





Robert Cray

VINTAGE

VIBE

By Josef Woodard

Photo by Mark Sheldon

When it comes to the long, storied career of Robert Cray, time and musical fashion have been slippery slopes in the saga.

The singer-guitarist burst onto the scene in the early '80s, proudly and organically “retro,” and pledging a natural allegiance to authentic blues and classic r&b. As a 20-something “old soul” artist, Cray lit up the blues world as a fiery and tasteful young-blood guitarist.

He struck global gold when “Smoking Gun,” a track from his 1986 album *Strong Persuader*, roared up to No. 22 on the Billboard pop singles chart. MTV put a music video for the song in heavy rotation, and nowadays, the track still gets played on classic rock radio stations. That level of pop stardom naturally faded, but Cray has continued to steadily tour the globe for decades.

Cray, now 66, isn't one of those artists who cranks out a new release every 12 months. He tends to favor quality over quantity, and the five Grammy awards in his trophy case support that notion. He explored renewably relevant '60s soul turf on 2017's *Robert Cray & Hi Rhythm* (Jay-Vee), collaborating with musicians

from the legendary Memphis-based Hi Records. His new album, *That's What I Heard* (Nozzle/Thirty Tigers), sports a menu of vintage covers, rarities from the r&b and gospel archives, and old-school-style originals that fit snugly into the program.

“Some of the [older] songs on the record sound like brand-new stuff,” Cray said. “I think the music is timeless.”

Cray spoke with DownBeat on a recent morning at a coffee house in Santa Barbara, California, just over the hill from where he lives with his family in the Santa Ynez Valley. The release of *That's What I Heard* was looming large on his calendar. Two days after the interview, he would head to Port Chester, New York, to be a logical puzzle piece in the “Thrill is Gone” tribute to the late blues master B.B. King, featuring such acclaimed guitarists as Buddy Guy, John Scofield, Jimmie Vaughan and Gary Clark Jr., with drummer Steve Jordan serving as music director.



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Robert Cray recorded his latest album, *That's What I Heard*, at the Capitol Records building in Hollywood.

Jordan has been Cray's close ally for decades, going back to their meeting on the Chuck Berry tribute/documentary project *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll!* in 1987. He has produced six of Cray's albums, including *Take Your Shoes Off* and *That's What I Heard*.

True to his deep blues roots, Cray boasts a sturdy link to King, an artist he opened for and shared stages with on many occasions—as has happened with a long list of now-bygone blues greats Cray had direct musical contact with.

"I was talking with [bassist and longtime friend] Richard [Cousins] about that," Cray said, discussing his connection to the past. "A lot of the younger kids now who are doing the blues, they haven't had the opportunity that we did, to play with a lot of the old people, who are gone now: Albert Collins, Albert King, John Lee Hooker, now B.B., and Muddy [Waters] and on and on.

"We talked about how different it was, and how we were able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and pick up how to back up and just see it directly. It's a different thing now." By the logic of cultural and generational continuum, Cray's own current status finds him as a veteran blues legend in his own right.

The title of *That's What I Heard* serves as a testament to Cray's own musical upbringing, after he and Jordan settled on the largely vintage material and vibe. Call it truth in advertising. "The title came after listening and after the selection of covers that we did, the whole overall view of the varieties of music," he said. "All that is stuff that I listened to or was inspired by, coming up."

But despite appearances, the new album wasn't approached with the intent of venturing into a personal "roots discovery" mode. Jordan had thought of the 1965 Sam Cooke album *Shake* as a general template for the proj-

ect, so he sent Cray a compilation of vintage soul tracks to peruse. Cray immediately latched onto Don Gardner's snaky-funky number "My Baby Likes To Boogaloo," as well as Billy Sha-Rae single, "Do It," both of which became key tracks on the new album. Dipping further into the archival pool, Cray pays homage to his heroes Curtis Mayfield ("You'll Want Me Back") and Bobby "Blue" Bland ("You're The One").

History also sneaked into the logistics of the album's progress when Jordan booked the band for a week of recording in the fabled Capitol Records building in Hollywood. These are the hallowed studios where Cooke, Nat "King" Cole, Frank Sinatra, The Beach Boys, Michael Jackson and Paul McCartney have recorded. Jordan recruited veteran studio engineer-producer Al Schmitt, who worked with Cooke, to help with the Cray sessions, alongside engineer Niko Bolas.

"This was the first time we've ever recorded at Capitol," Cray said, "and it has such history, and there is the echo chamber that Les Paul built. You just turn the knob, and there it is. It's under the parking lot at Capitol Studios," he said with a chuckle. "They have all these old microphones, and Nat Cole's piano is in the room that our keyboard player got to use. The history there, and the vibe, rubs off at least a little bit. At least you think it does."

The new album also marks the first time Cray has cut a bona fide gospel tune, the Sensational Nightingales' 1956 "Burying Ground." Cray's testimonial fervor in gospel-singer mode seemingly comes naturally, a byproduct of his deep ties to r&b, although his background didn't come out of the church, a common lineage of such iconic soulsters as Cooke, Aretha Franklin and Al Green.

"I went to church for a little bit as a kid," Cray recalled, "but I didn't do it all the time. But my

dad played gospel music on Sundays. Later on, after he got out of the military, he started a little quartet, which I never got to see, but they practiced a lot at the house. He liked a lot of that music. I listened to it as a kid, and when I got into the r&b and blues thing and started hanging out with my buddies, I got back into it again. It became something we did.

