
RCA VICTOR

Etta James

ALL THE WAY

"It's Sunday night and I'm filing CDs and listening to Etta James, next record and I stop. Is she really making Prince's 'Purple Rain' over? And did I just hear Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On?' What, I wonder, is going on with Etta, the rock-turned-blues-turned-soul-turned-jazz-turned-you name it kind of performer who has always defied all the odds..."
David Nathan, music journalist and owner, www.soulmusic.com

Etta James has seen it all: in a life lived to the full, she has experienced all the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the joy, the pain and then, rejuvenation, reinvention and renewal. Perhaps unlike any one of the dozens of albums she has recorded during a distinguished career that spans five decades, **ALL THE WAY** could be said to capture – if just one record could possibly do so – a miniature kaleidoscope of the emotions, feelings, expressions and sentiments that this remarkable woman has experienced.

With a range of material that would render most singers helpless, the truly legendary Etta James – a three-time Grammy award winner, NARAS Lifetime Achievement, Rhythm & Blues Foundation Pioneer awardee and W.C. Handy Blues Foundation honoree, who rightfully has her own star on the Hollywood Walk Of Fame - shows that when it comes to music that speaks to the soul, she is virtually peerless. After all, who else could tackle Leonard Bernstein's classic "Somewhere" in the space of one record and then give "Holding Back The Years" the kind of world-weary workout that makes you say, "Simply who?" in a reference to the song's originator, Simply Red. It takes a whole lotta raw talent to take on such a feat but then this is Etta James, who recently underwent (CHECK NAME OF SURGERY) surgery that resulted in her shedding some 200 pounds. Etta 2006 is, in the words of one of her many classic albums, 'betta than evah,' with a new spring in her step, a new lease on life and of course a new CD that showcases her enduring talent. "Now I can flaunt my figure wherever I go," she grins, "and I can go shopping and buy those outfits I always wanted to wear!"

She also 'wears' the diverse songs on **ALL THE WAY** like hand in glove, almost as if they were designed for interpretation by one of music's most distinctive vocalists. The executive producer of the album - a family affair with sons Donto and Sametto and longtime musical associate Josh Sklair - producing the record's eleven tracks, Etta explains how her latest RCA Victor Group project was conceived: "I talked to the record company about what I had in mind which was to do an album of songs that I've always loved, tunes that I heard and thought, 'wish I could have been the one to do that one first!' We talked about me not doing another blues album and they said they wanted something 'lush'. I figured the best thing to do was let them *hear* what I had in mind so we cut some songs including Bobby Womack's "Stop On By," "Strung Out" which is a Johnny Guitar Watson tune and "All The Way," which I've always associated with Frank Sinatra. Since we put the strings on that song, they got the 'lush' track they wanted...and I got to make an album that I can listen to and say, "I *really* like this record!" For the first time in my fifty-three years of recording, I really had control over an entire album, start to finish. And that feels *really* good!"

In much the way she is a musical storyteller, Etta relishes the opportunity to talk about her choices for **ALL THE WAY**: "The title track? Well, I've been hearing that song since I was a child growing up. My mother was a jazz fanatic and she wanted me to play the piano so I could play jazz tunes. I wish I had learned but I was too busy running out there, getting into trouble! I do remember she always told me, 'even if a song has been done a thousand times, you can still bring something of your own to it.' I'd like to think I did that with this standard..."

Perhaps best known as a key album cut by '70s band Rufus as well as a Top 5 R&B 1974 hit for its writer, Bobby Womack, the funky "Stop On By" is Etta's way of paying tribute to the soul man who she's known for many years: "This song is a real R&B kind of tune just like Bobby Womack who is always very real both with his music and as a person." In a truly respectful way, Etta pays tribute to another of R&B's legendary pioneers, the late Johnny Guitar Watson via "Strung Out Over You". Her soulful, bluesy treatment of the song is one of the many standout cuts on **ALL THE WAY**, Etta giving the classic tune the kind of down home, honest reading which has been her trademark for a remarkable five decades of recording. "Johnny Guitar...just one of my favorite singers of all time," she sighs. "I first met him when we were both on the road with (renowned bandleader) Johnny Otis in the '50s when I was a teenager. We traveled the country in a car together so I would hear him sing every night. His singing style was the one I took on when I was 17 – people used to call me the 'female' Johnny Guitar Watson and him the male 'Etta James'. This is the first of his songs I've ever recorded, although I used to do his 'I Want To Ta-Ta You Baby' in my show. He knew what the blues was all about..."

"Somewhere" from the evergreen movie, "West Side Story" may seem like a strange choice, sandwiched between a Johnny Guitar Watson cover and a pointed, authentic take on Brit soul group Simply Red's "Holding Back The Years." Etta explains that

she was asked to do the song for a commercial and she included it on her new album “because I’ve never done a song like that and we really took it a little ‘left’ - and I like that we did that.”

Etta’s longtime love affair with European fans of her music gets some payback with her choice of recording the Simply Red 1986 hit. “I met him and I thought he was cute as he could be with his gold chain!” Etta chuckles, referring to the group’s lead singer, Mick Hucknall. “I think of the tune as a young people’s kind of song and I used to tell my manager how much I always wanted to do it myself.”

