



RUBEN'S RETURN

OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT FOR TWO YEARS, **RUBEN STUDDARD** RETURNS WITH A NEW ALBUM, A NEW DIET (HE'S A VEGETARIAN!) AND A NEW HANDLE ON LIFE

Listen up, ladies: If the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, women can woo Ruben Studdard by whipping up some . . . tofu. "I'm a vegetarian now!" says the singer, who stopped eating meat about four months ago. "It was like learning a new music genre for me," says Studdard, who now orders greens and sweet potatoes instead of filet mignon. "Like, I'm trying to fall in love with country when I'm more of an R&B kind of guy."

Don't worry—Studdard's taste in music hasn't changed. This month the Birmingham, Ala.-bred singer serves up a healthy helping of soul on his new disc *The Return*. And while Studdard still has the same "Velvet Teddy Bear" smile and smoky tenor that seduced 24 million viewers into elect-

ing him *American Idol* champ over Clay Aiken in '03, this CD reveals "a more mature Ruben," says Studdard, 28, who expanded his empire to include his own production company and modeling agency. "You're going to see a sexier Ruben. He's definitely more adventurous," says Clive Davis, chairman, BMG U.S. "One thing we used to hate on the show was that they used to call us the kids," says Studdard. "Now, I'm really grown up."

Still he struggles with a problem he's had since childhood: his weight. After packing on some 100 lbs. post-*Idol*, Studdard topped out at 455 lbs. Emotionally, "I've never had an issue with my weight," he says. "My family has a history of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart-related issues—

STUDDARD: MICHAEL O'NEILL; RUBEN: MARIO YUILLANA; STYLING: FRANCESCA LARACINO; HAIR: DAVID

UPS AND DOWNS: RUBEN'S STRUGGLE WITH HIS WEIGHT



MARCH 2003
about **350 lbs.**

"He's always embraced being a big person," says Ruben's brother Kevin of the singer (on *American Idol*). "He feels attractive."



NOVEMBER 2004
449 lbs.

"I would eat what I wanted back then," says Studdard (on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* shortly after ending his first diet, sponsored by *Extra*, after two weeks).



SEPTEMBER 2006
385 lbs.

"I never thought I'd be a vegetarian," says Ruben (in NYC), who tries to lose 1 lb. a day. "Now I'm a whole new person." Adds Kevin: "He's gone from Velvet Teddy Bear to Veggie Boy; that's what I call him."

things I didn't have to deal with yet because I'm young. But I don't want to be worried at 40, and if I don't fix things now, I will be."

Two years ago he went on his first weight-loss plan, partnering with the TV show *Extra* and celeb trainer Gunnar Peterson for a regimen of daily workouts on a roughly 1,200-calorie diet. "I'm a big man. There was no way to do those workouts on that amount of food, so everything was contradicting itself," Studdard says. "I was losing weight, but I was exhausted. It was making me sick." Says Peterson, who only oversaw his training: "I told Ruben I would never have done a diet like that, because his body was in shock." So two weeks in, Studdard dropped out only 12 lbs. lighter, telling *PEOPLE* at the time, "I'm happy with who I am."

That sentiment soured a few months later when Studdard was hospitalized with pneumonia while promoting his gospel album *I Need an Angel*, the follow-up to his debut, *Soulful*. "That downed my spirits," he says. "I wasn't even hospitalized for issues pertaining to my size, but I realized I had to start taking a lot better care of myself."

Step No. 1: Ditch the southern comfort food that fueled his years as a college football player and load up on stir-fried veggies and soy milk. "The people at the vegetarian store in Birmingham are like, 'What's *he* doing in here?'" he jokes. In June, he entered Duke University's Diet & Fitness Center and shaved off 40 lbs. during a monthlong program.

"Every week we would start by writing out a meal plan and calories," says Studdard, who stuck to three meals and several snacks and two to three daily workouts, from water aerobics to hiking, a day. "When I was leaving, they gave me this 40-lb. thing on my back. I was like, 'Hell no!' I can't believe I was walking around with this extra 40 lbs."

Thanks to daily mile-long jogs, Studdard has dropped an additional 25 lbs. to 385, which explains why the crooner constantly has to pull up the jeans that now hang off his 6'3" frame. His ultimate goal? To trim down to about 250 lbs. and "find my inner LL Cool J" by building muscle like the chiseled rapper. There's just one thing that could come between Studdard and killer abs: "Beer is my downfall. I don't think I will be able to give it up."

So other than an affinity for light beer and tofu, what other qualities is Studdard looking for in the future Mrs. Teddy Bear? "Someone who's mellow and can just kick it. Not someone who's on my case nagging all the time," he says. Not that he has too much room in his life for another person. "I have so many clothes now. The closets are filled! I need more space," says Studdard of his 2,500-sq.-ft. condo outfitted with a pool table, screening room and a sweeping view of Birmingham. "It's a player pad. And I'm living real bachelorific."

By **Sona Charaipotra** in New York City