

PAUL RODGERS

Paul Rodgers possesses one of the most influential voices in Rock, famed for his bluesy tone which was essential to the success of bands such as Free and Bad Company. With a string of solo releases to his name, as well as joining up with Queen for an album and two successful world tours, Paul's latest work sees him go back to his roots. His new album 'The Royal Sessions' sees him paying homage to those who helped shape his distinctive sound – Soul music from the timeless Stax Motown era. James Gaden called Paul to hear all about it.

I get the impression that you never intended making this record to start with, you were actually writing for a new, original solo Rock album. How come you made an authentic Soul record instead?

Well I think it's been on the back burner in my life of music for a number of years. How it came about was almost incidental. My friend and producer, Perry Margouleff, who I write songs with, in the conversations we had, he knew Soul had influenced me. He one day called me up and said "Guess where I am!" He was down in Memphis at The Royal Studios. He said "It's fantastic, the music, the atmosphere - I know you love Soul music. Why don't you come down, spend a couple of days, see how you like it?" I decided I would do that, so I cleared a bit of space and had three days in the studio. Perry had done a lot of organisation before then, they had a great session band together - the band that actually appears on the album. They weren't told who I was, they just knew I was a singer-songwriter from the Rock world. They had no preconceived notions at all. I went down and they didn't know anything about me, so I had to prove myself in a way. I put on the headphones and started with 'That's How Strong My Love Is'. From the first few bars, I heard them in my headphones and they heard me, we just looked at each other and thought 'Yeah... this is gonna be good!' I just had a feeling it would work. I spent a very productive three days there. It was a lot of fun and I decided to spend some serious time there to make an album.

You used analogue techniques, recording to tape and using old methods and equipment. Have you always recorded like that or was that more like a throwback to how you first started?

Actually, I'd heard that all the original Stax Soul records were made that way, with Otis Redding and the like. The original Stax studio, which is now a museum, was a converted cinema, and so is the Royal, so there were a lot of similarities. The band played everything pretty much live - but you have to realise what 'live' means. When you play live on stage, there's hissing and crackling, crowd noise, all kinds of stuff going on. You've got to kind of isolate all that when you make an album so you don't have dogs barking or somebody shouting "Oi!" when somebody

plays a solo! (laughs) Recording individually though, you can get too clinical, so one of the things I learned was you play live in the sense you're all playing right now, you can see each other and get a good feel but still in a studio environment. It was my understanding that's how all Soul records were made.

There's a warmth to it as well, even though it's not a vinyl release, doing it analogue it feels more like vinyl which complements the material.

Oh yeah - we will release it on vinyl as well, we're planning a special edition on vinyl. Thanks for noticing that though, that's really important to me. Music should have a warmth to it, it should draw you in. That's what I got from listening to those early records by Otis Redding, Sam And Dave, Albert King... I felt immediately drawn to it, it had a real power and warmth and I love that. That's what we tried to get here. Everything is analogue, there are no Pro-Tools in sight. Very little overdubbing at all actually, mostly live off the floor.

There's so many great songs from that era and that area in general, what criteria did the songs have to meet to make the album?

Just songs I love to sing. The theme for the whole album was Stax, that was my starting point. There's one exception - we have an Ann Peebles song in there, she wasn't with Stax, but I found her master tape among all these other masters in the corridor. It was right at eye level. I saw it and went "Whoa, is that the Ann Peebles master of 'I Can't Stand The Rain'?" It was, she recorded it there and I thought "Wow, we have to do that song!". We dug around and found in the cupboards the original electric bongos that were played on the intro to the song. Unfortunately they didn't work so Perry said "Leave it to me!" Perry's a real wizard with that stuff and he got them working, so we used them on the track! That was nice.

I was really glad you chose that one - that, along with 'I Thank You' are my two favourites.



Good, I'm glad - the record company have favoured those two as well, I think one of those may well be chosen as a single.

I really enjoyed 'Walk On By' too, but I was expecting a version like Dionne Warwick, whereas you seem to have gone more towards the Isaac Hayes version.

Yeah, that's right. I love the original and I love Dionne Warwick, but when I heard Isaac Hayes' version, he really talked it down. It's a really deep, masculine version and I loved what he did with the song. We gave it a little twist ourselves because the Reverend Charles Hodges, he plays amazing Hammond organ and he is the musical director of the band. He put this break in the middle of 'Walk On By' and I was thinking "Okay, what do I do here?" (laughs) I had to come up with something that would flow, that wouldn't be too tricky, so I kept it nice and simple. I liked that I had the opportunity to do that, to open up the song and give it our own little touches.

