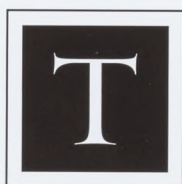




AWARD FOR RECORDING EXCELLENCE

# LEON RUSSELL

[ BY DAVID FRICKE ]



HE NAMES and stories come in steady, unhurried succession through a deep, gritty drawl, like a lazy river rolling over a bed of rattling stones—during lunch, between takes at a recording session, and back in his Nashville living room as Leon Russell sits in a padded-leather lounge chair, idly stroking his snow-white beard as he talks. “I don’t think of my story or history,” the singer-pianist-song-writer-producer, now 68, claims at one point. “It reminds me of my mortality, and I don’t like to think about that.” He adds a rumbling laugh for emphasis—then keeps going.

“I was playing bass for Bob on that record about the boxer,” Russell recalls while driving to a friend’s studio, referring to Bob Dylan’s 1975 single “Hurricane.” “We did a take—just running it down, I thought. I said, ‘Are we going to do the real thing now?’ Bob said, ‘Why? We’re just going to make the same mistakes.’”

There was the studio date playing keyboards for George Harrison that nearly drove Russell crazy. “George loves takes,”

he explains, grinning. “This song was up to Take 160. I said, ‘George, do you want me to play the same thing or do 160 different things?’” Then he jumps to a memory of Brian Wilson at one of Russell’s mid-sixties sessions for the Beach Boys:

“He walked into a studio with twenty musicians and went all the way around the room, singing each guy his part. By the time he got back to the first guy, that musician had forgotten what he was supposed to play. Brian had to sing the parts again, all the way around the room.”

Russell grins, then describes the way he likes to lead a band. “I’m very big on not letting the morale go down. I’m not

into making people do a hundred takes of bullshit. In my opinion, there has to be a good reason for another take.”

Russell has been everywhere in the music business, usually in legendary company, for more than half a century—touring, writing, and arranging hit songs and making classic records for himself and others with a singular exuberant fusion of downhome country, big-band soul, and gospel rapture. It’s been a remarkable zigzag: doing those sessions for Dylan, Wilson, and Harrison, as well as studio

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work for Frank Sinatra, Ricky Nelson, Phil Spector, and the Rolling Stones. Born Claude Russell Bridges in Lawton, Oklahoma, on April 2, 1942, he made his bones playing Tulsa clubs, often with his friend, guitarist JJ Cale. Russell was still in his teens when he hit the road with Jerry Lee Lewis.

By the early sixties, Russell was part of the famed Wrecking Crew, the first-call posse that ruled the studio scene in Los Angeles, appearing on records by, among many others, the Byrds, the Monkees, Jackie DeShannon, and Gary Lewis and the Playboys. Russell was also a house musician in the 1964 pop-revue film *The T.A.M.I. Show* and on the TV show *Shindig!* "He had the gospel feel and blues thing, a different touch on the piano," says guitarist James Burton, a longtime friend and Russell's daily session buddy at the time. "Leon also had great ideas for arranging songs. He could hear a lot of things that other players didn't."



"I was a jobber," Russell contends now, "like an air-conditioning installer. You need air conditioning? You call this guy. People called me to do what I did." Russell notes that when he wrote the brass arrangement for the Stones' "Live With Me," on 1969's *Let It Bleed*, Mick Jagger said the horns reminded him of "Harlem Shuffle," the 1963 single by Bob and Earl. Russell's reply: "I thought that's what you guys did."

At the turn of the seventies, Russell was that rare contradiction: a superstar side-

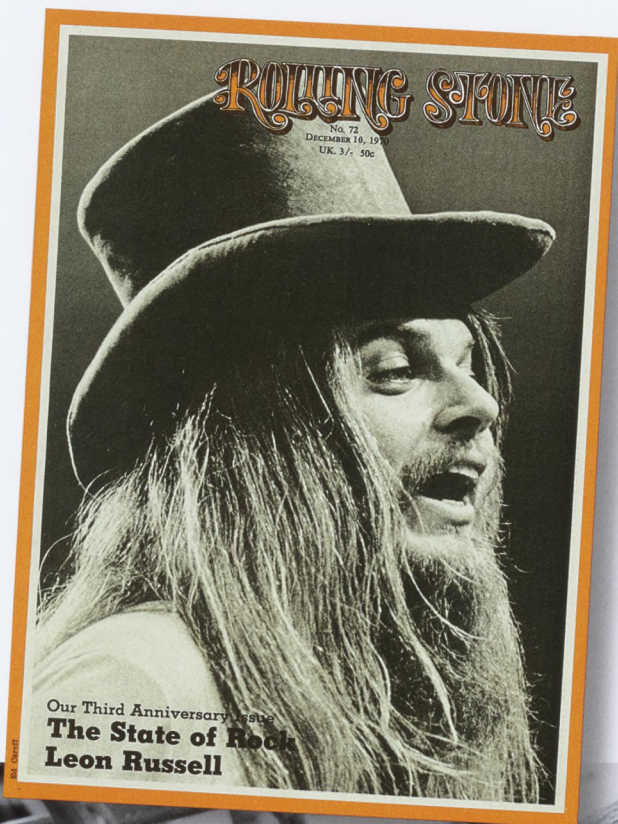
**THIS PAGE** *In the studio, 1964; with Mad Dogs and an Englishman—Joe Cocker (far left), Rita Coolidge (fourth from left), and others, Detroit, 1970.*

**OPPOSITE PAGE** *At home in Oklahoma, late seventies.*

man, making every singer and player around him sound sharp and funky. He toured and recorded with Delaney and Bonnie; co-produced Joe Cocker's second album; appeared on Eric Clapton's debut solo album; and, most notably, led the massive R&B orchestra on Cocker's historic 1970 *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* tour. Russell's ubiquity and iconic look—a long mane of prematurely gray hair, matching beard, and a ringmaster's top hat—earned him the title "Master of Space and Time" on the gatefold sleeve of the live *Mad Dogs* album.

