

A close-up photograph of Leon Russell performing on stage. He is wearing a white cowboy hat, sunglasses, and has a long white beard and hair. He is singing into a microphone. The background is dark with red and orange stage lights.

On Stage

Leon
Russell
HE'S PLAYED
WITH THEM ALL

by Glenn R. Swift

He is one of rock n' roll's most accomplished and versatile musicians. His long and storied career includes collaborations with some of pop music's most hallowed icons. Jerry Lee Lewis, Ricky Nelson, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, George Harrison, Ringo Starr, Eric Clapton, Joe Cocker, David Crosby, Dave Mason, Stevie Nicks, Edgar Winter, B.B. King, Aretha Franklin, Luther Vandross, Rita Coolidge, Willie Nelson, Ike & Tina Turner, The Rolling Stones – all share one thing in common.

They all played with Leon Russell.

Fifty years after leaving the plains of Oklahoma for the musical wonderland of Southern California, Russell still brings audiences to their feet.

"It's something to do to keep me from having to get a real job," cracked Russell, 66.

Born to a musical family in Lawton, Oklahoma, young Leon began taking piano lessons at age 4. It seemed like the natural thing to do.

"My mother and dad played a duet piano deal. My mom played the top and my dad played the bottom. I also had two or three aunts who played."

And what did this legend of rock n' roll listen to as a kid?

"I had a membership in the Columbia Record Club. I picked up the category Big Jazz Band. Benny Goodman and Miles Davis were the first records I listened to. I also had some friends who turned me on to blues and gospel, and they gave me a lot of those records to listen to."

Leon's family eventually moved to Tulsa, where he began playing in nightclubs at the ripe old age of 14. Three years later, after graduating from Tulsa's Will Rogers High School, Leon took his band, the Starlighters, on the road with Jerry Lee Lewis for nearly two months. It was then that he made the fortuitous decision to head to the West Coast, where he quickly earned a name for himself on the LA club scene. He received a big break in 1964 when he was named a member of the house band on ABC Television's *Shindig!*, a music variety show which showcased the top pop acts. Before long, Russell was working with some of the best musicians in Hollywood.

Over the next few years, Russell became an integral part of recording mogul Phil Spector's studio group, playing backup for acts like The Byrds, Gary Lewis and the Playboys, and Herb Alpert on some of the most popular hits of the 1960s. In 1967, he built his own recording studio and recorded his first LP, *Look Inside the Asylum Choir*.



Leon Russell at the height of his popularity in the late 1970s.

Two years later, Russell wrote his first hit, "Delta Lady," recorded by Joe Cocker. Russell went on to organize Cocker's *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* tour. The Russell-written "Superstar," sung by Rita Coolidge on that tour, would go on to be a big hit by The Carpenters, Luther Vandross and others. Shortly thereafter, Russell released a solo album, *Leon Russell*, which included the original version of the popular, "A Song for You." Also in 1970, Russell played piano on Dave Mason's album, *Alone Together*.

In the summer of 1971, Russell was asked by George Harrison to play piano on Badfinger's third album, *Straight Up*. The piano that complements George Harrison's slide guitar on Badfinger's mega hit "Day After Day" is played by Russell from those Apple sessions. The sessions were interrupted because many of the musicians on *Straight Up* left for New York City to participate in the Concert For Bangladesh, organized by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, at which Russell performed a memorable foot-stomping rendition of the Jagger-Richards rock anthem, "Jumpin' Jack Flash."

Later that year, Russell played on recording sessions with B.B. King, Eric Clapton, and Bob Dylan. He also released two studio albums a few months after under his own name, *Leon Russell And The Shelter People* and *Asylum Choir II*. It was during this time that Russell met Freddie King, whose career he helped to revive by collaborating with him on three of his albums for Shelter.

In 1972, Russell's album *Carney* reached #2 on the charts, fueled by the blockbuster single "Tightrope." In addition, the LP contained a tune called "This Masquerade," which the Carpenters also recorded, and years later, would win a Grammy for George Benson.

His 1975 album *Will O' the Wisp* was commercially successful, along with its single "Lady Blue." That same year, Russell married Mary McCreary, a former member of Sly & the Family Stone's background vocal group Little Sister. The two collaborated on *The Wedding Album* in 1976. The following year, Russell and McCreary reunited for another album. In 1969, Russell and Willie Nelson had a number one duet on the Billboard country music charts with the Elvis Presley classic "Heartbreak Hotel." He spent the next two years touring with the New Grass Revival and released two more albums with Paradise before the label folded.

For several years, Russell stayed largely out of the music spotlight, releasing *Anything Can Happen* in 1992, then two more albums in 1998 and 1999. He continues to tour 52 years after taking the stage at his first Tulsa nightclub gig. His bassist, Jack Wessel, has been with Russell close to 25 years. His son with McCreary, Teddy Jack (named after Gary Busey's character on Sartain's show), has also toured with his father, as have his sisters Tina Rose and Sugaree Noel.

Looking back over his career, Russell was clearly one of the first artists to fuse rock, blues, jazz and country influences into a distinctive genre. Nevertheless, Russell remains modest about his accomplishments. When asked how his music has changed over the years, Russell jokingly replied: "It's 35 years older."

The venerable rock n' roller does have a sentimental side. When asked if he had a memorable experience with one of the great stars that he would like to share, Russell said this: "I had just finished a recording session with Aretha Franklin at Columbia Records that included a big orchestra when the string players began tapping their bows on their stands to applaud her. I hadn't seen that before or since."

As for what he's doing now, Russell recently released a new CD, *Angel In Disguise*.

"A friend of mine, Mike Lawler, called me and said that if I would bring him piano tracks with a vocal, he would do all the rest of the instrumentation, the mixing and the mastering. I couldn't pass that up. I spent about six hours on that record and my friend spent six months. It was a great experience." **PBG**

Speaking of great experiences, don't miss out on a rare opportunity to hear the one and only, Leon Russell, live and in person with yet another of the great legends of rock music, Dave Mason, at the Sunrise Theatre in historic downtown Ft. Pierce on Saturday, November 22 at 7pm. Call (772) 461-4775 to reserve your tickets now! For more information, visit www.sunrisetheatre.com.

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