



MUSIC

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AFTER 31 YEARS ON LONG ISLAND, SOUL LEGEND GARY "U.S." BONDS HAS HAD ENOUGH

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The term "the other side of the tracks" doesn't truly resonate until you pass through the mini industrial park and slightly run-down part of Wheatley Heights that magically disappears once you cross the tracks into Gary "U.S." Bonds' neighborhood. The same guy who served as a bridge between the early days of rock 'n' roll and the British Invasion with his hits "Quarter to Three" and "New Orleans" lives in a postcard-perfect vision of leafy suburbia, on a block of high and low ranch houses with perfectly trimmed lawns. For 31 years, Bonds has made Long Island his base of operations. But that will soon change because of the Island's infamous traffic.

"It took me two hours and 15 minutes to get to LaGuardia the other day," gripes the Florida native. "That's just stupid. Time to [move] somewhere near an airport."

Converted from his home's garage, Bonds' office contains plenty of memorabilia from a career stretching back to the late '50s. A picture of the singer performing on American Bandstand hangs next to a framed 45 of "Quarter to Three" complete with the jacket. Shots of him posing with Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi, civil rights leader/politician Andrew Young and Muhammad Ali also compete for space on the wall along with a few gold records. Of particular note is a 1972 certificate of merit from the Country Music Association for his writing the Johnny Paycheck hit "(Don't Take Her) She's All I Got." Bonds himself has an easygoing smile, and with his curly, jet-black hair, lean build, dimpled chin and smooth skin, it's hard to believe that this Southern transplant is 65 years old.

Bonds has invited me into to his modest yet lovely home to chat about Back in 20, his first record since making an early-'80s comeback under the auspices of Springsteen. Just back from Collin Raye's Lake of the Ozarks charity golf tournament, the acclaimed duffer is rightfully proud of his latest recording.

"The only reason I got into this album was my daughter," he says. "She's into music, so we bought a bunch of equipment and set up a studio downstairs. Got the band to come out from New Jersey and got a bunch of friends to help me out." It's a matter-of-fact statement until you realize these friends include Springsteen, Southside Johnny, Dickey Betts and Phoebe Snow. The result is an exuberant collection of roadhouse blues-rock with a soulful edge that ranges from raucous originals like "Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks" and sassy Snow duet "Bitch/Dumb Ass" to a heartfelt cover of old friend Otis Redding's "I've Got Dreams to Remember."

Friends with Redding before hit it big, Bonds always wanted to honor his late running buddy. Getting a faraway look in his eyes, Bonds recalls the Big O as being "just a sweet, young man. I really miss him. He was a really cool guy and I always wanted to do one of his songs. I tried to find one that was good and ['Dreams'] was it." Interrupting this somber moment is a kooky message left by R&B vocalist Chuck Jackson and it isn't long before Bonds is sharing anecdotes about Chuck Berry, meeting Springsteen and exchanging the dream of being a golf pro with singing rock 'n' roll.

Currently setting up dates to promote his album with the help of his Roadhouse Rockers (who include his background-singing daughter and wife, both named Laurie), Bonds is also in the midst of moving from Long Island. Smiling broadly, Bonds laughingly explains, "I remember when I first moved out here. I thought it was the greatest place in the world. I still have a lot of feelings for it. The only things I hate about it is it's too damn cold and there's too many people."