band, the Rigmor Gustafsson Quintet, who later toured in Germany, and had a decent number of gigs in New York, including at the legendary Birdland.

"I learned so incredibly much during those years! The challenges just never ended. You really have to think about who you are when you are completely alone in Manhattan and don't really know how anything works."

In perfect timing for when her visa was about to expire, and there was a tiny temptation to stay as an illegal immigrant, she received an offer she just couldn't refuse. Would she like to be a teacher in jazz vocals at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm? So off she went back home to Sweden, with a demo recording with the quintet in hand; this would become her first album, *In the light of day*, released by the record company, Prophone.

Once in Stockholm she taught, recorded her second album, *Plan #46*, with an American quintet, and played gigs here, there and everywhere! Even so, deep down inside, the desire to take yet another step smouldered, and after four years, Rigmor left the Royal College of Music to go all in on a solitary card; life as a freelance singer.

This would prove to be a decision she would not regret, and her life as a jazz star began. Over the years she has collaborated with singers Jeanette Lindström and Lina Nyberg, and with trombonist Nils Landgren. She has toured much of the world with her own groups, collaborated with the Radio String Quartet Vienna, Danish Radio Big Band, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Swedish Radio Jazz Orchestra. Not only that, she has performed at Crown Princess Victoria's wedding and at the Nobel Prize Awards, as well as appearing on TV in numerous countries, and so much more.

First and foremost, Rigmor has travelled her own path, both on stage and on vinyl. In 2000 she recorded *Rigmor Live* with her first full Swedish group, with pianist Jakob Karlzon at the head.

With the album *I Will Wait For You* (2003), Rigmor made yet another move, albeit off stage - she signed a contract with the German record company, ACT.

“ACT has been fantastic! I have recorded six albums, all followed by extensive European tours, and I have been able to play in great conditions with the best musicians.”

For *Close To You - Celebrating Dionne Warwick* (2004), she joined forces with French star pianist Jacky Terrasson, on *Alone With You* (2007) she presented a new group of her own, and on *Calling You* (2010) she collaborated with the Austrian string quartet *radio.string.quintet.vienna*.

“We did more than 70 concerts across Europe. We played in Cairo and Alexandria and were the warm-up act for Wayne Shorter in Istanbul. Fantastic!”

On *When You Make Me Smile* (2014) Rigmor stepped forward in an even broader sense. In addition to a jazz group, she also brought along the string orchestra, Dalasinfoniettan.

Her latest album, *Come Home* (2019) presents newly written music by Rigmor herself, as well as Kate Bush, Joni Mitchell and Tanita Tikaram; in other words, all female composers. Pianist Jonas Östholm, bassist Martin Höper and drummer Chris Montgomery, play as a trio on the record, backed-up here and there by Lisa Långbacka on accordion and Margareta Bengtsson on harp.

Anyone who has taken the time to scan the text on the back of Rigmor Gustafsson's albums soon notices that she doesn't always perform her own material.

“Since I was a little girl I've always made up melodies and chord sequences. I love sitting at the piano and just floating away. It is, and always will be, a significant part, perhaps the greatest part, of my music-making, and is 100 percent desire and joy. But I don't feel that I always have to perform my own music. On the other hand, I do always have to find a relationship with a song. The melody or the harmony have to be good, and I have to be

able to identify myself with the lyrics. Only then can I be totally present in the music. And that is what's most important for me!"

By Johan Scherwin

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