

Noel Gourdin's Retro-Relevant Soul (Interview)



Noel Gourdin's arrival with his song "The River" in 2008 felt like a mini time capsule of soul had landed in the midst of a scene heavily weighed down with the concerns of pop music. Images of baptisms, Confederate Flags and Impalas tapped into a long-held Americana romanticism with the south that transcended your average soul fan. The song gave him an immediate identity among a mass of R&B singers and a presence on the Billboard charts. His tone has often been compared to Sam Cooke who he openly admires and his love of R&B after hip-hop is something he calls Retro-Relevant. The release of his third studio album, *City Heart, Southern Soul* this year has him sticking to his unadulterated sound to the delight of his fans. In this interview he talks about the meaning of Retro-Relevancy, the new album and his thoughts on why soul music continues to be pushed to the margin.

What have you been up to since we heard from you the last time with *Fresh: The Definition*?

I've been recording and staying on the road as well as working on *City Heart Southern Soul*. I think that's very important to stay in front of people. I've been trying to step into other realms of entertainment. I've been taking some scripts for some films and been reading for those. And just trying to reach out to other artists to do some collaborations. I think that's really important. I have a

future project right now with half females and half males. Iâ€™m working on that and constantly writing and just staying busy. Itâ€™s always about that next project because people have really short memories.

I know you were raised in the south and spent time in Massachusetts, So how would you describe your city heart and southern soul?

The City Heart would have more of the influence of the music I grew-up with while I was hanging with my older brother. So he was listening to more of the hip-hop, classic R&B and New Jack Swing that type of music. The Jodecis, he used to listen to Ready For The World, those types of groups. The southern soul would have to be the influences I got with my pops because Lord knows he wasnâ€™t going to be playing any hip-hop. The oldies but goodies we use to call them, Tyrone Davis, Johnnie Taylors and Wilson Picketts, Otis Reddings and Al Greens the Sam Cooke and Marvin Gayes which I grew-up with while hanging with my pops. Thatâ€™s pretty much where the City Heart and Southern Soul comes from.

[youtube id="y0v6vcCNxiY"]

What kinds of connections do you see between your music and southern soul from the past?

I would say the spirituality not religious in a sense but the spirituality of certain chords the feel of organic instrumentation the strings as much as I can put in there as far as live instrumentation thatâ€™s what I wanna do, but I still wanna have my hip-hop, New Jack Swing, R&B I still want the track to have a punch to it. I still want the drums to have a kick to it I want you to be able to feel the beat, but if Iâ€™m able to incorporate live drums, the right kit to have that punch the fat punchy snares the real kick. I always like to incorporate live instrumentation, itâ€™s really important for me to have that because when I fell in love with it, it

had that sound you can't get from synthesizers and you can't get from keyboards and just sampled sound. There are actual instruments being played and the strings and the horns and such having a quartet you just can't duplicate that with synthesizers and keyboards.

It sounds like the best of the old and the best of the new.

Yes, it's like a term I coined retro-relevancy having that throwback, but still in a sense and the new so that people of today's demographic younger folks 25-40 or even younger than that 18-25 can understand the concepts and still vibe with the music and feel it and live with it. That's that retro-relevancy that I'm trying to stick to and it just seems to have its niche people are looking for something different and I think that's just enough to be able to keep it fresh.



Sounds like you don't have any use for the term Neo-soul.

No, because there's nothing new about soul. Soul is soul. To me soul is a feel it's the feel of the music. It's very tough to describe it, I've always tried to come up with new ways to describe things it's very difficult. It's easy to know when it's soul and you know when it's not there. It's quite difficult for me to describe soul and what it is, it's the feel it's easier for me to know when it's not there.

Have you changed or grown at all as an artist since we last heard from you?

I've become comfortable with the artist that I am. I am more comfortable with the lane that I'm so content to being in I love to make this kind of music I call it Soul-N-B. It's soul and it's R&B. I'm comfortable making this kind of music, even though it does not get the type of support that I think it should be getting.

Why do you think soul music is scarce in the mainstream?

You know I really don't understand because my genre and I'm even speaking of myself I'm talking about other artists who've been doing it for years at such a high level the Anthony Hamiltons and Joe and D'Angelo and Eric Benet and Eric Roberson, Raheem DeVaughn and Dwele. You know all these artists have been doing it at such a high level for years and years and it's not getting the respect that they should be or their music is. People are saying a lot of the times today that soul music is lost, it's missing, but on the contrary, I say that it's the support for soul music that's missing. Because these people have made great music for years and years, it hasn't been lost so it's really the support that is missing. You've got some artists that's coming in and they're flourishing, it's just crazy that you have some other artists that I won't name though a lot of people would know who I'm talking about they're up on stage at awards shows and they're up there with the greats and the legends. Why isn't Anthony Hamilton up there? Or why isn't Eric Benet up there? Or D'Angelo on stage with these guys? I just don't understand, it's just disheartening for people to just swoop in that's done pop most of their career and come into soul music and be accepted as the best soul artist that's out there. I don't understand it, it's frustrating to say the least. But all we can do is move on and continue to make music that we love to make. And hope that people will come around and start supporting.



