

DELTA GROOVE

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TRACY NELSON

"Tracy Nelson isn't so much a singer as she is a force field — a blues practitioner of tremendous vocal power and emotional range." —**Alanna Nash, Entertainment Weekly**

". . . a bad white girl . . ." —**Etta James, from her autobiography, Rage To Live**

She has one of the signature voices of her generation. That natural gift has always guided Tracy Nelson's soul; indeed allowed her to both write *and* seek out the deeper songs regardless of niche or genre. A fierce singer of truth, a fountain of the deepest heartache, she is an ultimate communicator and has regularly destroyed audiences across decades of performing. She is one of the few female singers who has had hit records in both blues and country genres, performing with everyone from Muddy Waters to Willie Nelson to Marcia Ball and Irma Thomas, with Grammy® nominations for both her country and blues efforts. John Swenson, writing in *Rolling Stone*, asserted, "Tracy Nelson proves that the human voice is the most expressive instrument in creation." With ***Victim of the Blues*** (Delta Groove), her 26th album in just over five decades, she has circled fully, back to the original music from South Side Chicago that mesmerized her teenaged mind in the mid-1960s.

"Several years ago," Nelson reveals now, "I was driving with a friend across Montana, tooling down I-90 hauling a 1962 Bambi II Airstream trailer, the one that looks like a toaster. We were making a trip to Hebron, North Dakota where my grandfather homesteaded and built up a 2000+ acre ranch which he sold in the early '60s." The current owners were about to tear down the old claim shack and she wanted to go back there one last time. The car windows were down and national blues DJ Bill Wax was on their XM Satellite Radio — the great Otis Spann's "One More Mile," from his 1964 Prestige album, rolled out of the truck speakers. "It had always been a song I wanted to do" Nelson recalls, "and that started me thinking about all the great Chicago blues songs and artists I had heard in my formative years, especially Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. This was around the time I made my first record, ***Deep Are the Roots***." She thought too of just a few years ago when she was touring nationally as part of a well-known Chicago blues revue, playing a lot of blues festivals. "The music I heard back in the day in Chicago and what I was hearing from the current crop of blues acts bore little relation to each other."

From that memorable day in the Badlands hearing "One More Mile," she decided it was time to make a record she says, with "some of those fine old songs and be as true and authentic to the style as a Norwegian white girl (is that redundant?) from Wisconsin could manage it." This new album, ***Victim of the Blues***, is a hand-picked collection of songs, most written by Nelson's early heroes: Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Percy Mayfield, Lightning Hopkins, Joe Tex and Howlin' Wolf. She has chosen 11 songs of the day, ones that were spilling out of AM radios from second-story apartments, rolled-down car windows, and live from darkened clubs with exotic names like El Macambo.

The album kicks off with a rollicking Wolf tune, "You Be Mine," propelled by piano man Jimmy Pugh (Robert Cray, John Lee Hooker, Etta James) and tough guitarist Mike Henderson (The Bluebloods), with slapping doghouse bass from Byron House (Robert Plant's

Band of Joy) consummately conjuring Willie Dixon, as Tracy Nelson's voice soars. One contemporary song, "Lead a Horse to Water," Nelson notes, "is by a wonderful singer/songwriter named Earl Thomas, who *should* have been born in that era." The snaky, shimmering Pops Staples sound from guitarist Henderson along with the gospel background vocals (Vicki Carrico, Reba Russell, John Cowan, Terry Tucker and Nick Nixon) would make Mavis grin.

A pair of Jimmy Reed ("the great Chicago blues communicator" —Robert Santelli) classics follows: "Shoot Him" pops like a wry firecracker, complete with rimshot/gunshot from drummer John Gardner (Earl Scruggs, The Dixie Chicks, James Taylor) and Henderson's unexpected (and dismayed) shout. Nelson's pal and guest singer/piano woman Marcia Ball jumps in on the action too. And on "It's a Sin" Nelson delivers perfect slow-drag vocals. (Lyrics on both are by Mary Reed, Jimmy's longtime collaborator and wife.)

Women howling never sounded so damn classy in Wolf's "Howlin' for My Baby." Here Nelson is joined by Texan and her fellow Blues Broad, Angela Strehli. "One More Mile," the Otis Spann song that inspired the whole album, is a true tribute to the Delta/Chicago bluesmen who brought their soul and musical skill to future generations, and could be considered a bookend to Nelson's 1968 version of her Memphis Slim namesake song, "Mother Earth." Again, Nelson just tears it up, deeply, cathartically, achingly.

Percy Mayfield's minor-key masterpiece "Stranger in My Own Hometown" is seductively propulsive thanks to Gardner's brushes and Pugh's touch on the Hammond B-3. The dramatic and tender caution Nelson offers in "The Love You Save," a 1966 Joe Tex gem, pleads for intimate understanding in a timely, worldly way.

A New Orleans second-line beat infuses Nelson's take on the dark Lightning Hopkin's "Feel So Bad" with the notion to dance away the pain. And when Nelson intones "feel like a ball game on a rainy day," you can taste the humidity, and the clouds overhead.