With the musicians playing on some of the original songs and not being aware of your history, did your approach of how you would normally make a record change?

Not really - my only priority when I go into a studio is "Can these guys play?" I want to know if we can play together and if there is a good vibe. There was a wonderful vibe in there, a great feeling of friendship and kinship and a real love of the music. We all love to step into this Soul world, each song has its own world. As soon as I started singing 'I've Been Loving You Too Long' I got chills. It was hallowed material - we were all speaking the same language. As long as that can happen, I'm very comfortable.

You've included 'Born Under A Bad Sign' which you originally did on your 'Muddy Water Blues' album. I always think of that as a Blues classic, despite the fact it was written by Booker T Jones and William Bell from the Stax era. Was that why you included it here?

That was voted on because everybody else wanted to do it! (laughs) I did say that I had recorded it on my tribute to Muddy Waters way back, but nobody seemed bothered! We decided to do it and see how it went and I think it's the best version I've done of the song. I've got the authentic real deal playing on there and Perry got the chance to play lead guitar on it. We also recorded a version of 'Walk In My Shadow' while we were there, that's on the back burner too. I didn't put it on the record because I wanted to stay with the Stax thing as much as possible. We might put it out at some point.

Roughly how much time did you spend

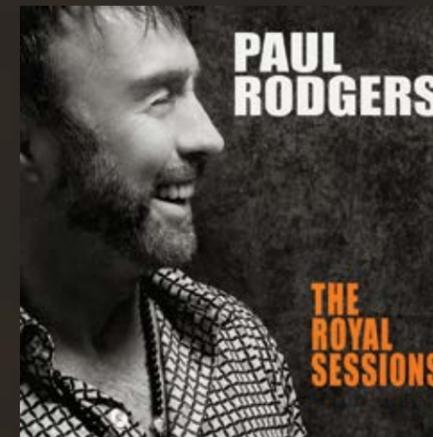
in the studio then after your initial three day trip?

We recorded it in May, we spent a couple of weeks for the tracks and then the mixing after that took a bit longer. Actually, we mentioned 'Walk On By' just now, I recorded the vocal for that in New York because I didn't get the vocal for that on the day. I wanted to take that one home and think about it. I recorded the vocal for that in Perry's studio in New York, that's another great analogue studio actually. I recorded it with a great microphone, a Neumann u47. It's a beautiful thing, it's actually on the album artwork on the back.



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You're donating proceeds from the album to the local music education programmes in Memphis, which tells me that your love for the music from that area couldn't be more genuine.

Yeah, the studio itself is in a sort of slum area. There's a lot of derelict buildings and poverty. We drove past it every day to go to this studio to make this amazing music. We found out that the original Stax studio had become this fantastic museum

and they run a programme there, a school which teaches kids music. We visited it and it was so cool to see these kids energised by this music. They sang a cappella to us and it was just "Wow". Perry and I financed this album so we thought we'd donate the proceeds to them.

Do you think this is something you could take on the road, or would you have to keep it as an album project due to the people involved?

I don't see myself touring heavily with it, but I can picture us doing a TV show, maybe video us in an iconic club down in Memphis, maybe make a DVD there. Try to capture the music on its home ground. That would be great, I'd love to do that. There's so many clubs to choose from, if we can find one where we could bring cameras in and not be too intrusive, I'd love to do that. I'd like to try and capture these songs visually like we've captured them on the record. I will be touring with my solo band and I will put some of these Soul songs in. 'I Thank You' is definitely on the agenda.

Finally, you released a song called 'With Our Love' as a download quite recently - was that a song meant for the album you were working on with Perry before the Soul stuff cropped up?

Yeah - that's how Perry and I know each other, he's a producer with a studio and we have been writing songs together. We have an ongoing project for songs we've been writing, we get together between other things - I tour quite a bit. To cut a long story short, we will make a new album using his analogue studio. We wrote that particular track 'With Our Love' and it sounded like a finished song. We decided to put it out and donate whatever it made to the Seraphim12 Horse Sanctuary in New York. It did well for us and the money from it allowed us to save six mares. It's nice to be able to do that with music.

I think you have the best of both worlds as well, recording with analogue yet you have digital distribution where you can go and put a single track out via iTunes without incurring manufacturing costs.

Yes - that's the thing nowadays, you can do analogue up to a point. Somewhere down the line you'll have to convert it to digital like you say. We've kept it as close as we can - no Pro-Tools, using actual tape to keep everything analogue until the very last stage. We try to capture as much as possible the original depth, and of course joy, in the music!

'The Royal Sessions' is out now. Visit www.paulrodders.com for more information.