What's the story behind 'Spotlight Lovin'?

'Spotlight Lovin' is a concept that I came up with probably three months before I got a certain track from Tremain Williams. Tremain Williams is a Grammy-nominated programmer as well as an engineer as well as producer. I had

this shower idea what I call I get most of my ideas in the shower and then I put it down on voice recorder. But I had this idea for "Spotlight Lovin'" talking about a fellow that's he's had relationships in the past and he had been hurt so many times and beat-up by relationships by women who just didn't seem to be the one for him. He really didn't want to put any of the relationships on display because of how rough he had it so he finally met this one who made him feel comfortable taking the relationship slow and letting it blossom and able to display his love for this woman in the open, loving in the spotlight. It was about three months before and I told Tremaine, I got this idea and I gave him a voice recording of the melody and he came back with this track that was perfect. Unconsciously it seems like it works for steppers as well. And I did a show in St. Louis last year for a stepper's union and I think they're really going to eat this up. This record, "Spotlight Lovin'" I think it was magical to be able to do a track with Tremaine Williams and a couple of his writers that I co-wrote with.

Men usually get a pass for their past but women don't so that's a different idea.

That's the reason why I touched upon that concept as well it's pretty much a woman that I'm talking about and I think it's different and it's getting a great response as well. It's a lot of folks favorite record.

What was your experience in the studio with Avery Sunshine?

She is one of the sweetest people I have ever met. A lot of people know she's tremendously talented, huge voice control that's out of this world. Her spirit is so sweet and down to earth and we had done a string of shows in Louisiana last year. We talked about this record "I Can't Wait" probably about a couple of years ago with the heavyweights, Marcellus Dawson and it wasn't quite finished and I told her

I needed her voice on this record. She came through and the chemistry was already there as a good friend and we just went into the booth and made it happen and the feel of the record is phenomenal. It was pure delight to be able to work with Avery and Iâ€™m looking forward to the next record we do together.

[youtube id="T_j9MfpparY"]

Who would you say is your biggest inspiration and/or influence?

I would have to Marvin Cooke, if I could say that. Itâ€™s hard to just choose one you know, like I said I think Marvin Gaye had the best voice Iâ€™ve ever heard Sam Cooke as well. They almost theyâ€™re very close in their tones. Their tones were so unique and thatâ€™s what I always believed was the most important aspect of a soul singer is the tone. You got a lot of very talented vocalists today that have an insane amount of control where they can do runs and all of that stuff and I try to do a little bit of that but I try to let my tone prevail. And thatâ€™s what I think is so special about singers back in the day was their tone, the Otis Reddings , the David Ruffins and Eddie Kendricks all these people and their tones. Thatâ€™s what I think is so memorable about soul singers of the past thatâ€™s what Iâ€™m trying to carry on, that legacy.

Is "I Want You" in any way inspired by Marvin Gaye?

Absolutely. The feel of it is inspired by Marvin Gaye who just happens to be the best voice that Iâ€™ve ever heard the pure and raw talent that he had his range, his control,. Itâ€™s meant to be a homage paying homage to the feel of Marvin Gaye but the concept is that of itâ€™s just happens to be one of top three favorite songs on the album. Loving someone unconditionally regardless of their past and their promiscuous past especially in a city where you grew-up at there can be so many things going around about someone and their past. And

this is about a couple that it doesn't matter what the stories are it just that love prevails and that's what that record is about.

You made such a strong impression with "The River" I have to go back and ask you how did it come about?

We was in the studio in the Poconos myself, Balewa Muhammad, Arama Brown who is the female voice on the record and my man CK. We weren't from the south, but we had family from the south and spent a lot of time in the south. And we were talking about things we remembered growing up and being down there for family reunions and being down there with older relatives staying pretty much the whole extent of the summer with grandmamas and great aunts and uncles. So we just kept talking about stories then we started putting it all together and it was really really crazy that we wrote it and recorded it pretty much under 4 hours. It just started pouring from my pen and I knew we had something special halfway through. To me it always had the feel of a new "Midnight Train To Georgia" and it was special because it was new. You could tell it was new but it still had that retro feel to it and that nostalgic feel that everybody from all demographics could identify with and I still get thanks to this day for making it and performing it. It was a blessing to be able to come up with that for that to be my very first single. I want to thank all my supporters for being there even after I took a couple of years off and radio folk. Anyone who's had a hand in making any of my projects a success I want to thank you and I will not let you down. I will not conform to what's happening now I will always continue to make the music that's always on my heart and soul to make.

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