

ROD STEWART SOULBOOK

"You have to go way back, to when I was about 16," says Rod Stewart, recalling his introduction to a sound that would change his life. "I'd found an odd job somewhere, and I went everywhere with a transistor radio glued to my ear. One day, I heard Sam Cooke singing 'Chain Gang,' and I was hooked."

"Soul music, that's what it was," he continues. "Pure and simple, it got straight through to your soul. The songs were joyous, for want of a better word—even the slow songs were joyous."

Stewart's new album, *SOULBOOK*, is a collection of classic Sixties/Seventies-era soul favorites, a long-awaited celebration of the music that is closest to this Rock and Roll Hall of Famer's heart. Featuring his renditions of such immortal songs as "Tracks of My Tears," "Love Train," "Just My Imagination," and "Wonderful World," *SOULBOOK* is a loving tribute to a glorious period in pop history—and a logical extension of Stewart's Grammy-Award winning *Great American Songbook* albums, which have sold over 19 million copies, making them the biggest selling ongoing series of new music recordings ever.

Rod Stewart has one of the greatest and most distinctive voices in rock history—no less than the Godfather of Soul, James Brown, called Stewart "the best white soul singer." With an estimated 250 million in album and single sales, Stewart is also one of the most successful performers of all time. His last five studio albums have held the top spots on the *Billboard* charts, including his last release, 2006's *Still The Same...Great Rock Classics of Our Time*, which entered the charts at Number One.

Despite these historic accomplishments, *SOULBOOK* represents something special to Stewart. Though he has recorded numerous soul standards over the years ("This Old Heart of Mine," "I'm Losing You," "Having a Party"), in a note on the album package, he writes that "this is the album I've waited my whole lifetime to record. These songs and singers were the oxygen that fueled my passion to sing. Otis Redding, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, James Brown, The Temptations, The Four Tops, and so many more...they were my Gods and my heroes."

He admits, however, that his reverence for these giants made it a bit intimidating to begin this project. "I suppose I did have to be pushed into doing it," he says. "I was a bit frightened of tackling these songs, because these really were my heroes. When we started, the first song we did was 'Just My Imagination,' and that took off. And then after that, we did 'Rainy Night in Georgia,' and I slowly gained in confidence."

As sessions for *SOULBOOK* proceeded, several remarkable guest stars contributed to the recordings. The album features two stunning duets: Mary J. Blige joins Stewart on the Stylistics' 1974 hit "You Make Me Feel Brand New" (the most recent song on the album), and he sings alongside Jennifer Hudson on "Let It Be Me," inspired by the 1964 Jerry Butler/Betty Everett combination. "The two of them have got amazing ammunition when it comes to singing," Stewart says of his chart-topping vocal partners. "They can hit any note."

Smokey Robinson guests on "Tracks of My Tears," which he made famous with the Miracles in 1965. "It was a great honor to have Smokey on this album," says Stewart. "He just gave it a wonderful little touch with that falsetto he's got." Finally, Stevie Wonder adds a harmonica part to Stewart's version of his 1969 hit "My Cherie Amour."

The producers of *SOULBOOK* are Stewart's longtime collaborator Steve Tyrell, who worked on several volumes of the "Songbook" series, and Grammy/Emmy award-winner Steve Jordan (Keith Richards, John Mayer). One of the album's engineers was Al Schmitt, Sam Cooke's original producer/engineer, and a number of legendary musicians perform on the tracks, including Motown

stalwarts Bob Babbitt and George Bohanon and Memphis eminences Willie Mitchell, Charles Hodges, Wayne Jackson, and Jack Hale.

"With the players, we didn't mess about," says Stewart. "We got all the best boys in. You need those guys to make it sound authentic."

Even with all of these veteran collaborators, though, Stewart is careful to point out that his goal with *SOULBOOK* isn't to recreate or imitate these classic recordings. "You have to remember, these are brilliant singers," he says. "I'm not trying to challenge the originals, they're just alternate versions. They're my versions."

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The ability to tackle such stellar, challenging material has to start, of course, with the voice. A voice about which Elton John once said, "Bar none, Rod's the best singer I've heard in rock 'n' roll." A voice that best-selling author Chuck Klosterman referred to in *Spin* magazine as "the single greatest male singing voice of the rock era." A voice so distinctive, producer Steve Tyrell has said, that "he sings just two notes and you know it's Rod Stewart."

