



**BOSTON PHOENIX – JULY 14, 2004**

**Gary U.S. Bonds – “Back In 20” – M.C. Records**

There's not much difference between timeless R&B and old-fashioned rock and roll, as Gary U.S. Bonds proves on his first release in decades. True to its title, the disc is his first since his Springsteen-associated '80s comeback (which in turn came two decades after his initial success with "Quarter to Three"). And to judge from the sound of the first track, not much has changed since then: "Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks" is a vintage Jersey-style rocker that features both the Boss and Southside Johnny on vocals. With its winking references to advancing age, it's exactly the sort of thing that Springsteen would write in a lighter moment - but it's Bonds who does most of the songwriting this time. He also produces, serving his voice up straight instead of using the trademark walls of echo. And though the songs skew toward blues, the good-time feel of his early singles is intact.

All the guest appearances are on the first half of the disc, which sounds like a long encore on the Boardwalk: along with two more Southside Johnny duets, there's some proudly excessive slide guitar by Dickey Betts on "She Just Wants To Dance" and a Phoebe Snow duet, "Bitch/Dumb Ass," that sounds like one of those under-the-counter "dirty blues" records from the '60s and is more fun than anything in Snow's catalogue. The guest-free second half allows Bonds to stretch out with a credible cover of Otis Redding's "Dreams To Remember" and some testifying on a couple of funky struts. He remains a master of the soulful party record.

BY BRETT MILANO