

Leon Russell: Feb. 7, 1992---THE ONLY INTERVIEW I'VE DONE BY Fax....

He is a stranger in a strange land.

An enduring architect of American pop music, Leon Russell is also a notoriously reserved star. The last time he played Bidly Mulligan's the encore was so emotional that Russell scooted off stage straight into his tour bus.

And when I wanted to ask Russell about his contributions to contemporary music - as a session player for Phil Spector, sideman and songwriter for Gary Lewis and the Playboys, and recent collaborator with Bruce Hornsby - I had to fax questions to his Nashville studio.

"I require a short time to think about replies to strangers and sometimes am nervous around strangers," Russell faxed back. He'll appear solo, surrounded by several million dollars of sound gear, at 10:30 tonight at Bidly Mulligan's, 7644 N. Sheridan.

Expect new things as well as Russell's hits - "Tight Rope," "This Masquerade" (popularized by George Benson) and perhaps "Superstar" - which Russell cowrote with Bonnie Bramlett and is currently being covered in concert by Luther Vandross.

The gravelly voiced Russell is cut from the same veiled cloth as J. J. Cale, another reclusive Oklahoman. Russell was born 50 years ago this April in Lawton, Okla. Both his parents played the piano, and Leon learned music when he was very young. He grew up fast, forming his first band at age 14. Russell played trumpet.

"Oklahoma enjoyed a perfect environment for the growth of musical artists, in the respect that liquor by the drink was illegal at that time . . . which allowed me to start my career in these 'nonexistent' establishments at the age of 14," Russell faxed. "I was a full-blown alcoholic by the age of 17 when I went to California for the first time and discovered I wasn't old enough to play in nightclubs. What a concept!"

The first time Russell trekked to California, he took a Greyhound with a guitar-playing friend from the Tulsa music scene. Russell faxed, "He was sure we had a job waiting. He was mistaken."

Russell settled in Los Angeles for good around 1960 after a second trip that included Cale (who was drummer for Leon Russell and the Shelter People). Another figure from the Tulsa music scene, David Gates, who went on to enjoy

fame with Bread, quickly joined Russell.

Spector was one of the first producers to use Russell. He was Spector's session man on the 1963 LP "Ronnie and the Ronettes," assorted tracks by Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans and classics such as the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'."

Faxed Russell, "Phil Spector is sort of a Wagnerian Sam the Sham. He has his own unique taste in music, which he perceived to be the middle ground for American youth taste. His use of instrumentation was always exciting, even if the record process was sometimes tedious."

I asked-faxed Russell if he was involved in Ike and Tina Turner's "River Deep - Mountain High," the most majestic Spector production of all time.

"I don't believe I played on that," he faxed. "If I'm not mistaken, that session occurred shortly after a recording episode with Phillip that was particularly grueling, in which I got very drunk and climbed on top of the Steinway to do my (X-rated performance artist) G.A. Allen imitation, liberally sprinkled with the vilest of obscenities and invectives that were directed exclusively at Phillip."

After Spector, Russell appeared on projects as diverse as Herb Alpert's "Whipped Cream and Other Delights" and the 1965 Bob Lind hit "Elusive Butterfly," and as piano player on the Byrds' "Mr. Tambourine Man." But to really rattle Russell's cage, just bring up funnyman Jerry Lewis, the father of Gary Lewis.

"I did have the misfortune of working with him on an album called 'The Jerry Lewis Singers,' which was produced by my partner, Snuff Garrett.

"It was really the Johnny Mann singers, with Mr. Lewis complaining aggressively (on an Orson Welles level) . . . Jerry's well-known vocal timbers were mercilessly inflected upon the rather velvet qualities of the Johnny Mann group."

With the re-interest in roots music past being a passing fancy, this is a good time to rediscover Russell's earthy treasures. The Russell-Hornsby album is due April 7 (Hornsby cites Russell as his first musical influence). Furthermore, Russell may produce the next Black Crowes album.

"I spoke to the Crowes but haven't played with them yet," Russell reported. "In listening to their work, I found a desire to do a guitar record and include performances by all the great guitar players I have worked with over the years." This looks to be a big year for Leon Russell.

He may be a stranger no more.