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## Old Soul Is the New Neosoul

After the success of Solomon Burke, more soul and R & B vets get a second chance at doing it right.



Bettye LaVette, Dan Penn



RICHARD MITCHELL, CHARLIE TAYLOR

By Bob Mehr

As the songwriter behind masterworks like “The Dark End of the Street” and “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man,” Dan Penn is particularly sensitive to the struggles of R & B stars. Many of the singers he wrote for during the 60s and 70s have faded into obscurity, and classic soul hasn’t enjoyed a revival of interest the way other genres have. “Everybody says ‘What goes around comes around’ and all that ol’ good stuff,” he says. “Well, we’re still waiting.”

R & B singers from that era—including Chicagoans like Syl Johnson, Ruby Andrews, and Cicero Blake—haven’t disappeared. But with fewer

opportunities to perform and get heard on the radio, many of them are relegated to careers playing small venues and recording patchy albums on the cheap. For instance, Detroit belter Bettye LaVette, who began her career at 16 with the 1962 hit “My Man—He’s a Lovin’ Man,” has recorded only sparingly since the early 80s. That’s especially galling because on the new *I’ve Got My Own Hell to Raise* (Anti-), a

brilliant album of slow-burning soul, she’s a better singer than she was in her youth. “It took me 30 years to learn to interpret songs,” says LaVette, 59. “I mean, I’ve always been able to attack rhythm and blues songs. But it took me 30 years to learn to interpret and learn to really sing.”

LaVette has an unlikely booster in 44-year-old producer Joe Henry, a white roots-pop singer-songwriter from LA who’s been leading a growing movement to revitalize the careers of veteran soul acts. Henry bristles at the notion that artists like LaVette are past their prime. “I’m sorry, but nobody’s telling Elton John that, or Aerosmith, or the Rolling goddamn Stones that,” he says. “They keep putting out records. I mean, the Stones are great, but I would trade every record they ever made for ‘Let’s Stay Together.’”

Henry’s R & B revival efforts began in 2002, when he produced Solomon Burke’s *Don’t Give Up on Me* (Fat Possum), an album of stripped-down

soul that captured the essence of Burke’s 60s Atlantic sides. While promoting the record, Henry began to realize that the album filled a niche. “I was very aware talking to journalists all over the world that the record was resonating because people were so starved, as it were, for a contemporary version of an authentic soul record,” he says.

The album jump-started Burke’s career, and he’s not alone—contemporaries like Al Green and Howard Tate have made comeback albums of their own in recent years. But soul singers from the 60s, especially those who never enjoyed crossover success, remain a tough sell to major labels. “The mainstream music industry is so committed to the idea of selling ten million records that selling 200,000 records doesn’t even get their heart started,” Henry says. “Solomon Burke’s record, even if we hadn’t won a Grammy for it, was approaching selling a quarter of a million records worldwide. And we only spent \$40,000 making it. You can do the math—it wasn’t a foolish enterprise on any level.”

Still, a lack of radio outlets has made larger labels hesitant. “With the exception of blues stations that will play some soul and R & B, the urban format has gone completely toward hip-hop,” says Lisa Best, head of Proper American Recordings, a new spin-off of British roots-rock label Proper Records that’s released albums by Penn and Bobby Purify, aka Ben Moore, who began his career in the 60s Atlantic duo Ben & Spence. “What you’ve found is not just less opportunities on the label end, but fewer opportunities for the labels to get the music out there.”

Faced with such problems, Henry tried to come up with an arrangement that would allow him to do more projects like the Burke record. His solution was to create his own label, Work Song, and begin a series that he hoped would attract more artists and major-label backing. “I decided it was smarter to create some permanent scenario that gave me license to call an artist that I wanted to work with and say, ‘Hey, let’s do something.’”

Henry launched the series in June by inviting five veteran acts—Ann Peebles, Mavis Staples, Billy Preston, Allen Toussaint, and Irma Thomas—to come to an LA studio to record *I Believe to My Soul*, which was rereleased last month by Work Song, Rhino Records, and Starbucks Hear Music. The last label was immediately interested in the project, thanks to its success with last year’s *Genius Loves Company*, an album of Ray Charles duets that sold more than a half million copies in Starbucks stores alone. *I Believe to My Soul* did precisely what Henry hoped it would: he’s about to begin recording an

album of collaborations between Toussaint and Elvis Costello, and he’s also planning to produce solo albums by Peebles and Preston.