Stewart says that his approach was initially shaped by a variety of sources. When he first encountered the emerging soul sound, he recalls, "I was just trying to find my own vocal style. I'd started off listening to the Carter Family and Woody Guthrie, and before that I was listening to Little Richard and 'The Girl Can't Help It.' But Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, all those guys—they definitely sowed the seed."

Rod Stewart and his characteristically throaty, impressively expressive, and surprisingly versatile voice had been knocking around the London club scene with groups like Steampacket and Long John Baldry's band before he connected with ace guitarist Jeff Beck in 1968. Their collaborations in the Jeff Beck Group brought Stewart to the spotlight on the blazing *Truth* and *Beck-Ola* albums.

But it was when Stewart joined forces with the greatest party band in rock history, the magnificent Faces, that he truly hit his stride.

For about a half-dozen years, Stewart went back and forth between recording and touring with the Faces ("punk prototypes," as Wilco's Jeff Tweedy has called them) and launching his own wildly successful solo career. After his first two albums on his own—1969's *The Rod Stewart Album* and 1970's *Gasoline Alley*—revealed the range and artistry of a vocalist previously best known as a shouter, everything came together for *Every Picture Tells a Story* in 1971. Universally acknowledged as one of the greatest rock albums of all time, it includes Stewart's soulful, commanding takes on folk, R&B, and blues material; the astonishing title track; and the international Number One smash, "Maggie May." The album also demonstrated that along the way, he had become a top-flight songwriter.

In the years that followed, Stewart solidified his standing as a superstar. "Tonight's the Night" proved an even bigger hit than "Maggie May," and while other rockers lost ground to a global outbreak of disco fever in 1978, Stewart simply responded with another Number One hit, the notorious "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy."

Throughout the '80s and '90s, Rod Stewart remained a consistent presence on the charts, with smashes like "Young Turks," "Forever Young," "Downtown Train," and the massive "All for Love" trio alongside Sting and Bryan Adams. His *Unplugged...and Seated* set reunited him with Faces mate Ron Wood, and resulted in a big hit with his intimate version of Van Morrison's "Have I Told You Lately." As the century turned, Stewart underwent throat surgery to remove a benign cancerous node, and also tackled some of his most ambitious material—from contemporary Brit-pop on *When We Were the New Boys* to new-school R&B on *Human*. (The full scope of his solo work can be explored in greater depth on the new four-CD box set *The Rod Stewart Sessions 1971-1998*, which collects 63 previously unreleased studio performances.)

But no one would have predicted that the next move for this rock & roll icon would be an album titled *It Had to Be You...The Great American Songbook*, a collection devoted to the craft and

elegance of songs like "The Way You Look Tonight" and "These Foolish Things." Stewart maintained, however, that the project was actually a long time coming. "It wasn't a sudden impulse or urge," he said, "it's something I'd been wanting to do for as far back as I can remember."

And the more you think about it, the more logical a step it actually was. Rod Stewart has always been a remarkable interpretive singer—throughout his career, he's recorded songs by the finest contemporary songwriters, from Bob Dylan to Curtis Mayfield, from John Lennon and Paul McCartney to Cat Stevens. Aside from that unique vocal tone, perhaps his greatest strength is his ability to put across a great set of lyrics clearly and directly.

"I prefer doing slower numbers," Stewart said as far back as 1970, in an interview with *Rolling Stone* at the height of the Faces' popularity. "For a vocalist, a slower number lends itself better than anything else. In opportunities for phrasing, it's much more free." Certainly, his cosmopolitan, jet-set persona meshed easily with the sophistication and sexiness exemplified by America's pop classics.

If anyone still argued that this new iteration of Rod Stewart—complete with bow tie rakishly undone in the cover photo—seemed at all far-fetched, the public immediately said otherwise. *It Had to Be You... The Great American Songbook* entered the charts at Number Four, Stewart's highest perch in years, and went on to sell more than five million copies. Not that anyone knew what the public response would be—"Rod was doing it out of sheer determination," said manager Arnold Stiefel. "As he said to me, we've waited 20 years to sing these songs and I'm going to give them my all, and if the album sells 25,000 copies, so be it."

