

Q&A

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JOAN OSBORNE

Bringing it on home to the blues and soul of her early days

FROM THE MOMENT SHE LIT INTO Sonny Boy Williamson II's "Help Me" on her triple-platinum 1995 debut, *Relish*, it was clear that Kentucky-born Joan Osborne had a natural feel for gutbucket blues. She's explored those roots regularly ever since, but never so directly as on her new album, the all-covers affair *Bring It On Home*. With the help from her co-producer and guitarist Jack Petruzzelli, Osborne tackles a set of gems from the classic blues and soul songbooks. She's already working on her next album of originals, a song cycle called *Love and Hate*. "I'm keeping busy," says Osborne, 49, speaking from her home in Brooklyn. "Life is good for me right now."

What inspired this album?

I'd like to take credit for it, but I really can't. The guys from Saguaro Road Records approached me and said, "Would you want to do a record of nothing but blues and soul covers?" At the time I was more focused on working on original material, but the more I thought about it the more I came up with ideas. "I could do that song, wouldn't that be cool?" "What about that tune?" I started to compile a list in my

mind. It's cool to just throw down and step right into those shoes.

Does this represent your roots?

My education in becoming a singer was in trying to sing this music. That's why I wondered what it would sound like for me to sing these songs now, having been doing this as my career for 20 years. What would it be like to go back to the source and reach into this music? What different things could I bring to it? I felt like my voice has gotten deeper and richer as an instrument, and being older brings more life experience. That's an important thing to have when you're singing this kind of music, because it's very raw and emotional. The more of yourself you bring to it, the better you're going to be.

Is it tricky to produce yourself?

It's difficult to be objective about yourself to a certain extent. But then when you listen to a playback, it becomes easier to step out of that mindset and compare one thing to another. I think I've gotten much better at getting beyond that nervousness and being more matter-of-fact about it: "All right, this is working and obviously that is not. That thing

I did right there? It clearly sucks." Just being able to say that about yourself and not be too precious about it. It's easier when you're working with friends, because they'll tell you what sucks. The people I work with have that level of comfort with me.

What mics do you use?

I usually end up with a Neumann U87 on my voice. They can get all the different nuances and not get completely blown out when I start to sing really strongly. I will sometimes use other mics, but I do tend to go back to those Neumanns.

Do you have a goal now?

There are many, many things I still want to achieve. There are other recording projects on my wish list. There are dozens and dozens of different records that I'd like to do. I want to continue to grow as a writer and a singer. It's very satisfying to have the feeling that I'm still getting better at what I do. This is a business that doesn't always allow people to have lengthy careers, so I feel grateful that I've had a career this long. It's a big life, you know?

—Chris Neal

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