"Without Love," written by Danny Small, made famous by Tom Jones, Irma Thomas and Elvis Presley, closes, magnificent in presentation, humble and redemptive — "I had conquered the world, but what did I have? Without love, I had nothing at all." Singer John Cowen matches Nelson's explosive power as he takes the high part and goes to church.

The only piece on this album from the first generation blues era — replete with banjo, steppin' bass from House and Pugh's whorehouse piano — is by Ma Rainey, whom Nelson defines as "my first musical influence when I started to sing seriously. It's the title tune, 'Victim of the Blues' — and the story of my life . . ."

Nelson's listening education began in the early 1960s when, while growing up in Madison, Wisconsin, she immersed herself in the R&B she heard beamed into her bedroom from Nashville's WLAC-AM. "It was like hearing music from Mars," she recalls of the alien sounds that stirred her so. As an undergrad at the University of Wisconsin, she combined her musical passions singing blues and folk at coffeehouses and R&B at frat parties as one of three singers fronting a band (including keyboardist Ben Sidran) called the Fabulous Imitations. She was all of 18. In 1964 she went to Chicago to record her first album, ***Deep Are the Roots***, produced by Sam Charters and released on Prestige Records. "We hired Charlie Musselwhite to play harp on that record and he and I connected and hung together for a while. I'd go visit him in Chicago and he'd take me to the clubs on the South Side. That's where I first met Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf."

A short time later, Tracy moved to San Francisco and, in the midst of that era's psychedelic explosion, formed Mother Earth, a group that was named after the fatalistic Memphis Slim song (which she sang at his 1988 funeral). Mother Earth the group, true to its origin more grounded than freaky, was nonetheless a major attraction at the Fillmore, where they

shared stages with Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Eric Burdon. In 1968 Mother Earth recorded its first album, which included Nelson's own composition "Down So Low." It became her signature song, and is considered by all a staggering achievement in the canon of rock music. *Esquire* magazine called it "one of the five saddest songs ever written." It has been regularly covered by great women singers through the years, including Etta James, Linda Ronstadt, Maria Muldaur and, in 2010, Cyndi Lauper, who chose it for her own Grammy-nominated blues album.

In 1969, the second Mother Earth album, ***Make a Joyful Noise***, was recorded in Nashville, leading Tracy to rent a house and later buy a small farm in the area where she still lives today. As a side project, she soon recorded ***Mother Earth Presents Tracy Nelson Country*** for which she coaxed Elvis Presley's original Sun-era guitarist Scotty Moore to co-produce (with Pete Drake) and play on her rendition of Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's All Right Mama." In a way, the phenomenon that is Tracy Nelson is encapsulated in that circumstance: it's a blues song, made famous by a rock 'n' roller, recorded on a country album by a folkie turned Fillmore goddess, produced by a rockabilly legend and the preeminent pedal steel player of the day.

After six Mother Earth albums for Mercury Records and Reprise Records, Nelson continued to record throughout the '70s as a solo artist on various labels. In 1974, she garnered her first Grammy nomination for "After the Fire Is Gone," a track from her Atlantic Records album, a hit duet with Willie Nelson that Tracy reprised on her 2003 album, ***Live From Cell Block D***. Willie (who, despite the rumors, is not related to Tracy although he contends they just might be "the illegitimate children of Ozzie and Harriet") said of Tracy's remarkable pipes, "that tremendous voice has only gotten better over the years."

The highlight of Nelson's tenure with Rounder Records throughout the 1990s was surely ***Sing It!***, the brilliant, big-selling 1998 album starring Nelson, swamp blues/rocker Marcia Ball and soul queen Irma Thomas. "She has a magnificent voice. She can truly sell a song," said Thomas, and music critics enthusiastically agreed — "Nelson repeatedly stops the show with her enormous, wraparound voice, transforming tunes like 'In Tears' from simple country-flavored ballads into cathartic emotional experiences," wrote Michael Point (*Austin American-Statesman*). And drawing from the recent albums she did with Memphis International, Nelson gave fans worldwide the chance to hear her live (in the great jailhouse album tradition of Johnny Cash and B.B. King) when she released ***Live From Cell Block D***, recorded at the West Tennessee Detention Center in Mason, Tennessee. It was a profound experience for her and reinforced "the value of sharing music in every venue imaginable."

In late July, 2010, Nelson was featured on NPR's "Weekend Edition," a little more than a month after the tragic fire that took the 100+ year old farmhouse she shared with longtime partner Mike Dysinger. She was just beginning to deal with the aftermath of losing her home and many of her personal belongings. "The firemen told us they could save one room — we had to decide — we said 'the studio.'" This album, ***Victim of the Blues***, is the album that miraculously survived the fire. And that is the reason that the first people Nelson thanks in this album's notes are the Burns, Tennessee Volunteer Fire Department.

To date, there have been several benefits across the country to assist the two in rebuilding their farmhouse on the land they love. Seeing as how her first Grammy nomination was for "After the Fire Is Gone," with Willie Nelson, she would say drolly, "It seemed like the perfect thing to call these events." Nelson had titled this album before the fire, so the irony is not missed on her. ***Victim of the Blues*** is as deeply felt as anything she has recorded in her exceptional career; she is a soul survivor.

—Mindy Giles