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ECHOES

Bobby Womack

The Greatest Soulman In The Universe

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Take Courage

BOBBY WOMACK'S NEW ALBUM WITH DAMON ALBARN IS BOTH SOULFUL AND UNCONVENTIONAL AT THE SAME TIME. CHRIS WELLS GETS THE INSIDE TRACK FROM XL BOSS AND CO-PRODUCER RICHARD RUSSELL, AND BOBBY'S LONG-TIME SONGWRITING PARTNER HAROLD PAYNE.

***The Bravest Man In The Universe* is quite unlike any other Bobby Womack album you're ever heard. You probably already know why.**

Inspired to make a long overdue comeback by his relationship with Damon Albarn and the latter's Gorillaz project, Bobby has done what he promised in his last interview with *Echoes* and cut an entire album's worth of material at Albarn's London studio, teaming up with the Gorillaz leader, XL label chief and musician Richard Russell, and regular songwriting partner Harold Payne to work on a set that will now be released on June 11.

Already, advance internet sampling of both the single, *Please Forgive My Heart* and the title song has caused a mixture of surprise, delight and, in a few places, fierce debate as to the album's musical direction. It's sure to introduce the soul legend to a brand new audience - a crowd of younger, Albarn addicts who, to be frank, probably first came across Womack as the old guy doing those soulful vocals for Gorillaz. They'll surely be up for finding out what Damon's new friend can do when backed up by their former Blur hero.

Some soul fans, meanwhile, while no doubt starting out with a feeling of appreciation that Albarn's link to Bobby has brought their man back from several years of silence, are showing signs of being slow to warm to the new sound beneath that great voice. Time and sales figures will, of course, reveal the overall reaction to an album that's bound to be one of Womack's highest profile undertakings. Here, though, we have the story of how it came together.

Naturally, our original plan was to talk at length to Bobby himself, as we usually do. However, right before he was due to fly in for promotional duties, Womack was taken seriously ill with pneumonia and, as I write these words, has just left hospital in Los Angeles to recuperate before undergoing two operations - one [pre-planned and publicly announced] for his early-stage bowel cancer, the other a heart bypass. These will take place as soon as Bobby feels strong enough. In the meantime, conversations with Richard Russell and Harold Payne have offered some intriguing background to the sessions that produced the album.

Russell - like Damon Albarn a confirmed Womack fan of long standing - happily admits that there was no preconceived plan as to creative direction when he, Albarn, Payne and Womack first sat down together: "We were never going to try to recreate what

he'd done before, because... well, we'd have just got beaten by it. But we were *influenced* by it. We were also influenced by the thread of... funk that he's associated with. So what we did with Bobby wasn't in any way alien to him, because it *is* him. It was appropriate for him. And he seemed very comfortable with all of the ideas.

"I have to say," continues Russell, "I enjoyed these sessions so much. It has been the most fun thing I have been involved in my whole career. It was incredibly gratifying to learn afterwards that Bobby had had such a great time too, 'cause I had thought that I was enjoying it so much because I was privileged to be in a room with him, listening to this great, undiminished voice.

"The way he put it was, 'We just wanted him to be him'. But I can't imagine anything other than that. Why else would you want Bobby Womack to be there? I know he has experienced in his career people wanting him to be more conventional in some ways. But he is quite unconventional. It wouldn't have occurred to me to make anyone more conventional. That's not the way to succeed. I subscribe to the ethos that you work with interesting people and then let them be themselves."

Harold Payne, who has worked with Bobby on

off again. I'm sure they were wondering why they needed anybody else in there when they had Damon and Bobby already, both of whom can write songs. But Bobby has relied on me a lot over the years. He knows he can give me a little seed and I can run with it: we work well together.

"Basically they said I could come over and if it didn't work out... I guess I'd be on a nice vacation. Which is fair: they were spending a lot of money on an important project, so I totally respected that. So for me it was always about getting there and showing what I could do."

The basic breakdown of the creative process - as hinted at on the online Electronic Press Kit [EPK] - was that Damon and Richard supplied the musical beds while Bobby and Harold came up with the melodies and lyrics. Sessions ran pretty regularly from 10am to 5pm, Damon and Richard cycling in and, says Harold, "behaving like two kids having just so much fun in a sandbox." It didn't take long for Harold to prove his worth.

Says Richard: "Harold was a great presence in the studio. I love his approach to it. He raised the level of everything. The songwriting is so good, and done by somebody on the inside, somebody integral to who Bobby is.