Part of the reason Henry’s productions work is that he pushes singers outside their comfort zones: he asked each of the performers on *I Believe to My Soul* to bring two songs they’d never recorded, and he encouraged Burke to try songs by Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, and Tom Waits. For LaVette’s *I’ve Got My Own Hell to Raise*, she and Henry drew from contemporary female songwriters outside R & B, including Fiona Apple, Sinead O’Connor, and Lucinda Williams. “She took this opportunity that was given to her and just ate it alive,” Henry says. “She didn’t have one moment of looking back.”

Dan Penn, who produced Bobby Purify’s new album on Proper American, *Better to Have It*, argues that most older acts suffer from a lack of both solid material and quality control; because they don’t usually write their own music, they’re often at the mercy of their collaborators. “A lot of the trouble is that they either don’t get sufficient songs or they don’t get a good producer,” he says. “Or they cut a record but it doesn’t have any significance. It’s like nobody cares anymore. And at least with Bobby Purify, I cared. I felt like this guy needs some good songs, so we wrote for him just like we would’ve written for Elvis or Otis.”

*Better to Have It* is one of the year’s best albums, thanks to a strong batch of fresh tunes almost all cowritten by Penn, Purify’s well-aged pipes, and backing from a who’s who of Memphis and Muscle Shoals session players. The success in England of similar albums featuring soul luminaries—including last year’s *Testifying*, produced by Penn and billed to the Country Soul Revue—is what spurred Proper Records to launch its stateside imprint in June. Besides the Purify album it’s also released *Moments From This Theatre*, a reissue of a 1999 live album featuring Penn and longtime collaborator Spooner Oldham, and plans to announce more signings soon.

Both Penn and Henry argue that the time is right for a renaissance of classic soul, given the revival of interest in Ray Charles and the rediscovery of Sam Cooke prompted by Peter Guralnick’s recently published biography. And, they note, many of the artists who enjoyed their greatest success in the 60s and 70s are now moving into their twilight years. “I do think it’d be great if people really started to recognize that this music is incredibly vital and it’s a living thing,” Henry says. “All you need is a moment of daylight to really break through.”

“We’re all getting older,” Penn adds. “But we all still need a chance.”

# The Treatment

A day-by-day guide to our Critic’s Choices and other previews

## friday18

**CC CAGE** I’m sure lots of people thought hell would freeze over before this sick ‘n’ twisted New York MC went straight. It must be snowing in the underworld right now, because the erstwhile Chris Palko has ditched the drugs, and on the new *Hell’s Winter* (Definitive Jux) he’s dropped the viciously misogynistic lyrics too. His cartoonishly morbid horrorcore first turned heads on the 1997 single “Agent Orange,” where he claims that he survived his own abortion when the suction canister was stolen from the garbage; his dementia topped out on 2004’s *Water World*, a collaboration with Tame One that’s all about smoking stuff dipped in embalming fluid. But then Palko decided he wanted to make an album his young daughter could listen to. That sounds like a recipe for no fun at all, but fortunately Cage’s idea of child-appropriate material is not the MPAA’s—and in fact his new approach sharpens his music, infusing it with a purpose and emotional resonance it’s never had. He’s not just rapping about repulsive, horrific stuff; he’s rapping about repulsive, horrific stuff that’s actually happened to him. He describes his six-year-old self helping his heroin-dealing dad tie off and lifts a barrage of nightmarish imagery from his 18-month confinement in a mental hospital, but “Stripes” is the most arresting of his autobiographical sketches—it’s a grim picture of his parents’ doomed relationship that captures both of them in its harrowing chorus (“The bastard inventor that bent her backwards in winter / With her back against the wall she can hear death singin’ in her”). El-P handles most of the production, with an assist from Blockhead and cameos by Rjd2 and DJ Shadow; the tracks oscillate between poignant, almost desolate backdrops and the usual Def Jux sci-fi boom-bap. *Hell’s Winter* is a triumph—Cage is finally using his talent to do more than raise his middle finger to the world. Camu Tao, Slow Suicide Stimulus, Mass Hysteria, the Aristocats, and DJ Crazy Glue open. **►** 9 PM, Abbey Pub, 3420 W. Grace, 773-478-4408 or 866-468-3401, \$15, 18+.

