

## Back In 20: A Conversation with Gary U.S. Bonds

When it came time to choose the track listing for Gary U.S. Bonds' first album in 20 years, the slyly dubbed *Back In 20*, there was no song more appropriate for the leadoff spot than "Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks." Not only does it feature old friend and superstar Bruce Springsteen on backing vocals and guitar, but, with a cackle, Bonds says the track expresses a lesson he feels like he learned while making the album.

*Back In 20* was initially begun as a blues record, the veteran party rocker says. "But for some reason or another, every time I got bluesy I would end up rockin' it out a little bit, saying to myself, 'What am I doing here?' Every time we would record stuff, it would come out more rock than blues." So what *Back In 20* became instead was a collection of more of Bonds' trademark party music tunes delivered with a blues bent.

As a result, the disc carries a true roadhouse blues-rock vibe, a sound with which the singer is more than pleased. "To me, it sounds like 1955, before I had a record deal. It reminds me of being a teenager and running around with a bunch of crazy people that didn't care and just wanted to have a beer and put 5 or 10 dollars in their pocket and call themselves musicians and singers."

Having spent more than 40 years in the music business, scoring his first hit in 1960 with "New Orleans," Bonds has a number of famous friends. And a few lend a hand on his return, which is a mix of cover songs and originals mostly written by Bonds and his daughter, Laurie "Lil' Mama" Anderson. In addition to Springsteen, fellow Asbury Park hero Southside Johnny adds vocals to the blues classic "Fannie Mae" and blows harp on a trio of songs, including "Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks." Ex-Allman Brothers Band guitarist Dickey Betts guests on "Take Me Back" and "Bitch/ Dumbass," on which Bonds duets with Phoebe Snow.

While Betts and Bonds are relatively new friends who bonded over their loves for music and golf--Betts agreed to be on *Back In 20* only after Bonds promised to visit him at home in Florida for a round of golf--Bonds has been aching to record with Snow since they met some 15 years ago. "We never had a chance to do anything. Her music was different from what I was doing. So we never got together. I wrote this song, and my daughter was singing it with me; she was gonna do it on the record. And she said, 'Ya know, daddy, Phoebe would be great on this thing.' I gave her a call and she said, 'Of course I'll do it.' She never even asked to see lyrics or anything."

Bonds pays tribute to another old friend with a cover of the Otis Redding classic "Dreams to Remember." After first seeing the soul icon at a juke joint in Macon, Ga., in the early '60s, the two quickly became friends. "Otis was very special to me," Bonds says. "He was a very, very dear friend of mine. And I always loved the way he sang. His interpretation of ballads - of any song - was really, really cool. He had that old down-home, homeboy feel about him, that you don't normally get anymore. And he was just such a nice sweet man, a lot of fun to be around. I still like him. He's no longer with us, but I still feel him and love his songs."

Both Redding and Bonds, who also covers the Keb' Mo' track "She Just Wants to Dance" on *Back In 20*, saw their careers take flight in the 1960s. Born Gary Anderson in Jacksonville, Fla., and raised in Norfolk, Va., Bonds' "New Orleans" went to radio in 1960 in sleeves inscribed "Buy U.S. Bonds." After the song became a smash, there was no going back. The then-recently renamed Anderson was Bonds for good.

The follow-up to "New Orleans" was the legendary party record "Quarter to Three." During a tour of Europe in the 1960s, he was one of the headliners on a bill that featured a back-up band whose members would later go on to become the Beatles. Over 40 years later, John Lennon's portable jukebox was uncovered containing both "New Orleans" and "Quarter to Three" among a collection of recordings said to have been a part of Lennon's early songwriting inspirations. The jukebox has become part of the permanent collection at the John Lennon museum in Liverpool.