John Lennon’s immortal “Imagine” is, the woman born Jamsetta Hawkins in Los Angeles in 1938 says, “a song I’m singing for a few people – my sons, my old manager, myself... It’s a song I’ve always loved, period.” As is the case with every song on **ALL THE WAY**, R. Kelly’s anthemic “I Believe I Can Fly” takes on a new meaning when Etta James puts her stamp on it. “With what’s been going on in my own life in the last few years, it has more meaning for me personally. You see, at one point, a few years ago, I thought ‘I’ll never make it.’ I started to go to the doctor to help me lose weight. My mother was alive at the time and she always wanted me to be glamorous and when I thought about that, it really fired me up...and once I lost all those pounds, I started to feel really *good* about myself. “I Believe I Can Fly,” yeah...” Etta smiles, triumphantly.

Few artists have ever had the sheer nerve to attempt a song originally recorded by the Godfather Of Soul and for a female singer to take it on, well, only a unique woman like Etta (who has influenced everyone from Bonnie Raitt and Janis Joplin to yes, self-confessed James fan, Diana Ross) would have the chutzpah, the gumption, the balls! “James Brown and I, we’ve always been tight from back in the day. We did a tour once, me, James and Jackie Wilson – all kinds of stuff with James threatening to drop me from the show because he asked me to go buy him a pair of socks and I was late getting back and Jackie threatening to leave if James didn’t keep me on the tour!” Etta grins. “I figured I could do “It’s A Man’s Man’s Man’s World” because I believe it’s the truth and I know James is gonna get a kick out of me doin’ it. I can hear him now...!”

Prince’s classic “Purple Rain” may also seem an ‘odd’ choice for an artist most usually associated with the blues and soul but Etta simply says, “I love Prince and I love the song. Oh and I do know it takes some nerve to touch a Prince song!” ‘Nuff said, indeed. And, likewise Marvin Gaye’s perennial “What’s Going On” gets a jazzy workout from Etta who adds that the song with an important message (as relevant today as when it was released in 1971) is one that she wished she could have done when it was first written. “It’s not about ‘batting’ the original artists when I record these songs, it’s about paying tribute to them.”

Rounding out her primo musical selections for **ALL THE WAY** is “Calling You,” an ambitious, tour-de-force kind of tune that allows her to do what Etta does best, convey heartfelt emotion with the clarity of someone who has lived what she sings about. “That song has a real story to it... I was originally going to do the song for (the movie and television series) “Baghdad Café” but my version stayed in the can. I like that we added that piece at the end where you can hear one of my sons calling on the phone...that made it a little different...”

ALL THE WAY is, Etta proclaims, an album that allows her “to sing the songs that people need to hear” and in looking back at her illustrious career, that’s been a constant theme for five decades from 1955 after she was first discovered by Johnny Otis while still a teenager. It was the bandleader and talent scout who produced that first hit, the saucy “Dance With Me Henry,” which immediately topped R&B charts nationwide. Her tenure with Chess Records began in 1960 and would continue for sixteen incredible years with a string of landmark hits including her signature tune, “At Last,” along with “All I Could Do Was Cry,” “My Dearest Darling,” “Trust In Me,” “Something’s Got A Hold On Me,” “Tell Mama,” “Fool That I Am” and “Don’t Cry Baby.” Together they comprised a run of charting records that ranked Etta third, just behind Aretha Franklin and Dionne Warwick, as the most prolific female R&B vocalist of her era.

Even with a prolific catalog of great albums to her credit, it’s only been in the last decade or so that Etta has finally received the industry recognition long due her. Inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame in 1993, Etta received her first Grammy in 1995 (after nine prior nominations) for her Private Music debut album, *Mystery Lady: The Songs Of Billie Holiday*, a collection that introduced her extraordinary vocal prowess to a new generation of fans. In 2003, she was honored with another Grammy for “Let’s Roll” as well as receiving a NARAS Lifetime Achievement award by the Recording Academy’s National Trustees, in recognition of her outstanding creative contributions that same year. In 2005, Etta won her third Grammy in the Traditional Blues Album category for *Blues to the Bone*, an outstanding collection of covers of tunes originated by blues greats such as Robert Johnson, Willie Dixon, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin’ Wolf, Elmore James and Lightin’ Hopkins.

Now with **ALL THE WAY**, chock full of contemporary classics and time-honored standards and running the gamut from R&B chestnuts to show tunes, Etta James is ready for what she calls “the next adventure! You know, now that I’ve lost all the weight, I can stand up on the stage again like I used to after five years of sitting down while I sang. I look out at the audiences and I say, ‘how do all these young eyes who are looking at me know my music?’ The range goes from 17 and 18-year olds to some of those older folks, 50 to 70 who are in there hollerin’ away for me to sing one of my songs! ” Looking and sounding great, Etta James is justifiably proud as she declares, “This is one of the best records I’ve ever made!” Amen, Etta, amen.

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