**CANASTA, HEADLIGHTS CANASTA** sounded like one of Chicago’s best pop bands even before they made a record, and I loved their five-song EP, 2003’s *Find the Time*. Their debut full-length, the new *We Were Set Up* (Broken Middle C), doesn’t disappoint: leaning heavily on organ and strings, they work a melody the way a metal band works a riff, as both a signature and a weapon. The martial rhythm that opens the lead track, “Microphone Song,” gives way to a gentler pace later in the album, with new melodic bubbles constantly rising up.

**—Monica Kendrick**  
*The Enemies EP, HEADLIGHTS’* first release, was a fine assemblage of snappy, flawless pop tunes—too bad you couldn’t find it anywhere but the band’s merch table. Polyvinyl Records, based in the band’s hometown of Champaign, apparently agrees: the label reissued the album earlier this month, a year after it went out of print. Headlights’ sound is more pensive and “adult” than the distorto-power-pop usually associated with the downstate burg, but they can muster plenty of esprit when it’s called for. Their male-female vocals, airtight drumming, and palpable guitar hooks click particularly well on “Tokyo” and “It Isn’t Easy to Live That Well.”

**—J. Niimi**  
Canasta headlines, Headlights play second, and Palaxy Tracks open. **►** 9:30 PM, Subterranean, 2011 W. North, 773-278-6600 or 800-594-8499, \$10.

**DIALS** *Flex Time* (Latest Flame), the full-length debut from local power-pop band the Dials, bristles with stabbing guitars, lamp-shade-on-head Farfisa tickles, and petulant vocals from Rebecca Crawford (of the Puta-Pons) and Patti Gran (of the New Black). The album was recorded last year, before the tragic death of drummer Doug Meis in a traffic accident that also claimed the lives of Silksworm’s Michael Dahlquist and Crawford’s husband, the Returnables’ John Glick. Chad Romanski (MirrorAmerica, Rockit Girl) will play drums for this show, a release party for *Flex Time*. Detholz!, the Avengers, and the Bitter Tears open. **►** 10 PM, Beat Kitchen, 2100 W. Belmont, 773-281-4444, \$8, 18+.

**CC DWARVES** San Francisco shit-rock kings the Dwarves were originally the Suburban Nightmare, a psych-garage band formed in 1983 by four rambunctious lads from Highland Park High School. They retained their Seeds/Standells influence on their first album as the Dwarves, 1986’s *Horror Stories*, the back cover of which originally featured the band in fitted paisley finery, with a contact address near Ravinia. After moving to San Francisco and partaking of the city’s excellent drugs, the band quickly reinvented itself as a Cramps/Dead Boys-influenced hardcore punk act, their main interests encapsulated in the title of their debut LP for Sub Pop, *Blood Guts & Pussy*. The band built a legion of fans with two more gory and crass Sub Pop releases before their infamous April Fool’s Day hoax in 1993, wherein the group tricked its label into issuing a press release announcing the fictional stabbing death of guitarist He Who Cannot Be Named in a bar fight in Philly. Seattle music fans who were still reeling from the recent deaths of Charlie Ondras (of Unsane) and Stefanie Sargent (of 7 Year Bitch) didn’t take the joke lightly—and neither did Sub Pop. The group was canned and called it a day shortly afterward. Founding members Blag the Ripper (fka Blag Dahlia) and He Who subsequently re-formed the Dwarves in ’97 and have since released three more albums, including 2000’s electronica-infused *Come Clean* and last year’s *The Dwarves Must Die* (Sympathy), for which the band enlisted the help of Top 40 producer Eric Valentine (Smash Mouth, Queens of the Stone Age). It’s a weird change but kind of a welcome

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