

CASSANDRA WILSON

A month after *Time Magazine* named her America's Best Singer, Cassandra Wilson boarded a train in New York and headed to Mississippi to begin production on her latest Blue Note album, **Belly of the Sun**. Born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, Cassandra returned to her home-state with a few songs she'd written for the project, phone numbers of some Mississippi musicians and the faintest sketch of an idea that she hoped would lead her into the album and help her discover something new. The idea for the album was simply to return home and let the deep musical traditions of the area guide her.

Months before beginning production, she'd toyed with the idea of an all blues album that could be recorded in the Delta. But, Cassandra is never bound by an idea of what her music (or any music) should be. Working as both producer and performer she set out to create an environment for the music to come to her and then guided it through the recording process. For this album she knew that that environment needed to be Mississippi. "In my twenty years of recording, I'd never recorded an album in Mississippi. It was time. I felt it calling me home."

With a small group of local folks including her childhood friend, singer/songwriter Rhonda Richmond, Cassandra toured the Mississippi Delta for two weeks talking to people, remembering the smells and sounds of her childhood and scouting a location for the recording sessions. As she moved through the cities and small towns meeting musicians and thinking about the album, the idea of a blues album began to evolve into something else. It wasn't clear what yet, but she knew it was growing beyond the initial concept. "Mississippi is an almost magical place for music. In addition to the legacy that's there, great musicians are everywhere. In the smallest town you can find cats that are amazing players. Not just the blues, there are also funk players, soul singers, of course gospel singers, and like my father, some serious jazz musicians. For the most part the world outside of Mississippi has never heard of them."

Finally settling on the legendary Delta blues town Clarksdale, Cassandra rented the old train depot and over two days transformed it into a recording studio. Relying on her band (musical director/guitarist Marvin Sewell, guitarist Kevin Breit, percussionists Jeff Haynes and Cyro Baptista and bassist Mark Peterson) as the foundation, Cassandra was ready to begin. Under difficult conditions, including a scorching August heat, and working with her long-time engineer, Danny Kopleson, and a half dozen supporting staff, over the next few days she recorded 15 songs (two of them "Hot Tamales" and "You Gotta Move" were recorded in an abandoned box car after getting kicked out of the train station for a wedding reception.)

Starting with only two songs she'd written for the project ("Justice" and "Cooter Brown") Cassandra's ideas for the album were fueled by the intense creative environment that had been created. The first song recorded was "The Weight" which seemed appropriate to the task she'd taken upon herself. She pulled from her recent performing repertoire and recorded "Wichita Lineman" and the "Waters of March". The local blues piano legend Boogaloo Ames ambled in on 80-something year-old legs and sat down and

played with timeless hands. Out of that collaboration came “Darkness on the Delta” and “Rock Me Baby”. She added the African influenced “Little Lion” and James Taylor’s Brazilian influenced “Only a Dream in Rio” with background vocals from Jackson singers (Jewell Bass, Vasti Jackson, Patrice Moncell and Henry Rhodes). She also included two songs by Mississippians, Rhonda Richmond’s “Road So Clear” and with guitarist Jesse Robinson (who’d played with Cassandra’s father Herman Fowlkes) Cassandra co-wrote “Show Me A Love.”

“With the Miles project I had a clearer picture of what it would be. I wasn’t so sure how this project would develop. As we began recording it was as if all that I’d learned about music growing up in Mississippi was pushing me forward. When I was a child my father taught me to listen to everything and I felt all of that coming back during those days in Clarksdale...the jazz albums he used to play for me, the blues that were always present in Mississippi, the importance of African influences in the culture and popular music, it all seemed present during those sessions. I’d heard a Yoruba translation of a lyric that said, ‘We’ll meet in the belly of the Sun’. And that was it. I knew that was where we were, in the hottest place literally and metaphorically in America, the Mississippi Delta, the Belly of the Sun.”

With the Clarksdale sessions completed, Cassandra traveled back to New York to complete work on the album. The young soul singer India.Arie had mentioned Cassandra as an influence and wanted an opportunity to work with her and Cassandra had written a song (“Just Another Parade”) she wanted to do with another singer. For a while she’d wanted to record the Bob Dylan song “Shelter From the Storm.” The duet with India.Arie and the Dylan song were added in a New York studio. And then it was done.

Belly of the Sun is an exploration of influences, sounds, history and most of all the roots of American music and of Cassandra Wilson’s life in Mississippi. It has that thing her growing legend of fans love, the unexpected shaping of a song to the spirit of the time by a singer and songwriter for this time. It has something else that is the trademark of a Cassandra Wilson project, the willingness to see, to feel and reach beyond any boundary to find something unusual and common in music and people.

CASSANDRA WILSON • [Belly of the Sun](#) • Blue Note 35072 • March 26, 2002