"And it's funny to see them together. They

"This is a Bobby Womack record. You get a strong sense of him on this record. He feels it's the best record he's ever made." [Richard Russell]

and off for three-and-a-half decades - their first tune together was the superb *Daylight* from Bobby's 1976 album *Safety Zone*, his last LP for United Artists - was pleased to see his old buddy fired up once again and ready to make some new music.

"Bobby started calling me from the road with Gorillaz. He'd been pretty solitary for a while, but I had stayed in contact with him. After all, he was like a mentor to me. When he called me with ideas and stuff, it was like he had found his mojo again. It was clear the affection Damon had for him as an artist had pulled him up and made him feel creative again.

"For my own part, well, of course, Richard and Damon didn't really know who I was, so for a while there the trip to London was on, then it was

are a real double act. Harold is Bobby's straight-man. He's a patient man too. We loved having him around."

Harold: "Bobby was amazingly open. Just as many of his fans are wondering about it being different, Bobby clearly trusted Damon. It created a wonderful vibe. They knew that if Bobby put his soul on there and they put some modern surroundings, then his soul would shine through and they could still do the modern thing. They are such big fans of Bobby anyway that they could help bring out his story. I definitely think the songs are there and it's... just in a modern setting."

The title track was actually derived from a song entitled *Break The Chain*, which had first appeared on a Memphis Horns album in the

mid-nineties and featured vocals from Bobby [as well as input from Ike Hayes].

Says Harold: "Right before we left to come over I had given Bobby a copy of a CD I'd made. It included my version of the song *Break The Chain*. He really liked my version of the song and, to my surprise, he pulled it out and played it for Richard and Damon. They really liked the first two lines: 'The bravest man in the universe/Is the one who has forgiven first'.

They felt that the rest of the lyric wasn't quite right, which was OK. And they had this track which they put these two lines on, and then Bobby improvised the rest of the song."

Some of us who'd read Bobby's autobiography, *Midnight Mover*, had been guessing it must have been a song about his relationship with one of his brothers. Turns out, we weren't far out.

"Well, we wrote the song when I was at Bobby's mom's home in Virginia," continues Harold. "He had this dirge-like, New Orleans march kinda thing, and then I put my thing to it. His brother Curtis was there and they were kinda in a spat at the time. One of the later lines in the song was about Curtis, I think - the part that goes, 'I felt the pain of losing touch/With a brother who I loved so much/I know that I was wrong/To let this carry on/And precious time goes by/Because we don't see eye to eye'. But that was the original version. It's not what the song became as *The Bravest Man*."

One of the most pleasing aspects of the album is that Bobby sounds much stronger vocally than he did during that last set of solo concerts. To be fair, he'd flown in to fulfil those dates against doctor's orders. On the new set, though, he sounds like he's up to the task.

Observes Richard: "He laid it out for us at the beginning of the session: he said, 'My voice is as good as it's ever been - in fact, it could even be better than it's ever been - but my guitar playing is not what it was'. But when he got on the acoustic [guitar]... yes it is *different*, but it's great. It's kinda wonky sounding. And that's all over the record and glues things together.

"But his voice? The power of it is amazing. We'd sit and look at ourselves in wonder that

don't like what you do. It applies to everything.

"You have to make music for sake of the doing it. It was easy to do that on this album. The process was so great it was easy to be unconcerned about people's reactions. Some will like it, some will be nonplussed, some will actively dislike it. That's all fine.

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we'd been able to capture this instrument that was in no way diminished. That was a delight."

So what, then, of the soul fans who are already reacting against the music on the album? In his roles as both head of the label and also as a contributing musician, is Russell concerned about the response of the soul mafia? He laughs at my use of the 'm' word.

"Wow, this 'soul mafia'... are they like the real mafia? Are we gonna get rubbed out?"

"Look, I don't think you can trouble yourself with what people are going to think of it. Everyone has an opinion on everything.

"There's an interesting statistic: two hundred million people have iTunes accounts, so if you sell a million copies and have a big hit, it means that most people either haven't heard of you or

guy. For anyone to suggest this record is not soulful, for me that means they are not listening to the record.

"It's really about whether you're hearing something that's real. And there's no doubt you're hearing something real from Bobby here. If you are a fan of his, there are wonderful things on this record."

He pauses and then adds:

"In some ways I am a purist myself. It's important to be purist about some things. I respect that purist mentality more than the 'sell-out' mentality, most definitely. But this is a deep and considered piece of work. If someone had gone in and made a crass, commercialized record... but this is not that. This record is not made in 1973, but in 2012." ●