Coming along at a time when pop was at a lull, "New Orleans" and "Quarter to Three" energized the music with a jolt it needed and Bonds' party sound would prove revolutionary for music fans like Springsteen, for whom it would serve as a bridge between early rock'n'roll and the British Invasion. Thanks in part to the momentum generated by those two tracks, Bonds would go on to collect a slew of top 40 hits, including, "School Is Out," "School Is In" and "Dear Lady Twist."

Over the years, his exuberant, spirited early rock and roll style helped him transcend changes in pop music. In 1980, a chance meeting with Springsteen and E Street Band guitarist Little Steven Van Zandt led to Bonds' first return to the record bins after a long lapse. In 1981, the duo helped reintroduce the singer to the mainstream with *Dedication*, which found Bonds dueting with Springsteen (the Boss wrote three cuts on the album, Van Zandt penned one), and covering songs by Dylan and Jackson Browne. The E Street Band backed him on the disc (along with Gary's regular band on two tracks), and they would return, as would Springsteen as guitarist, vocalist, producer and songwriter on Bonds' follow-up, 1982's *On the Line*.

Although Bonds hasn't issued a studio album in two decades, it's not as though he's been inactive. As a writer, he hasn't paused, writing continuously and even scoring a Country Music Association song award nomination. Until just about a few years ago, he was playing more than 200 shows a years (which yielded a string of live sets). These days he and his Roadhouse Rockers, who back him on the new album, play about 100 nights per year. What's more, Bonds has been recording for years in his Long Island, N.Y., home studio. He and the Roadhouse Rockers cut most of *Back In 20* there, heading out to the Boss' Jersey studio for Springsteen's tracks. "It's always weird to watch him," Bonds says of Springsteen. "Because it's so effortless. He just goes in there and has a good time with it and before you know it, he's out and it didn't take long at all."

It was at a Jimmy Smith show at the renowned New York City jazz club The Blue Note that the seed for *Back In 20* was planted. While there to see a friend back Smith on drums, a club staffer mentioned to Bonds that he had a great blues record in him. "I said,

‘Well I never really thought about doing blues, because I leave that up to B.B. King and those guys, they know how to do that.’ And I don’t want to come out there and fake it.” He gave it a shot anyway, struggling a little as the tempo was getting faster and he began rocking out on the tunes.

After he stumbled upon an album by Delbert McClinton, instantly falling in love with McClinton’s sound, Bonds and the Roadhouse Rockers found their direction for *Back In 20*, and happily began blending party rock with blues. “When I started listening to Delbert and guys like that, I said, ‘I can live with that, because that’s kind of rock and roll and blues,’” Bonds says. (Bonds covers “Every Time I Roll the Dice,” a song previously recorded by McClinton on *Back In 20*. A high point of McClinton’s set at this year’s South by Southwest music festival came when he brought Bonds onstage to perform the song with him.)

“We just started writing things like that and it just happened,” recalls Bonds. “It turned out to be a really fun project. The songs that we were doing were kind of like the songs that I used to do before I got a record deal, the songs I used to sing at chicken joints down in Virginia.”

Helping getting the disc off the ground was Lil’ Mama, with whom Bonds has been writing for some 20 years. Both his daughter and wife share the name Laurie Anderson (hence the necessity of “Lil’ Mama”). With his wife having scored her share of hits (including “United”) with the Love Notes, Bonds says of Lil’ Mama, “I guess it just rubs off.” Both his daughter and wife sing background in the Roadhouse Rockers.

Frothing over with energy and spirit, *Back In 20* finds Bonds’ voice at tip-top shape. While the vocal strength of countless peers has eroded over time, Bonds’ pipes are as muscular as ever. “I still figure I got another 30-40 years before it starts fading out,” he says with a laugh.

With another laugh, he adds, “It’s good to know that people are still concerned and excited about something that I do. It still amazes me that people like what I do. I *love* what I do, but I didn’t think that people would like it that much. And they still do. It’s been over 40 years now, so either I’m doing something right or people are crazy as hell.”

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