

Q&A



JOSS STONE

The neo-soul sensation wraps her vocals around a new set of classics

Joss Stone was a nervous 16-year-old kid in 2003 when *The Soul Sessions* made her a star, thanks to its old-school grooves and the slinky hit "Fell in Love With a Boy," a vivid reworking of a White Stripes song. Nearly a decade later, the British singer decided she'd like another crack at it. She re-teamed with *Soul Sessions* producer Steve Greenberg for her latest release, *The Soul Sessions, Vol. 2*. The album features Stone's interpretations of R&B tunes including "I Got the ...," "While You're Out Looking for Sugar," along with the Broken Bells song "The High Road," the collection's nod at indie cool.

Recording a second volume was an uncharacteristic choice for Stone, who

has made a point of not repeating herself with projects. But the 25-year-old artist wanted to make the record with experience she didn't have the first time around—and to counterbalance memories of a project that, for all its success, didn't live up to its potential in her mind. "I usually don't try things twice," she says. "The fact that I went back in after it went wrong the first time was a big thing."

She and Greenberg convened in the same Nashville studio where Stone recorded her previous album, *LP1*—but instead of carefully plotting which songs to record, she allowed the material to choose her. "We had a hell of a good time while we were playing it," she says,

"and it wasn't too thought-about—that to me feels like school, too studied."

What made the timing right for this?

Steve had asked me, but I didn't have time because I was doing *LP1*. I wanted to do it because it sounded fun, and when he asked me again I had time. And it just happened that it's been almost 10 years since the first one. I guess it adds to the story—something to write about. It doesn't mean much to me. Though perhaps it will encourage us to make another in 10 years.

What's changed in a decade?

The first time I did *The Soul Sessions* I literally did not know how to make a record.



'A massive part of my method now is spontaneity, not thinking too hard and not worrying.'

I actually didn't know how to sing. I'd never been in a studio before, never played a gig, never sung into a microphone. So it was kind of like the world watched me grow up. At the time I was nervous because I didn't know what I was doing, and I was a lot quieter than I am now because I was busy listening. I probably should be a bit quieter now. But with all the experience I've had from record to record, I'm at the point where I make records the way I want to make them.

How was this process different?

The first time around we were in New York. The mistake we made was pre-picking the songs. A massive part of my method now is spontaneity—not thinking too hard and not worrying. It's funny, I feel like you can overtalk the idea of making music, or any kind of art. When we were back in Nashville for the second time around it was like, "OK guys, set it all up, make sure the band is ready to go, the record button is ready to be pressed, and my mic is on." Then we would go into the control room, everyone would sit around and we'd play songs from this massive list that Steve had. And I'd say, "OK, why don't we try this one?" Moments later we were playing it, and what you hear on that record is what we played.

Are these mostly first takes?

They're first, second or third takes. If we had to mess around with a song for more than that, I chose not to carry on because what's the point? Either it feels good or it doesn't. These musicians are so good they don't need more than two or three takes. Then it's just lethargic and it takes the fun out of it. And I wanted everything to feel good—not like an unruly jam, but a jam all the same. It adds a spark and a bit of "Oh my God, we don't know what each of us is going to do." Because I'm singing with them, they have to listen to where I'm going with my voice and use the dynamics to complement that. And sometimes they would move the dynamic, and I'd have to go with that. We'd kind of bounce off of each other.

How many songs did you know?

I knew some but not all of them. Steve picked loads of good tracks I'd never heard. I knew "Then You Can Tell Me Goodbye," which is one of my favorite songs, so that was really hard for me to do. But we ended up changing it so much that it wasn't too bad. I love the strings on "I Got the ..." They're amazing.

How was it working with Steve again?

It was funny—and interesting because the

last time he worked with me I was a kid. So I don't know what it was like for him, but I'm sure it was a bit strange. He had to figure out what I'm about—though I'm pretty easy to read; I'm not a quiet person. If I'm feeling something I will just say it. It's pretty easy for people to understand where I'm coming from.

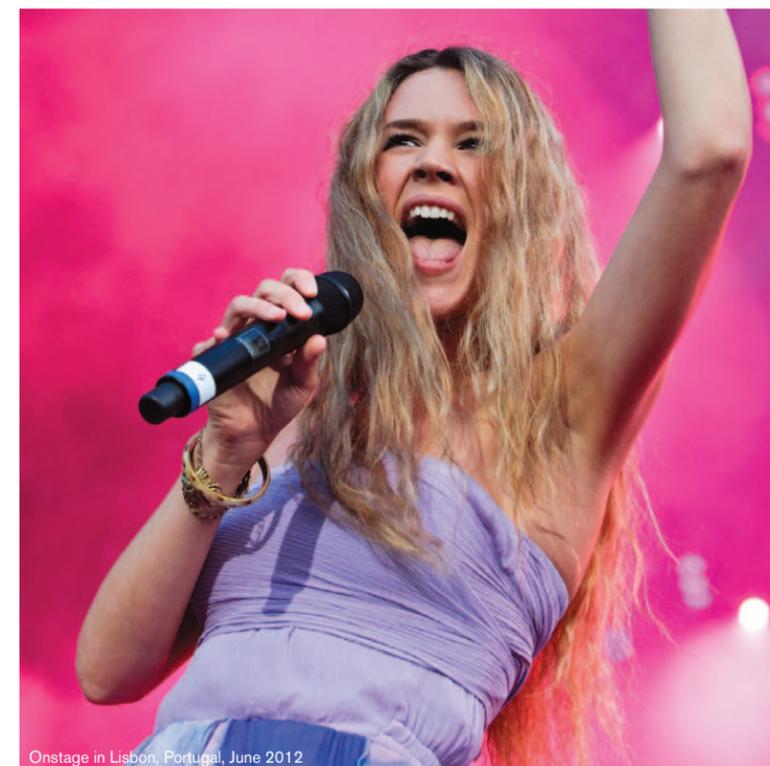
You once referred to your second album as your real debut.

It was to me then, because I was writing. And the third album was actually the music that I wanted to make, because I really loved that hip-hop kind of R&B sound. The first record is all covers and it's basically Steve's project

created it with Steve Greenberg and [co-producer] Steve Greenwell—so although we didn't write the songs, it's as if we did. It feels like we created the sounds and the changes and all that.

Did the *SuperHeavy* project with Mick Jagger and Dave Stewart influence this?

Probably not. I think making *Colour Me Free!* and *LP1* gave me the experience to make this one in the way that we did. Those records were so free-form, and that's the kind of treatment this album needed. The *SuperHeavy* record wasn't like that: We did two sessions of two weeks, and



Onstage in Lisbon, Portugal, June 2012

that I was lucky to be part of. I was able and allowed to write songs for the second album, so that was a bonus. And the third one I was able to be a part of the music. It was a journey—and after that I just made whatever I wanted to make.

This album is also covers, so where does it fit in?

The first wasn't really my project. I was the singer but I was doing a job I didn't know how to do. It had my name on it but that was really Steve's baby—he put the songs together, he had the vision. This time I

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I went in, I wrote, I sang, and then I left. After that it was in Dave and Mick's hands.

So you're happier with *Vol. 2*?

Way happier. If I weren't, I wouldn't have put it out. I really did have a lovely time because we were in an environment where we could.

—Eric R. Danton