

MEMPHISCALLING

Memphis Calling session - vocal booth at Sam Phillips Recording by Steve Roberts

Emma Wilson Go For What You Know

I want to represent a modern English woman!

"There's something about doing what you know, isn't there?" considers Emma Wilson, ahead of the release of her new album, *Memphis Calling*, the long-awaited follow-up to her breakthrough 2022 release, *Wish Her Well*. With a grounding in the music of Hi Records, Chess and Stax, she admits that over the years she got taken along a rockier path as the gigs and tours increased but, "on this record, I want to represent a modern English woman, who's deeply influenced by the music of Memphis." Emma talks to Clive Richardson.

Opening our conversation, I ventured that with *Wish Her Well* doing so well and getting good airplay it had proved a major step forwards for her - actually about this time last year. She agreed, adding that the lockdown had actually given her the chance to think, breathe and be more creative.

"I was planning to release *Wish Her Well* myself but through the wonders of the internet, I was spotted by Frank Roszak, the American publicist, who was looking after Eliza Neals at the time and a lot of other really cooking acts. He found me on Facebook and said that I needed to meet Johnny Phillips who might distribute my album for me. So I signed a distribution deal with Johnny Phillips of Select-O-Hits, and that meant I had a great publicist in America, I had the team at Select-O-Hits doing all my digital promo and they linked me up with Proper Music in the U.K. who distribute me in Europe. That all did things I couldn't have done myself, regardless of how good the album was!"

I suggest that how it all began was an important factor for her, the stepping stone she has made to now 'live the dream' by recording in Memphis. "*Wish Her Well* came out and I had never met Johnny Phillips. Strange things happen in life: my father's death in 2014 was a huge factor in the way I thought about life. There are so many people who are important to my career that I want to meet, who's going to know what will happen? The stars really aligned, I was lucky enough to go to Nashville in January to write with Gary Burr, who happens to be an old friend of my brother from years ago and has always seen me as 'Simon's kid sister!' However, having heard my music, he was really keen to write with me and we wrote four songs, two of which are on *Memphis Calling*. I just hopped on a Greyhound and went to Memphis to visit Select-O-Hits. I told them I was coming, didn't just knock on the door, and there was this iconic building. I walked in and Johnny said 'You've come

6,000 miles just to see us?' They are lovely people, totally unaffected by the impact Sam Phillips had on the world. He said, "You should really come and record at Sam Phillips Recording Studios, we've just put in the refurbished STAX console." Those words went in and my head started buzzing, and I said, "When?" The seeds had been sewn!

"They said to me I could bring in whoever I wanted, knowing I had contacts in Nashville but I didn't have a producer or band in America. I thought, "Come on Emma, you can make this work!" I realised that Scott Bomar was the Studio Manager at Sam Phillips Recording and is a great producer: he's on site, he's in the Bo-Keys, will he do it? We got in touch, a couple of Zoom meetings, and we clicked. We were both honouring the music of Memphis, he works with Leroy and Charles Hodges - Scott also worked with Howard Grimes for a long time. We got on very well but, more importantly, we loved the same music, a mixture of soul and rock and blues and he agreed to make the album. Scott asked who I wanted on it, I said I'd like "the A-team" and he said to give him a week. I was in the car park at Tesco's when my phone rang and it was Scott, to tell me he had a band: Charles, Leroy, Hubbie, Steve Potts on drums, Joe Restivo on guitars and the hottest Memphis horn section, Kirk Smothers and Marc Franklin."

Emma pauses in the conversation as she recalls these events, understandably becoming quite emotional in the process. Three weeks later, she was on the plane to Memphis. "I thought of all the musicians I'd worked with, my friend Chris Fletcher, who was percussionist with Morrissey Mullen, I was in his Revue Band for years and learned such a lot - timing, groove, how to deliver a song, how to wait, how to learn that space is most important in music. I dug all that up and told myself, "Emma, you can do this." Then we picked the songs - some originals and some carefully chosen covers - and I asked Scott if he knew anybody

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to write charts out. He replied just that these guys don't need charts! The recording process was magical!"

I compliment Emma on how the album has turned out, that she has the talent to let the music breathe with the timing and space therein: turns out I was the first journalist or DJ to have heard the final album in full. "Clive, it means a lot to me that you're the first, with all your experience in this genre. We had two days of pre-production, then on day three, dah dah dah, dum (*she vocalises a drum roll*) – the musicians arrived. Charles Hodges, tall and slender, dripping in gorgeous turquoise jewellery, very cool, wearing a football shirt with 99 on it, said, 'Are you the artiste?' and took both of my hands and clasped them. Then Leroy came in; very tall, statuesque, broad-shouldered, plugs in. Hubbie, what a character! Hubbie Turner, great sense of humour, and Steve Potts, big strong hands, great drummer. Joe Restivo, a young cat on guitar. Twenty minutes and we were rolling, no chit-chat, very professional musicians! 'Water' is a great Southern song, Steve Cropper related it was the only song they let him sing on! 'I Still Love You' is an Ann Peebles song that Willie Mitchell wrote - 'Poppa' they called him, the musicians spoke so lovingly about him saying they "used to do this with 'Poppa'". With 'Hoochie Coochie Mama', Scott said I needed to include a song that's going to get me noticed by the blues festivals, and instead of doing it as an Etta James cover, we did it our own way. We did everything 'live' in the sessions – after we cut 'Hoochie', Hubbie Turner sat back in his chair and said, "She's not from Middlesbrough, she's from Mississippi!" That made me smile!

"For 'Since I Fell for You', we were sitting in the control room and I knew we needed a ballad. Hubbie asked who I was into, I suggested Fontella Bass. Her version of the song came up on streaming, but would not have been right, so we were sitting having a Reuben sandwich (*It's an American sandwich she explains to my raised eyebrow, "beef, rye, pickles..."*) when Leroy asked what was happening, we mentioned 'Since I Fell' and he said, "What, the Lenny Welch song?" (*Welch had a 1962 hit on Cadence with the Ella Johnson song*). So we played it, with the slow intro, and Charles said, "Let's work out a key for you Emma." They were so kind and supportive and so it came about. I almost forgot Don Bryant - Scott said he and Don wrote a song that was on Don's album 'What Kind Of Love', and would I like to cut it? I said I'd love to but would Don sing on it with me? There was a hiatus of two days then Scott phoned me: "I have good news, we have Don on the record!" Don arrived in black shirt, black trousers, black pork-pie hat, like a little jumping jack of energy. He walked in and Leroy Hodges rose out of his chair, said, "Good afternoon Mr B.". Don Bryant looked at Leroy, said simply "Hi, Junior", he didn't need to say anymore!"

From Middlesbrough to Memphis, Emma Wilson is indeed going back to what she knows, to where her roots lie, bringing her own unique sensibilities to a contemporary record that is, not to put too fine a point on it, an absolute belter.

Clive Richardson
emmawilson.net

Memphis Calling is released
on 27th October

MEMPHIS CALLING ♪ EMMA WILSON



You've come
6,000 miles just
to see us?

Image by Christopher Reed