

# SHERYL CROW

For Sheryl Crow, the title of her seventh album isn't just a location; it's a state of mind. "I grew up in a small town 100 miles from Memphis, and that informed not only my musical taste, but how I look at life," she says. "The drive to Memphis is all farmland, and everyone is community-oriented, God-fearing people, connected to the earth. The music that came out of that part of the world is a part of who I am, and it's the biggest inspiration for what I do and why I do it."

So for the Kennett, Missouri native, calling the disc 100 Miles From Memphis is a statement of purpose, both musical and emotional. It also marks a long-awaited return by the nine-time Grammy winner to the sounds that first drew her to making music.

"This is something I've been thinking about for a long time," says Crow. "When (manager Scooter Weintraub) first started working with me twenty years ago, what he heard in me was that I had heavy influences from the South—Delaney and Bonnie, all the Stax records. So for years he's been asking me, 'When are you going to make that record?'"

The results evoke a time when soul and passion filled the radio waves, when the sweat and joy of a recording session could be captured forever on wax. Sometimes the musical references—Al Green, Sly and the Family Stone, Stevie Wonder—are made apparent, but the album's eleven songs are characterized more by capturing a classic spirit than by imitating any specific style.

Crow explains that the way 100 Miles From Memphis was recorded is crucial to its slinky grooves and rolling rhythms. Produced by Doyle Bramhall II and Justin Stanley ("I knew they could get that old soul feeling with authenticity," she says), and cut mostly live with a regular crew of musicians, the album presented a new set of challenges for her as a singer and a songwriter.

"This wasn't like any other record I've made," she says. "We cut two, three, sometimes four tracks a day, for ten or twelve days. We wrote a lot of music, and then I had to write lyrics later, to catch up. That was definitely a new experience, feeling like I had to do homework. It was super-daunting."

With the musical direction already established, the album's messages crystallized in one night at Crow's farm, outside of Nashville. "Having a three year old, you don't get too much quiet time," she says, "but I sat up one night, and I worked all night long and came up with the better part of five lyrics."

What emerged was a set of songs that are unusually open and direct for someone often celebrated for the care and craft of her writing. "This music called for emotion, a place of sensuality and sexuality, and that's a little challenging for me," she says. "Sometimes it's easier for me to hide behind more intellectual lyrics. So it was a great stretching experience to show more vulnerability in my writing."

The songs on 100 Miles From Memphis display impressive range, in feeling and performance. First single "Summer Day" is a delightfully breezy slice of glory-days AM radio pop. "I wanted to experiment with writing something simple and positive," says Crow. "The feeling of a great, solid love—not just a new love, but something everlasting."

The spare, dramatic ballad “Stop” (the one song on the album for which Crow has sole writing credit) is a powerful vocal showcase that struggles with some hard truths. “That one is really a plea to make everything quit going so fast,” she says. “Life has reached this epic point of being out of control. There’s so much chaos everywhere you look. And especially when you have a little kid, you just want to protect the people you love from all that pain.”

Though the album features a tighter focus on Crow’s voice than ever before, a few high-profile guest stars did stop by the sessions. When she cut “Eye to Eye,” with its loping reggae groove, there was only one guitarist she could imagine adding his signature slashing riffs to the mix—her old friend Keith Richards. “He has been such a champion for me, and the Stones gave me so many breaks along the way, from very early on,” she says. (When Richards recorded his part at Electric Lady studios, the New York City facility built for Jimi Hendrix, he started reminiscing about the incomparable guitar wizard; “we were all like little kids at story hour,” says Crow.) Citizen Cope appears on a hazy, impassioned duet of his “Sideways,” a song Crow says she has long wanted to record and one of several string-heavy arrangements on 100 Miles From Memphis.

Another guest demonstrates her appeal across generations. A Memphis native named Justin Timberlake dropped by one of Crow’s sessions at Henson Studios in Los Angeles (the former A&M studio), and offered to contribute background vocals to a version of Terence Trent D’Arby’s 1987 smash “Sign Your Name” that was being recast in the style of Al Green, right down to the distinctive thud of the Hi Records drums. “He’s hysterical and super-smart, and he knows a lot about a lot of different kinds of music,” Crow says. “I’m totally impressed in every way.”

The final surprise, for both the singer and the listener, came out of a run through of an obscure Marvin Gaye song called “It’s a Desperate Situation.” The melody reminded Crow of “I Want You Back,” the Jackson 5’s breakthrough 1970 hit, and she started singing those words. Her natural vocal range sounds uncannily like Michael Jackson’s, and when Bramhall and Stanley heard it, they insisted on recording the song then and there. The album’s “bonus track” was done in one take; they even had to add the song’s introduction afterwards because they had gone straight into the lyric.

Crow, of course, first reached the spotlight as a back-up singer with Michael Jackson, and adds that “I Want You Back” was the first single she ever bought. “It wasn’t a conscious choice to do an homage, but it wound up being a very bittersweet thing,” she says. “Michael’s death brought a lot of stuff back for me, so it was nice that we could include this.”

For Sheryl Crow, 100 Miles From Memphis is the right album at the right moment. “My last record (2008’s Detours) was pretty political, extremely personal, and more lyric-driven,” she says, “so it seemed like a great time to do something soulful and sexy and more driven by the music.” It took a lot of years, but with this set of songs, she finally made it back home.

###

[www.sherylcrow.com](http://www.sherylcrow.com)