

Paul Rodgers New Album

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Longtime Bad Company vocalist Paul Rodgers has been called “The Voice” and for good reason – his vocals are so smooth and eternally ageless that it seems like there isn’t a good song he can’t wrap his voice around with ease.

His latest album “The Royal Sessions” is a great example, presenting an album’s worth of soul covers that Rodgers recorded at the legendary Royal Studios in Memphis.

In the liner notes for the album, Rodgers writes, “Artists like Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, Albert King, Ann Peebles, Isaac Hayes, and so many more gave me hope when I was an angst-filled teenager trying to make sense of it all! They were my teachers. Through their music I learned how to live, how to be true to myself, and how to tell my story as a songwriter the way that I was feeling it.”

After decades of telling his own stories in song, Rodgers finally had the opportunity to give back to those who had influenced him so greatly. “The Royal Sessions” collects the results of his Memphis experience and it’s an engaging listen.

We recently had the chance to speak with Rodgers about the new album.

For a guy like you who is a student of music, a project like this is a real joy for you.

Oh absolutely, yes it is. It came a little bit out of the blue, because Perry Margouleff, my producer, co-songwriter and good friend, we were doing something else entirely. We were writing songs for another album, but we often talk about our influences and I’ve often said to him about the Stax influence on my writing and career in general.

Kind of out of the blue, the stars seemed to align themselves, because he called me from the Royal Studios and told me about this place and that it was just the same as it was when they were making all of those great Al Green hits and all of that. He said to me, “Would you like to come down and check it out?” Because it’s just such a cool vibe [there], so I went down there for three days to see how it went and it was just so cool that I decided to go back and make this album.

As you mentioned, you were at work on an album of new original material, how easy was it for you to shift from that process to working on something like this?

Well you know, this is such a joy to do that the opportunity to get on mic with these great musicians – and they are masters of the genre, really – was an opportunity too good to miss for me. We did a lot of preparation work – I got about 20 odd songs together to choose from and then each day I would just sort of go by feel and just call off whichever song I would like to do that day.

The guys were really receptive to everything I wanted to do and they would take a little while to throw the arrangement around between themselves and we’d get the key and then we’d just launch into it and try it. Nine times out of 10, it worked straight away. All of the songs that we tried actually did work, which is something to say, really.

I was going to ask about that, going in with a defined song list of sorts, if there was the freedom and leeway to try some things. Because it seems like you could be knee deep in one song that

could make you think of another.

Well, yeah. There was a great element of spontaneity about the choice of song and there wasn't a great deal of opportunity for anyone to get any preconceived ideas about it. We would just fly with it. Some of the songs, like "We've Got Dreams To Remember," for instance, we just launched into that and let it go wherever. Actually, I think we did that on every song really, to be honest, we kind of just launched into it.

Very often there would be a moment in the song when it was, I thought, reaching its climactic end, but not necessarily. Because all of a sudden, [with] a signal from [organist] Reverend Charles [Hodges], it would go from a real peak down to a whisper. And now it was time to testify. I loved that and I love that there's confidence in me to do that. Then you're going to ad-lib and tell the story of the song and build it back up. We did that on a number of these songs and that was a joy.

Otis Redding gets three slots on this album "a good example of someone that it must have been hard to narrow it down, even to these three tracks. What was it that you loved about Otis and his songs?

Well, you know I love a lot of the music that came out of Stax. I had a band when I was 14 and we would play around in my hometown of Middlesbrough and we'd go to the club afterwards, which was the Purple Onion then. There would be live bands playing and in between that, the DJ would be playing records.

Nine times out of 10, it was Stax [material] and it was [artists like] Otis Redding [and] the Temptations "it was really dance music and rockin' out. I picked up particularly on Otis Redding and I went out on the strength of listening to "Down In The Valley," "Mr. Pitiful" and things like that, I went out and bought his records and was really deeply moved by a lot of the material, like "A Change Is Going To Come," "Cigarettes And Coffee" "there were so many great songs that he did.

A lot of the songs, his performance was the key to the song or the performance between the band themselves "they would communicate so well. I loved what they did and the way they did it. You know, Steve Cropper, Duck Dunn and Al Jackson Jr. on the drums, they had this interplay between them and that's where I really learned my craft. Otis Redding, his voice, there was something spiritual and unworldly and at the same time, very deeply connected with the human connection and the way one feels about life in general, love, life and everything, really.

He could put into his vocals words that weren't even the lyrics, just the oomph and the movement of vocal sounds really, not even lyrics, that would express the emotion he was trying to put across.

I think that's one thing that is great about this kind of music is there is a lot of that kind of stuff going on.

Yeah. It's very primal in some ways. It's very close to the bone and it's very deep in the lower chakra. I do like it.

