

William Bell
This Is Where I Live
Biography

This is where I live
This is where I give
All my love, all my time, all my money, every dime
This is where I live

“My thing as a singer is truth,” says Bell. “And if I can hear truth in a song, then I keep it.” Since his earliest days as an artist, this legendary Stax Records soul man has been delivering the truth with one of the most remarkable voices in popular music. While other R & B titans have made their legacies with vocal gymnastics, screams and shouts, Bell has carved out his niche with a more subtle approach. His style is all about phrasing and inflection, simmering tension and restraint. It's flowing and graceful, a kind of Tai Chi Soul. And whether he's singing a ballad or an uptempo tune, Bell always has a direct line to the poetry of the heart.

Now, decades after his last major release, William Bell returns to the relaunched Stax label with his definitive statement as an artist, *This Is Where I Live*. A 12-song collaboration with Grammy-winning producer John Leventhal, it's a beautiful summary of Bell's journey as a singer and songwriter. The album contains echoes of the past but, more importantly, it embodies a contemporary flair that points the way forward to a new chapter in an already storied career.

“This is the first major label album I've done in a long time,” Bell says, “and to have it be part of Stax is just great. I feel like I've come full circle, and that gives me new energy, like I'm starting all over again.”

In 1961, Bell was one of the first artists to sign with Stax Records, where his self-penned solo debut “You Don't Miss Your Water” was one of the young label's early hits. After serving two years in the Army, Bell established himself as an MVP at Stax, co-writing hits with Booker T. Jones, both for himself (including stone soul classics like “Everyday Will Be A Holiday,” “I Forgot To Be Your Lover” and “Private Number”) and others (“Born Under A Bad Sign” for Albert King became one of the most-covered blues songs ever written). His songs were recorded by everyone from fellow soul artists Otis Redding and King Curtis to rock bands like Cream and The Byrds. He didn't release his own debut album until 1967, but *The Soul Of A Bell* has been widely acknowledged as a seminal work. Bell sailed from strength to strength into the early '70s, when soul music faded and Stax folded.

He recalls, “When that happened, I thought, 'Well, I guess I'm not going to record

anymore.' So I moved to Atlanta and started a label called Peachtree Records, and I did a lot of producing of other artists. Then in 1977, Mercury Records approached me about making an album. I wasn't sure about it, so I did four sides. "Trying To Love Two" came out of that, which was a huge hit."

But that moment didn't last, and Bell went back to the 'business' side of the music business, producing and releasing albums for other artists on his own Wilbe Records label. As the years passed, Bell saw his songs covered by artists ranging from Billy Idol to Carole King to Warren Haynes to Sturgill Simpson, and he became a talisman for a new generation of hip-hop artists who have sampled his recordings. Bell was also inducted into both the Memphis and Georgia Music Halls of Fame.

With such a rich legacy, Bell recognized that a new album would have a lot to live up to. He needed just the right collaborator. And he found it in John Leventhal. The triple threat producer–songwriter–multi-instrumentalist, best known for his work with singer-songwriters like Shawn Colvin and Rosanne Cash, might've initially seemed an unlikely fit. But Leventhal says, "Soul music was a huge imprint for me, so I jumped at the chance to produce this project. I was real familiar with William. The only caveat I had was that I wanted to write the songs with him."

Bell says, "John and I clicked right away. We sat for two or three weeks, just talking about concepts and the kind of record we would make. I wanted it to be a little bit broader than just soul music."

Leventhal adds, "And as we started to collaborate, the central question was, 'What feels real for William?' There are a lot of categories of lyrics that don't really make sense for an artist of William's age. Part of the challenge as a co-writer was to find a way in lyrically that felt like, 'This is something worth singing about.'" Leventhal also brought in other writers, including Rosanne Cash, Marc Cohn and Cory Chisel.

"At my age," says Bell, "I've had a lot of experience, and I know what my limitations are, what my faults are as a human being, and I utilize that. When I approach a lyric or a melody, I'm brutally honest. And writing with John, and also Marc Cohn, they were sensitive to that. And yet, how I approach and present it feels a little more refined."

Honest and refined are the two words that come to mind as the album unfolds. "The Three of Me" reaches deep into the pocket of a classic Memphis mid-tempo groove for some unflinching past-present-future self-examination. Addiction to an unhealthy love stirs the hard-grooving "Poison in the Well" while the reimagining of his classic "Born Under A Bad Sign" takes on more vivid colors and a deeper resonance. When Bell shifts into ballad-mode, the effect is breathtaking. The grain of his voice, the intimacy of it, on standout tracks like the sweetly tender "I Will Take Care Of You" (written for a dear

friend recovering from health problems) and the cover of Jesse Winchester's "All Your Stories" define the very essence of soul singing. Throughout, Leventhal surrounds Bell with arrangements constructed of classic elements – loping drums, plump bass, chinking electric guitars, splashes of organ and horns – but always finds fresh ways of recombining them so the language transcends mere tribute. *This Is Where I Live* doesn't reinvent the wheel so much as give it some nifty new treads to carry it into the modern world.

Leventhal says, "There was a lot of incredibly great musical language that was created at places like Stax, Motown and Muscle Shoals. But you can never make the records better than the originals. The real challenge is how do you honor that tradition, but keep it vibrant. That's the kind of challenge I love, and luckily, William was willing to go along with me on it. And every time William opened his mouth to sing, man, it was a moment of inspiration. The timbre, the quality, the depth - I don't know that there are many artists like him. One who is still doing it, and can still do it in a meaningful way."

Bell says, "John is an extraordinary musician and arranger. When you're working with a producer, you have to get into each other's soul to find the creativity. We had a good working relationship that turned into a friendship. I haven't had that with anyone since I used to work with Booker T."

As Bell looks forward to a busy year full of promotion and live performances, he's enthusiastic about the new vistas ahead. He says, "I like staying active. I don't want any grass to grow under my feet, so I keep moving. I hope that when people listen to this new album, they will hear my growth as an artist, and the truth in the lyrical content. And as always, I'm hoping that they can hear the songs and say, 'Oh wow, that could've been written about my life.'"

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