"When Steve suggested that we do a gospel tune, I just went back to my records and pulled that one out. I played it for them, and everyone just fell right in like they knew it."

Despite his relative neophyte status as a gospel singer, Cray said, "I'm influenced by a lot of gospel-influenced singers. About my favorite singer is a guy by the name of O.V. Wright. He sang with the Sunset Travelers, a gospel group. I like him because of the fact that he comes from church and he can sing a ballad like nobody's business, and just take you on a journey with him from the start."

Once in the studio, Cray abides by the venerable method of recording live with the band, in real time, eschewing digital manipulation or excessive overdubbing. Asked to describe his approach in the studio, Cray said, "You do it and then you have to tell yourself to walk away. To me and Steve, that's how we like to work it. You can't really go for perfection. You go for performance." With a chuckle, he added, "You'd be searching forever looking for perfection."

Cray's real-time/real-feel insistence is part of the common ground he shares with Jordan, as musician and as producer. "Steve is all about the vibe. Because he's an active musician, he knows how to set the vibe. He knows how to get everybody onto the same page in the studio.

"When we did the Hi Rhythm record, I had met some of the guys from Hi Rhythm, and Steve played drums on it. When we got to Willie Mitchell's studio, Steve goes immediately behind the drum kit and starts playing. Everybody just fell in. No idea what we were doing, but just fell in, and for 20 to 25 minutes, there was just steady playing. And that's how he got the vibe going."

Jordan's assessment of Cray illustrated the mutual admiration: "First of all, [Robert is] a wonderful human being. He's a joy to be around and I'm happy to call him a very dear friend. And he happens to be incredible, as a musician and as a singer. Guitar players want to hear guitar solos, but I think of him as a singer first. When I work with him, I focus on getting the right songs for him to sing, not the right songs for him to play."

As both guitarist and singer, Cray laid the groundwork of his blues obsession during his teen years. Was he, in fact, a blues snob, to the exclusion of pop music of the day? "I think so, initially," he said with a slight smile, "because of the fact that I played guitar and was a big fan of people like Albert Collins and B.B. and all. Then, with the r&b stuff, that's all we wanted to do—play r&b and blues.

“When I grew up, I listened to music my parents were playing, especially in the early ’60s. We lived in Germany for two-and-a-half years. My dad was in the military and he was stationed in Munich, Germany. My parents had bought this great big Grundig console, with the tape deck, record player, short-wave radio and all that stuff. We bought records all the time at the [Post Exchange, a U.S. Army base retail store]. In the early ’60s, they bought jazz and blues, r&b and soul, all that stuff. So, I listened to all that.”

“When we moved back to the States in the early ’60s [to Tacoma, Washington], the Beatles came out and radio changed. I was a big fan of the Beatles, and still am. As 15- and 16-year-old kids, we got the blues bug. That just became the focus, and I shut out everything else. Then it wasn’t very long afterwards, I listened to Otis Redding records and stuff like that again, and let everything else back in. But for a short while, we just absorbed all we could by listening to records by the blues people and seeing those people.”

By the late ’80s, Cray was part of the rootsy vanguard of young, hot blues guitarists, alongside fellow Stratocaster blaster Stevie Ray Vaughan, helping to usher in a new emphasis on blues and roots music in major label/mainstream avenues. “That was a special period,” Cray said. “MTV helped a lot, too. Epic signed Stevie. That’s how record companies go. One record company gets theirs and then the next one’s gotta get theirs. But it was fine, because we got selected, so that was good for us.”

“At the time, there was this revival of roots music. Los Lobos was signed, and The Blasters were signed. There was a big resurgence going on. The rockabilly thing was happening. So, it was a good time for more roots-oriented music.”

Tragedy struck when Vaughan and four others were killed in a helicopter crash on Aug. 27, 1990, only hours after Cray’s band had played with him at Alpine Valley Music Theatre in East Troy, Wisconsin. At the time, Cray and his bandmates had been friends with Vaughan since the late 1970s. “We hadn’t seen [Vaughan] for a half a year or so,” Cray recalled. “It was a good time backstage, reminiscing, talking with everybody. Stevie and Jimmie were just coming out with the Vaughan Brothers album [*Family Style*]. Everybody was rolling. We were on major labels and all that stuff. And then we lose Stevie. It was really rough, really sad.”

On a more positive note, Cray said he appreciated “the one thing that having had the major label success has done for us: It has put us in the eyes of people in different parts of the country and outside of the country, too, so we can do the live shows.”

By this point, Cray’s songbook has grown to massive proportions, making the task of devising a setlist rather complicated. “Now,” he said, “it’s a matter of trying to remember them all.

You try to warm up some of them at sound check. Sometimes, you just take a chance. I always say to the guys, ‘No guts, no glory.’ If we make a mistake, we laugh it off.”

That’s What I Heard represents another entry in the ongoing Robert Cray story, and one with a retrospective emphasis.

“I look at it as a reflection of a lot of the different stuff that we like, and that covers a lot of bases,” the guitarist said. “There’s no down-and-dirty blues on it, though. That’s one thing. But that’s for another record.”

Could that fact alienate the more hardcore blues fan contingent?

“I don’t think about that,” Cray said. “We’ve gotten knocked a lot for that, but at the same time, *Strong Persuader* wasn’t a blues record, either. We are who we are. We play blues, but we play rhythm-and-blues, as well. I don’t think about having a record that covers all the bases. We do what we do. If you try to please everybody with your recordings, you hurt yourself. I think you have to be who you are and do what you do, when you do it.”

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