

C D R E V U E W

-Review: Randall Parrish

EMMA WILSON — MEMPHIS CALLING

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Cover Photo: John Findlayson

Emma Wilson, the sensational British R&B singer released her scintillating album entitled 'Memphis Calling' on independent label Emma Wilson Records. The release features nine glorious tracks recorded in Memphis, Tennessee at Sam Phillips Recording with some of the finest musicians that Memphis has to offer. It also features ace production and mixing by much lauded Scott Bomar. I greatly enjoyed her debut, 'Wish Her Well,' and this newest effort is even better, and should gain her fervent fans all across the globe.

"The recording sessions for my album, 'Memphis Calling,' at Sam Phillips Recording were so soulful; drenched in rhythm and blues."
~ Emma Wilson

The opening song sets the mood for the release with Wilson radiating soulful power on an original composition she penned with Gary Burr. "A Small Word" is one of two songs on 'Memphis Calling' that she co-authored with Mr. Burr, a Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame member. It suits her voice perfectly. The song has the Stax meets Muscle Shoals soul/blues sound escorted by a forceful push from the horn arrangement. The lyrical content of this love song centers around the simple, yet clever phrase, "Love is such a small word/Why is it so hard to say?"

"Gary Burr has a home studio, so it's a very relaxed environment. Yet, when we start work... it's intense. I learned from Gary that songs are like movies; you visualize the story." ~ Emma Wilson

Next up comes "Water," written by Steve Cropper and Eddie Floyd the same songwriting team that had a hit with "Knock On Wood" in 1966. This one from 1968 was originally released by soul singer Eddie Floyd, then covered by Cropper with Albert King and Pops Staples the following year. It has the same potent soulful groove that many of Steve Cropper's songs bear.

It's a mighty fine choice for this album with Emma's vocal coming across strongly, bearing an appealing clout.

"Singing with the incredible band of Charles Hodges on Organ, Joe Restivo on Guitars, Leroy Hodges on Bass, Archie Turner on Piano & Wurlitzer, Steve Potts on Drums, Marc Franklin on Trumpet and Kirk Smothers on Saxes was truly a magical experience." ~ Emma Wilson

The second Emma Wilson/Gary Burr co-write is the infectious blues rocker, "Watching You Leave." The keyboard combination and horns again are prominent, and Emma is cooling confident, somewhat reminiscent of Dusty Springfield. The narrator in the song sees their paramour leaving, but doesn't seem to really mind. Very nice song.

The Stax / Hi Record soul sound made famous by Al Green and Willie Mitchell at Royal Studio is a Memphis trademark. One of my favorites on 'Memphis Calling' is a cover of Willie Mitchell's "I Still Love You." Emma's vocals glides between a playful and a confrontational attitude amid the rise and fall of a superb horn arrangement. Her phrasing is resplendent and her tonal pitch is divine and she owns this song.

At the song's opening, she enticingly croons "Baby, I'm feeling sorta lonely" and I'm effectively hooked like a hungry bluegill. Seductively soulful might be the best way to describe her lovely vocal that cuts right to the marrow.

The love ballad lyrics tell, in simple words, the tale of a lover who has just received the news that their sweetheart is leaving. Instead of a face to face, the confrontation occurs over the telephone. And it turns into a desperate pleading for a reunion.

"Being from, and growing up in Memphis, it is hard not to be exposed to great music. There are so many great musicians, and so much great music everywhere here. My mother had a really great record collection. She had a lot of Memphis records including stuff by Carla and Rufus Thomas. She had some Ray Charles, and early James Brown on the King label. Going through her records is what really got to me early on. In Memphis you just have so much blues, country, rockabilly and soul music. It's just a real good mix." ~ Scott Bomar, producer

In a clever move, producer Scott Bomar brought in a special guest, Memphis Soul/R&B singer and songwriter, Don Bryant for a spirited R&B session. Bryant has enjoyed a rich history as a recording artist for Hi Records and he sang lead in the legendary late producer Willie Mitchell's singing group, the Four Kings on records and in the Memphis clubs. The song, "What Kind Of Love," is an original composition penned by Scott Bomar and Don Bryant that they deemed perfect for this Emma Wilson project.

The song opens with a blast of horns from Marc Franklin on trumpet and Kirk Smothers on saxes. Marc Franklin toured the world with the legendary Bobby "Blue" Bland in the mid-nineties and is a member of The Bo-Keys along with saxophone master Kirk Smothers, and guitarist Joe Restivo. Producer/bassist Scott Bomar is a co-founder of the Bo-Keys and he is recognized as one of the music industries brightest lights. The horn arrangement employed here grants this song a stamp that screams "Memphis."