As Stewart took to the road behind *It Had to Be You... The Great American Songbook*, he continued to strengthen a following for this material. The "From 'Maggie May' to the *Great American Songbook* Tour" (captured on the *One Night Only! Live at Royal Albert Hall* DVD) was completely sold out for three years in a row. In 2003, he released *As Time Goes By... The Great American Songbook Volume II*, which included duets with Cher and Queen Latifah. This time, he entered the charts at Number Two.

With 2004's *Stardust...The Great American Songbook Volume III*, the "Songbook" series established itself as a truly historic phenomenon. The album entered the charts at Number One—the first chart-topping debut of Stewart's career, and his first Number One in more than 25 years. Guests on *Stardust* included Eric Clapton and Stevie Wonder, adding a more modern edge to these beloved tunes. The resultant tour was one of the year's five biggest, and to cap it all off, there was a long-awaited Grammy for "Best Traditional Pop Vocal," Stewart's first trophy after 14 nominations over the years.

With *Thanks for the Memory...The Great American Songbook Volume IV*, he streamlined the arrangements, and shook up the "Songbook" formula by adding some different flavors into the mix, especially a duet with Chaka Khan on Sam Cooke's "You Send Me," and songs with Elton John and Diana Ross.

The Great American Songbook series pushed Rod Stewart's career into uncharted territory—in his fifth decade as a performer, he was now selling more records than ever and cultivating a new and growing audience. "Rod has become an inspiration to all artists," says Clive Davis, Arista/J Records founder and Chief Creative Officer, Sony Music Entertainment, "showing how long a truly great career can soar when one is willing to broaden and reinvent oneself."

It was Davis who came up with the idea of revisiting the rock songs that Stewart's fans had grown up with. The result was *Still the Same...Great Rock Classics of Our Time*, on which Stewart took the lessons learned from the "Songbooks" and applied them to a thoughtfully chosen set of songs crafted by such masters as Bob Dylan ("If Not For You"), Van Morrison ("Crazy Love"), and John Fogerty ("Have You Ever Seen the Rain"). The range of its production was displayed in sounds from the soaring Badfinger hit "Day After Day" to the Pretenders' 1994 ballad "I'll Stand By You."

When Stewart began work on the *SOULBOOK* project in the summer of 2009, he took a similarly expansive look at the golden era of rhythm & blues. He recorded almost thirty songs, stretching from the 1950s into the 1970s.

The singer and his team thought hard about ways to put their own signature on compositions that so many listeners know inside and out. With a selection like "Tracks of My Tears," Stewart says, "we knew we had to take it as far away from the original as we could. Greg Phillinganes came up with a great arrangement—it's almost like the '1812 Overture,' the way it builds."

In other cases, simplifying things felt more fresh than building them up. "We had been playing 'Love Train' live for the last three or four months," says Stewart. "So I told the band to just lay it down. I wanted it to sound like a garage band. It's had a few overdubs since then, but this version is still very rhythmic."

The Jackie Wilson classic "(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher" was the choice that most worried Stewart. "My wife pushed me to do it—she said 'You've got to do that one!,'" the singer says with a laugh. "I was very anxious about it, because that vocal is magnificent, and the track is extraordinary, just relentless. So I was particularly happy when we got that vocal done."

And just to bring things all the way back home to Stewart's greatest inspiration, *SOULBOOK* contains a punched-up version of 1959's "Wonderful World" by the towering Sam Cooke (the earliest hit included on the set). "I've always been very wary of doing his songs, because he's so in my blood," says Stewart. "I always find myself just copying exactly what he's done. So we took that one the Memphis way, we brought in the horns and toughened it up a bit."

Such creative daring illustrates both the confidence and the humility with which Rod Stewart approached the songs on *SOULBOOK*. The greatest testament to these masterful songs is the proof, found in these recordings, that they remain living, vital art, with layers that can still be revealed after all these years on the radio and in our hearts.

"I've lived with these songs for quite a while now, but they're still very dear to me," says Stewart. "That's really why I made this album—as a sign of respect."