



CD Review:

Gary U.S. Bonds

Back In 20 (M.C. Records)

With a little help from his friends, Bonds returns

Review by Michael J. Ryan Friday, May 28, 2004

Gary U.S. Bonds has been producing good music for 45 years. The soul singer's new CD, "Back In 20," his first album in two decades, is a worthy addition to his excellent legacy.

And like his last release, he gets some assistance from his famous friends -- Bruce Springsteen, Southside Johnny, Dickey Betts and Phoebe Snow lend their talents to several tracks.

In addition to the guest stars, Bonds is aided by his regular touring band, The Roadhouse Rockers: Mark Leimbach (guitar); Lance Hyland Stark (drums); Jim Wacker (keyboards); Joey Stann and Dan Cipriano (saxophones); and Zerrick Foster (bass).

Bonds isn't merely shaking off the rust here; he's showing the world the true power of rock 'n roll is spawned by energy and rooted in honesty.

And that's exactly what listeners get on this disc.

The flavor of "Back In 20" includes pop and rock, in a sleek mix of covers and originals; however, these tunes are firmly anchored in the blues. As a result, the 12 songs crackle with punch and promise.

Springsteen's guitar and backing vocals provide spark to the disc's best tune, "Can't Teach An Old Dog New Tricks." The track sounds like an outtake from Springsteen's "The River." Southside chips in with excellent harp work on "Fannie Mae" and "Take Me Back." Additionally, Keb Mo's "She Just Wants To Dance" boasts a scintillating guitar workout from Betts. "Too Much, Too Little, Too Late," a Bonds original, is also superb, as is the "Bitch/Dumb Ass" duet with Snow.

The production on "Back In 20" is polished, delicate and clean. Bonds' songwriting is poised and his buddies enhance the tracks without dominating them.

Does Bonds take any real risks here? Not really. But he's also not trying to re-invent "New Orleans," "Quarter To Three" or "Dear Lady Twist." This is the work of a mature singer who knows exactly where he wants to take this material; it plays to his strengths, limits his weaknesses and highlights his royal vocal elucubrations. He appears almost effortless as he howls with Springsteen, duets with Snow or goes solo on an Otis Redding cover ("I've Got Dreams To Remember").

Here's hoping some radio stations (Haverhill's WXRV, Boston's WZLX) give Bonds the chance to show that -- though his new record took two decades to make -- he hasn't lost a step.

"Back In 20" will be released on Tuesday.