Emma brilliantly sings the lead on the verses with a kittenish playfulness and coos seductively. Don Bryant acts in support and on the chorus joins her to echo the question, "what kind of love." Near the song's conclusion, Don Bryant steps forward to join in a little vamp between the two that raises the stakes to a higher plane. To me, this one brings to mind other immortal soul duets, such as Otis and Carla for the Stax label, or Marvin and Tammi Terrell for Motown. Quality duets have always been an integral part of the history of soul music, or any musical genre.

The bluesy "I'll See You In The Morning" is a composition co-written by Emma Wilson and veteran British singer and songwriter Terry Reid. Guitarist Joe Restivo steps up and makes his presence felt on this one as Emma reaches her upper register and shows a display of impressive melisma.

On song after winning song, Wilson pays loving homage to the musical legacy of Memphis, Tennessee. The city by the Mighty Mississippi whose blues clubs along Beale Street originated the unique Memphis blues sound; earning the city the "Home of the Blues" nickname. There is definitely something about recording in Memphis and that classic vibe becoming a part of the end result. I've noticed it before with Paul Rodgers and Boz Scaggs. And, on 'Memphis Calling' it's as clear as the nose on your face. And, I love it!

Emma takes on a sassy diva attitude as she sings "I don't need no drug... when you call me." The funky song "Drug" is an Emma Wilson and Scott Bomar song with a jivin' snap in its step. Once again with this song, the horn arrangement sounds so very good teamed with Emma's great vocal and the entire ensemble knocks it out of the ballpark



-Photo: John Findlayson



Studio Collage Photos: Steve Roberts

"I want to represent a modern English woman, deeply influenced by the music of Memphis, bringing her own Britishness, making an album with a unique contemporary sound, and I believe, with the 'Memphis Calling' album, we have achieved this " ~ Emma Wilson

Probably the bluesiest song on the album arrives on a cover of "Hoochie Coochie Man" (originally titled "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man"). This 16 bar blues standard was written by Willie Dixon, the poet laureate of the blues, and had its initial recording by Muddy Waters on January 7, 1954. The song became Muddy's all-time best selling and one of his signature songs. It's been covered by dozens of artists including Eric Clapton, Buddy Guy, Paul Rodgers and Etta James (I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Gal).

Emma renames it "Hoochie Coochie Mama" and takes the Chicago Blues sound down to Memphis with a stirring soul/blues dripping rendition. Mid-song instrumental solos from guitarist Joe Restivo and Hammond organist Charles Hodges stoke the fire that burns, and that marvelous rhythm section simmers just below a boil throughout.

"Scott and I spent two days preparing our music for the musicians. I was nervous, as they are some of my heroes; musicians whose names I had written down in a little book as a teenager and had studied their music for my whole life. They arrived at the studio: Charles Hodges, Leroy Hodges, Archie 'Hubbie' Turner and Steve Potts. All of them elegant, calm, kind, and so happy to be there.

"Joe Restivo is a younger cat, he would look over at me sometimes as if to say, "I get it!" The band was great; I immediately felt comfortable in their presence and ready to sing. We recorded some absolutely beautiful music, and all 'Live.' After we recorded "Hoochie Coochie Mama," Hubbie Turner sat back in his chair and said, 'She's not from Middlesbrough: She's from Mississippi!' " ~ Emma Wilson



Studio Photo: Steve Roberts

The Pop Standard, "Since I Fell for You," was composed by Buddy Johnson in 1945 and recorded late that year; then released in January 1947 by his sister, Ella Johnson, with Buddy Johnson and His Orchestra. Though the years it has been covered by many artists, crossing over to various genres, including the legendary country artists Lloyd Price (1961) and Charlie Rich (1975). Jazz greats Bob James and David Sanborn nicely covered it with Al Jarreau handling the vocal on their 'Double Vision' collaboration. Blues greats Bobby Bland, Charles Brown, and Bonnie Raitt also had very memorable renditions.

"Since I Fell for You" closes the release and provides Emma Wilson an opportunity to put her own lovely stamp on the tune with a simple, yet elegant, arrangement with a key contribution from Charles Hodges on Hammond Organ. The lady's vocal is decidedly delicious, and offers a glimpse of the range that she possesses. She steps away from her blues diva persona on display elsewhere on the record into a seductive jazzy glow that is quite bewitching.

In summation, Emma's fond musical tribute to the music that originated in the studios of Memphis, Tennessee is a sincere love letter performed with a passionate respect by everyone involved. On 'Memphis Calling,' Emma aggressively takes her spot among the premier R&B / Blues singers on the world stage.

Special mention must be made about the brilliant production by Scott Bomar. The Memphis master studio musicians Bomar assembled luxuriously accompany the marvelous vocal talent of Emma Wilson at each and every turn on this outstanding gem.

To find out more about Emma Wilson, be sure to visit her website www.emmawilson.net