"He was so musical," says Rita Coolidge, who sang for Russell on many sessions, was in the *Mad Dogs* choir, and inspired





THAT RARE  
CONTRADICTION:  
A SUPERSTAR  
SIDEMAN





→ 6A

→ 6

KODAK SAFETY FILM



→ 7A



→ 8A



→ 9A



→ 11



→ 12



→ 13A



→ 14



→ 15



→ 16A

→ 9A KODAK SAFETY FILM → 10A

KODAK TRI X PAN FILM → 12A

KODAK SAFETY FILM

KODAK TRI X PAN FILM



→ 25A



→ 26



→ 27



→ 28A



→ 29



→ 30A

→ 30

→ 29A

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→ 27

→ 26A

→ 26

→ 25A

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→ 24



Russell's song "Delta Lady." "He heard everything in his head, even before he started directing or writing parts. He already knew what he wanted to hear."

Russell soon had his own label, Shelter, co-founded with British entrepreneur Denny Cordell, and was issuing his own critically acclaimed and commercially successful albums: 1970's superstar-packed *Leon Russell*; the Top Twenty followup, 1971's *Leon Russell and the Shelter People*; and 1972's *Carney*, which went to Number Two with help from Russell's biggest hit single, "Tight Rope." Russell's songs were also becoming standards for others: B.B. King recorded "Hummingbird"; Ray Charles cut a masterful version of the ballad "A Song for You"; and jazz guitarist George Benson became a mainstream star in 1976 crooning "This Masquerade."

Russell had his own plaintive way with romance and disappointment, sung with growling vulnerable affection. "There was nothing like Leon's voice—it was so beautiful and raw," says Elton John, an ardent Russell fan who finally realized a lifelong dream when he wrote, sang, and played piano with his idol on last year's hit collaboration, *The Union*. "Dr. John had those qualities, too," John adds, "but Leon was out there. He was like Nina Simone on helium."

Russell is more modest about his singing. He recalls the first time he heard his voice on tape, when he sang on the radio as a kid in Tulsa: "I used to do a duet in grade school with a guy who's now a banker. I'd play ukulele, he'd sing, and I'd do some kind of alto part. We listened to the playback. I heard him, then I said, 'Who's that other guy? He's awful.'" Russell laughs. But he tells another story with quiet, unmistakable pride: "I had a limousine driver one time. He said he was driving Aretha Franklin some place, and he just happened to play my tape. When it came to 'A Song for You,' he said, 'She made me play it twenty times. I sat there, in front of the place she was going, and she listened to it over and over.'"

The seventies were a manic decade for Russell. He played at George Harrison's 1971 Concert for Bangladesh in New York; made the 1973 stone-country album, *Hank Wilson's Back*, a Top Thirty hit, and a funk record, 1974's *Stop All That Jazz*, with the Gap Band; started another label, Paradise; and released a Top Thirty album with Willie Nelson, 1979's *One for the Road*. The eighties were



rougher: Russell retreated from the glare, partly by design. He was exhausted by the road—"I had huge stage fright," he claims—and his studio workload. The stars stopped calling, too, and Russell went from headlining arenas to touring clubs and bars. When Elton John called him in 2009, insisting they make a record together, Russell had been without a major-label deal for nearly two decades.

"I knew that about show business," Russell says now. "I was surprised by the success that I had. I was not surprised when it went away." He was, it appears, always a reluctant star. That outfit he wore on the Cocker tour—the top hat and basketball jersey that said HOLY TRINITY on the front—came from a used-clothing shop down the street from his home and studio on Skyhill Drive in L.A. "I'm an actor," Russell insists. "I was just trying to make a show." There is an earlier, telling clip, on YouTube, of Russell performing "Hi-Heel Sneakers" on *Shindig!* in 1964. Fresh-faced and shaven, with a pompadour, he plays piano at center stage, singing and hammering at the ivories—and never looking directly at the camera. "Being seen—that's part of this business," says Coolidge. "It comes with being a successful writer and recording artist. People want to see you. Leon is not comfortable with being seen."

The wiry circus-boss look Russell had when he appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in 1970 has given way to a portly figure who walks with a cane. In January 2010, Russell underwent brain surgery for a cerebral-fluid leak. But he remains at heart, in purpose, a working musician. Russell was in the studio with John three weeks after the operation to begin recording *The Union*.

Russell continues to tour, write songs, and record them. And he is now managed by John Barbis, who also handles Elton John, who promises that Russell is in top form to stay: "He's come back to life. And I don't think he's going to let it go this time." Russell, though, can't help thinking like an old studio hand whenever he gets to work.

"I have two positions," he says. "I'm either running the session or—if they hire me to play piano—I keep my mouth shut." ❁

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Russell strikes a series of poses in 1970 at a photo shoot for his first solo album.

**THIS PAGE** On tour with Elton John, 2010.

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