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'Back in 20' and roaring

After two decades, R&B singer is releasing a new album with help from some friends

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The music industry is full of impatient hares. Gary U.S. Bonds is an archetypal tortoise.

In the early '60s, the Jacksonville, Fla.-born, Norfolk, Va.-raised R&B singer had a string of hits. Most notable were the rowdy party songs "Quarter to Three" and "New Orleans" -- later covered by Bruce Springsteen and Joan Jett, respectively.

Bonds' next burst of mainstream success came almost 20 years later. In 1981, he released "Dedication," featuring contributions from Springsteen and members of his E Street Band. The Springsteen-written single "This Little Girl" became a Top 20 hit, and the album reached the Top 30.

Follow-up albums "On the Line" (1982) and "Standing in the Line of Fire" (1984) failed to have much impact. Bonds had to wait another two decades to release another studio album, the cleverly titled "Back in 20" due out Tuesday on the blues-oriented Huntington Station, N.Y.-based label, M.C. Records.

Bonds, 64, will play songs from this album, as well as old hits, at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park on Sunday and at the B.B. King Blues Club & Grill in New York on June 17-18.

Even when his recording career has faltered, Bonds has never stopped touring and, he said, has never thought about quitting.

"This is all I know," he said from Long Island, where he has lived for the last 30 years. "You don't want to see me driving a truck -- get out of the way! There were some pretty rough times, in certain periods, but you overcome that. It's the record business. There's always going to be that."

Most of "Back in 20" is high-spirited blues-rock, though the album peaks with an intense, slow-building cover of the Otis Redding ballad, "I've Got Dreams to Remember." Springsteen sings with Bonds on "Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks," a Bonds song with a groove reminiscent of Springsteen's "Darlington County."

Bonds and Springsteen became friends in the late 1970s and have made occasional appearances at each other's shows ever since. In October at Shea Stadium they sang "Quarter to Three" and "Twist and Shout" together at the closing show of Springsteen's 2002-2003 tour.

Bonds said he wrote "Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks" 27 years ago and has recorded it a couple of times, but he has never released it. He cut a version of it 15 years ago, but the tape was destroyed in a studio fire.

Having decided to resurrect the song for "Back in 20," Springsteen heard Bonds rehearsing it before a benefit concert last year at the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank at which both singers performed.

"Bruce happened to come by, and he said, 'Man, that sounds like a good song,'" Bonds said. He recalls replying with, "Okay, I'll be calling you on that soon!"

Bonds called on other friends as well -- Southside Johnny (who sings and plays bluesy harmonica licks on three numbers), Phoebe Snow (who joins Bonds for a battle-of-the-sexes duet, "B----/Dumb A--") and original Allman Brothers Band member Dickey Betts.

Bonds has known Southside Johnny and Snow for a long time, but Betts -- who contributes stinging guitar licks to two tracks -- is a more recent friend.

"We met just a few years ago on a golf tournament," Bonds said. "We got together and just became buddies and started talking about things. I thought he would be a good fit on a couple of things I was doing, and he agreed to do it."

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