

Q&A



Danny Clinch

BOZ SCAGGS

From *Memphis* to Nashville: The lowdown on the soulful singer's latest

BOZ SCAGGS MIGHT HAVE A TRILOGY on his hands. The 70-year-old soft-rocking king of funky, laidback soul will spend the summer touring behind *A Fool to Care*, his second straight album of mostly covers recorded with producer and drummer Steve Jordan. The LP came about because its predecessor, 2013's *Memphis*, turned out so well, and although Scaggs has yet to discuss things with Jordan, he'd definitely be game for round three. "Steve and I really collaborate," says Scaggs. "It's as if we read each other's minds."

Last time out, recording took place in Memphis, where Scaggs—the sometime Steve Miller Band singer best known for '70s and '80s solo hits like "Lowdown," "Lido

Shuffle" and "Look What You've Done to Me"—found his way into songs by the likes of Al Green, Tony Joe White and Steely Dan. For *A Fool to Care*, Scaggs and Jordan opted for Nashville, where Blackbird Studio offered a wealth of analog recording gear. "The notion was to take the same tack—keep the same quartet of musicians—but find a little broader sonic palette," Scaggs says.

The approach worked. Combining funk, soul, blues, country, R&B and even some Latin grooves, *A Fool to Care* is another late-career triumph for the Texas native, including songs originally performed by everyone from Al Green ("Full of Fire") and the Band (the Lucinda Williams duet "Whispering Pines") to British singer-songwriter Richard Hawley

("There's a Storm a' Comin'"). There's also one original, "Hell to Pay," a swampy rocker done as a duet with Bonnie Raitt.

How did you determine the theme?

Things start with conversation. When Steve and I talked about which way we'd go, we kicked around a couple of thematic ideas. Then we started kicking around some songs, and the doors blew wide open: "Let's find the most interesting songs we can that are a good vehicle for these grooves—and for my voice."

How do you narrow the songs down?

We start a long list. The list gets kicked around, and I do some demos for myself at home. I find my key, and then play around



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with some different rhythmic ideas. I kick it around for several months, and a few weeks before we go in, we have a pretty solid short list of what we're going after.

Did you really record in four days?

Yes, we recorded our rhythm tracks in four days. It took four days of recording—and four decades of experience—to do it the way we do it. Everybody in the room was a very fine, seasoned, high-level brilliant cat. And Jordan is a great leader. It's not a matter of high energy. It's just showing up and doing what you do. It just doesn't take us that long to get our ideas and knock 'em dead. Then the post-production starts. There's quite a lengthy process of overdubbing my voice and guitar and duets and background vocals and horns and percussion. That's done in my home studio. Then the mixing process takes a hell of a lot longer.

The Bonnie Raitt duet was an original.

I'd had bits of that song written over the years. When the notion came up of making it a duet, I rounded up all the bits and pieces. There was this bit of tape—a demo of some guitars and a drum machine I had lying around—that was the right groove; probably because we were in Nashville it fit with the terrain. I fit the lyrics in, and we pitched it to Bonnie, and she loved it.

You also worked with Lucinda Williams.

Lucinda and I did a duet on a special show a couple of years ago. I think we both realized we had a rapport. We had a good blend. I love her energy. We promised to find ourselves a time and place to do something together. Being on the mic with her was something else. Now Bonnie and I both live in the San Francisco Bay Area and have known each other for years, but we'd never worked together. It was a special experience spending the day with her and getting her guitar parts and getting on mic with her with the vocals. Two different approaches entirely: Lucinda and I were just singing together, and with Bonnie I had to get her slide guitar on the track. It's great working with the pros.

Any songs you struggled with?

There was one that was challenging: a song Al Green originally recorded and wrote with some other people, "Full of Fire." I was having trouble finding the lyric on that. I couldn't understand some of the original lyrics. He had a gospel point of view. I had to adapt it a little to the way I sing and my approach. And of course, singing in the shadow of Al Green is a formidable place to find oneself.

I wanted to do the song justice. I loved the groove, and I loved the spirit of the song.

Where would you record a third album?

At one point, we talked about Chicago. We both loved that thing when the blues and R&B—and musicians from Texas and the Delta and the South—went to Chicago. There was this fantastic explosion of great music: Chess Records, Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf. All that stuff is so important. We talked about going there and recording, and then it occurred to me that the cradle of everything we've done—and everything I love—is New Orleans. All roads lead to New Orleans, one way or another.

Both you and Michael McDonald have been sampled in hip-hop songs. Are you a fan of that?

I've heard good and bad versions. Back in the beginning, when sampling started, it was the Wild West. When copyright and publishing laws started being enforced, things got more serious. But there were some grooves that were just obvious. People were grabbing "Lowdown"—that drum part Jeff Porcaro played was magnetic, and the bass part. I like it when someone does something and plays off the harmonics and makes their own and does something interesting and cool with it. It's nice when they have a hit. It's good advertising for your own stuff.



Onstage in Dana Point, Calif., 2015

Scott Dudelson/Getty Images

What do you make of young hipsters championing you, Donald Fagen and Michael McDonald as "yacht rock"?

There's a lot of common ground, obviously—that's why we work together. But I don't quite get the "yacht rock" thing. Is it like white soul? There's Hall and Oates and Bobby Caldwell and Michael and myself. I'm sure there are a handful of other blue-eyed soul singers. But I don't really know about the "yacht rock" thing. It's kind of sophisticated, I guess. I don't mean that in terms of how you dress. But it's a sophisticated music in terms of its jazz influences and its progressive R&B sound. That's the only thing I can think of.

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Do covers inspire your own writing?

It's inspired me to finish stuff. Your ideas really come to the fore when you're in there recording. I've got a number of songs in various bits and pieces. It's satisfying when it all comes together in the studio, like the "Hell to Pay" song. It makes me want to get out some of these other bits and finish them. It's one of three projects I have in the works right now: There's a self-written album, and then perhaps a follow-up with Jordan, and I have a standards album in the works. Lots to do.

—Kenneth Partridge