



## SOLOMON BURKE:

### 'BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN'

BY CORY ALBERTSON

Few know that Solomon Burke's first 1961 radio hit, "Just Out of Reach (Of My Two Open Arms)," was initially brought to him as a country song—legendary rhythm-and-blues label Atlantic Records wanted the song turned into its usual genre-crossing fare that would appeal to both black and white audiences. Instead, 20-year-old Burke—then an active preacher—took his gospel roots, added a dash of rock and fused the two styles with R&B, creating "the soul singer." He never stormed the pop charts as Atlantic had hoped, but he earned his place as music royalty by laying soul's foundation.



In a full-circle moment, *Nashville*, Burke's first country album, intertwines his trademark soul style with the rollicking Bakersfield sound of the '60s and smooth country-politan of the '70s. Along for the ride is Americana rocker and *Nashville* producer Buddy Miller, as well as a host of duet partners Burke heralds as the 'queens of his soul'—Dolly Parton, Patty Griffin, Gillian Welch, Emmylou Harris and Patty Loveless. Burke's painfully sincere vocals (alongside Miller's delicate guitar strums) open the album on a cover of Tom T. Hall's "That's How I Got to Memphis." The results aren't only stellar but alarming, which begs the obvious question: Where did a Philadelphia-raised African-American man like Burke develop such reverence for a notoriously white and (during his 1940s childhood) mostly rural genre?

With a tinge of humility, Burke asks, "If I told you, you won't laugh at me, right?"

The suggestion is almost comical. Laugh at the King of Rock and Soul?

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"As a kid," Burke remembers, "our thrill on Saturdays was—after we did all our little chores, my uncle and I—was to sit down by the radio for two hours and listen to the Top 40. Then after that we could watch two shows on the little round TV. One was called Gene Autry and the other one was Roy Rogers. And we basically didn't watch it for the cowboys as far as my grandmother was concerned. She wanted me to listen to the music. And she would say, 'Listen to the pronunciation of the words. Listen to how clear he says 'I'm back in the saddle again.' Listen to Roy Rogers—he says 'Happy trails to you.' In my mind, and in my life, that's been imbedded in me to listen to that. I'm just crazy about it." Then, cracking himself up, he admits "I have a clock radio that wakes me up to 'Back in the Saddle Again.'"

#### NASHVILLE BOUND

The idea for *Nashville* sparked last year when Burke had the opportunity to perform at the Americana Music Awards with Miller, who consistently incorporates gospel, rock and soul into his own music. Burke felt the connection immediately and, not long after,

was on his way back to Nashville to live with Miller and his songwriter wife, Julie, while recording. In addition to newly penned tracks by Griffin and Welch, Miller chose a broad range of songs for the project, including Bruce Springsteen's "Ain't Got You," the George Jones/Tammy Wynette classic "We're Gonna Hold On" and even his and Julie's "Does My Ring Burn Your Finger."

"We wanted a record that had old and new, and showed some different sides," Miller says. "And, you know what? When it gets right down to it, it doesn't matter that much what's on there, because every song that he puts himself to—it becomes his song." He cites "That's How I Got to Memphis" as evidence. "It's a soul song now," he says. "I used to sing that song. I don't think I'll be singing it anymore. It's not necessary. It's been *sung*."

Burke, however, admits he had trouble envisioning some of his performances on *Nashville*. For his duet with Dolly Parton on "Tomorrow is Forever"—a cover of her 1969 duet with Porter Wagoner—she would lay down her track at a later date; Burke faced the difficult task of trying to imagine her vocals while performing his. "It's like I had the buns and didn't have the hot dogs," he says, laughing at his analogy. "Why am I fixing all these buns? These buns are not good!"

Miller, in his typical laidback manner, gave Burke continual reassurance that everything would come together, and as usual he deflects the credit back to Burke. "There may have been the first minute or two of a song when the band would be looking around," he says. "We'd be trying to find our spot and I'd hear Solomon looking around for where he starts. I'd be thinking, with many of the songs, 'this is never going to work.' And then, suddenly, when Solomon finds the starting point it's the key that turns it on—it's just unbelievable. It never failed."

Without hesitation, Burke cites country music as the other part of his soul. And with *Nashville*, he's finally expressing his other half—painting a scene worthy of Gene and Roy. "You've gotta lean back and let yourself go," he says. "You've gotta just imagine yourself out there with the horse and the land. ... That's what country music allows you to do—just to forget all the negative stuff that's happening around in life and say 'God, bring it all together for us. Just bring this land back together again.'" Reflecting on his statement, he adds, "It takes more than boots and a hat to make a cowboy."