Some things that are accomplished today with effects and plugins, back then you just had to reach into your soul. There were no effects and plugins, at least not in the way there are today. Oh, I know. Today you can get lost in effects and people do get lost in the technology. I've got nothing against technology except if it is overused and you sort of bury the feel in it.

That's the problem. I think that everything from the very first instruments, which were probably we think, drums and vocals way back in the caveman time [Rodgers chuckles] all of the way until now when you've got super technology, all they are really is vehicles to

express emotion.

If you forget that and lose yourself in the technicality of it then you're not expressing emotion and that's really the point of music. Yeah, back in the '70s when I first started recording, it was relatively primitive, but we did achieve that spirit when it was a question of capturing the spirit of the music and the spirit that happens between a bunch of musicians playing together and speaking to each other with their instruments. That's what we were looking for.

That's a great feeling when you can find it and it seems like you've been lucky to find that a few times throughout your career.

It is so lucky when you find that. You seek it and you search for it, but it's not always going to happen. With this, the stars sort of aligned and came together and it came together so easily and so well that it would be easy to think that it's easy to do. All I can say is that it is when it is. When it does come together like that and everybody's just naturally on the same page without any effort, it's such a beautiful thing. I think we got lucky this time.

A project like this for you, even for somebody like you who has been referred to 'The Voice,' it still seems like it could be intimidating, because you want to get the songs right and you're walking on a sort of hallowed ground when you go down the road with songs like this.

Absolutely. You know, I was intimidated to some extent by the whole idea of it really and it was super challenging. But I stepped into it to see if I could do it because I knew I wanted to. It's not just a matter of 'I'll hear the lyrics, doo dee doo dee doo,' No, no, no, you've got to get inside that song and be there in the moment and tell the story. But you have to be in the story. You have to really get deeply inside of the song.

What was the process of pulling together the players for this album?

Well that was the thing, when Perry mentioned the idea of doing this, I said, 'Well, what musicians would we use?' and Boo Mitchell who runs the studio had said to Perry, 'Don't worry about it, trust me, I know who we can call.' And he was absolutely right. He called the best musicians. These guys, they are session musicians in terms of they do lots of sessions with other people in other situations, but they often work together. So they're almost a band in that sense. They understand each other very well. Reverend Charles Hodges 'and he is a reverend' when he's not playing, he's a preacher. He plays a Hammond B3.

Then you've got his younger brother LeRoy Hodges on bass and we had Archie Turner, we call him 'Hubby,' that's his nickname, on Wurlitzer. You've got two keyboards, you see, and you think 'Wow, how's that going to work?' Well, it worked so well because they coordinated with other so that they were almost one instrument. We had Michael Toles on guitar, who has played with B.B. and Albert King, Rufus and Carla Thomas. He's also played with Isaac Hayes, so his track record is unbelievable. Steve Potts on drums, who is related to Al Jackson Jr. The credentials of these guys is first class. They are like soul royalty. This seems like something you could get lost in doing stuff like this. Is there more stuff you want to do?

I don't know at this point. I know that the stars did align and make this very easy for us. I don't know if we can just say 'Hey, let's get together and do that again.' I'm not really sure. I would certainly be interested in looking at doing another one, I think, but we'll see how we go.

As far as the album of original material that you've been working on, what's the status

of that at this point and how does doing something like this project influence where your head is at now going back to that?

Well, we had to put that a little bit on the backburner, because [we] were wearing too many hats and all of that. But I'm very keen to do this album. We've been sort of doing it over [several] years in between things. So we have a lot of songs and I think it's fair to say that they are in demo form right now. So what we'd have to do is get them all organized and finished up and then go in the studio and actually record them. Probably the way we recorded this. But I can't really say too much about it, because we have to put that on the backburner [for now].

I want to talk about the bonus tracks for a moment and specifically, the one track that you wrote. Well yes, it was Perry's idea that I should revisit one of the first songs, in fact, it's the first song I ever wrote. I recorded it with Free back in the day. It's called "Walk In My Shadow." I was like, "Really? You think that would work?" And he said "Yes, they can do a great job" and they did! So it's a completely different version and it's quite interesting.

I was curious how you ended up going back to that one..

Yeah, I didn't put it on the album, because I thought "Well, really the focus here is Stax music," so it became a bonus track.

Do you have plans to play some of this stuff from the new record live?

Yeah, I'm touring with my band on a U.S. tour from April 28 until June 7 and I will definitely include some of the songs from this album in that tour. I'd also like to do a club in Memphis with the session guys. I'd love to do a show and record that, but we'll see how we go. What else is on deck for you this year?

That's about it. I only play 25 to 30 shows each year and I limit the amount that I play so I can take time to live. So I'll be doing that and supporting this album.