

IN THE STUDIO



Elton John Rediscovered His Inspiration: Leon Russell

On brilliant, soulful new disc, John duets with his early-Seventies hero

WHEN ELTON JOHN PLAYED HIS first U.S. shows, in August 1970 at the Troubadour in Los Angeles, he spotted a celebrity in the audience one night: Leon Russell. “You can’t miss that hair and those glasses,” John recalls now. “I absolutely panicked, because he was one of my idols.”

Three months later, John opened for Russell at New York’s Fillmore East. Russell was riding high as a songwriter (“Delta Lady,” “A Song for You”) and a solo artist; his 1970 debut album, *Leon Russell*, was loaded with guest superstars such as Steve Winwood, George Harrison and Eric Clapton. Russell had also been the ringmaster of Joe Cocker’s 1970 live revue *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*. But Russell clearly remembers his reaction as he watched John’s performances. “He was so dynamic,” Russell reflects in his gritty Oklahoma drawl. “I thought my career was over.”

That was the last time the two singer-pianists worked together – until 2009, when John, a global superstar, phoned Russell at home in Nashville and asked, “Would you like to make a record with me?” John, 63, says he called Russell, 68, who hadn’t made a major-label studio record in nearly two decades, for a simple reason:

“His music takes me back to a wonderful time in my life, of music and experimenting, people sharing what we had. It pisses me off that he was forgotten about.”

Produced by T Bone Burnett, *The Union* features songs written, in some combination, by John, Russell and John’s lifelong lyricist, Bernie Taupin. The R&B big-band roll of “If It Wasn’t for Bad,” the country ballad “Gone to Shiloh”

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were cut live in the studio with John and Russell on dueling pianos and a band that includes legendary R&B organist Booker T. Jones, steel guitarist Robert Randolph, a 10-piece gospel chorale and, on guest vocals, Neil Young and Brian Wilson.

The sessions in Los Angeles early this year were especially remarkable because Russell was recovering from brain surgery. “I was an hour late the first day, just getting out of bed,” Russell says, cackling. “By then, Elton had already written five songs.”

[Cont. on 40]

STUDIO NOTES

Brandon Flowers Goes Solo

Album *Flamingo*
Due Out September

Earlier this year, the **Killers** decided to take some time off – but not **Brandon Flowers**. “I don’t blame them for taking a break,” says the singer, 29. “But I’m always writing, and I wanted to chase these songs. I also have a fear that if I stop for a year, it might mess me up.” Working mostly with Madonna producer **Stuart Price** and **Daniel Lanois** in tandem (**Brendan O’Brien** also produced a few cuts), Flowers has made a solo set that walks a line between the Killers’ New Wave rock and a more rootsy sound. Named after *Flamingo Road*, an off-Strip Vegas street that Flowers calls his “Penny Lane,” the LP features tunes about his spiritual beliefs (“Playing With Fire”), regret (“Hard Enough,” with **Jenny Lewis**) and the seedy side of his hometown (“Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas”). He’ll support the disc with a tour in the fall and reconnect with the Killers in early 2011. “I seem to be at the age where you peak, and it freaks me out,” he says. “I don’t want to miss my chance.”

AUSTIN SCAGGS



IN BRIEF

■ **Robert Plant**’s next album, *Band of Joy*, is due September 14th and features covers of songs by indie trio Low, Los Lobos’ “Angel Dance” and traditional Appalachian folk songs. The LP was co-produced by Plant and country musician **Buddy Miller**. Said Plant, “He’s integral. You can hear his taste all over the instrumentation – mid-Fifties rockabilly, great country stuff and Memphis soul.”

Interpol

Album Interpol
Due Out September 14th

Interpol had big plans for the summer: They were going to open for U2 at stadiums across the country and were set to release their fourth record. But then Bono injured his back, canceling the tour, and the band's bassist, Carlos D, quit the group. "He has other ventures he wants to pursue," says singer Paul Banks, sitting at a console at New York's Electric Lady Studios. Says guitarist Daniel Kessler, "You can just check his website." (Slint's Dave Pajo will play bass and Secret Machine's Brandon Curtis will play keys on Interpol's rescheduled tour.)

After a stint on Capitol, which released Interpol's third album, the sharply dressed group returned to indie label Matador - a journey chronicled on the opening track, "Success." "It's about the foibles of fame and narcissism," says Banks. The new disc expands on the moody post-punk Cure sound Interpol mined on their earlier records, with more-commanding vocals from Banks. "It feels like Paul is owning the moment, in every which way, on every single song," says drummer Sam Fogarino. On the lead single, "Barricade," heavy, reverb-haunted guitar riffs meet driving drums. The poppy "Lights" leads into a final three-song suite, united by the sound of static that runs throughout. And as on Interpol's previous records, the mood stays dark. "I rely on certain themes because those are things I obsess over," says Banks. "Those being sex and alienation and fear." **GUS WENNER**



AND THEN THERE WERE THREE...
Fogarino, Kessler and Banks (from left) at Electric Lady.

JOHN AND RUSSELL

[Cont. from 38] "Leon had the surgery three weeks before we went into the studio - he was probably still under anesthetics," Burnett points out. "But you could see the music starting to wire him back up. By the second week, he was killin' it on the piano."

"The more we did, the more he came to life," John says. "Leon knows he's made a damn good record and is still worth a lot as a creative artist."

Russell sums up his talent this way: "I'm a collage artist - a little bit of this, a little bit of that," he says, laughing. As a teenager, playing in clubs in Oklahoma, he devoured inspiration from R&B and gospel radio; he recalls see-

Track by Track: Elton and Leon

"A Dream Come True"

JOHN: We had just convened in the studio. T Bone put up a YouTube clip of Mahalia Jackson, and it inspired us. I went to the piano and started writing. Leon came and played it with me - two pianos, two voices. It broke the ice.

ing a live extravaganza topped by Lloyd Price, in which stars like Clyde McPhatter and Bo Diddley "would do two songs, leave, then someone else would come out. That's what Mad Dogs and Englishmen was about."

"I Should Have Sent Roses"

RUSSELL: Bernie had this set of lyrics. I set them on the piano and just sang. Unbeknownst to me, T Bone recorded it on his phone. I told Bernie he was my new favorite lyric writer. He said, "Who was the first?" I said, "Jimmy Reed."

Russell was hip to John before that Troubadour debut; Russell tried to sign him to his Shelter label. "I've always been interested in soul singers - white soul singers in particular," Russell says. But he is modest about his influence on John.

"Monkey Suit"

JOHN: No one uses two pianos on a record anymore, since Phil Spector, probably. The original track of this is just Leon and me playing pianos, perfectly in time. We recorded the band on top of that, because we couldn't make it any better.

"He says, 'I got this and that from you' - I don't hear it," Russell insists. "It's his own thing." John isn't buying that. "He calls me the gov'nor," John says, "and I call him the master. Because that's what he is." **DAVID FRICKE**

"The Hands of Angels"

RUSSELL: I wrote it for Elton. I wanted to give him something for doing this for me: "What can I give this guy? He has 10 of everything." I went in and sang it, two keys too high. Then I did it again, lower. That's the take on the album.