

Sandy Carroll

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No other American city is a musical melting pot like Memphis. Blues, soul, rock, country—all these roots genres seep into one another in the Bluff City and surrounding environs, producing fascinating hybrids as compelling as they are unique.

Sandy Carroll is a proud product of that nurturing environment. The native of Stantonville, Tennessee (located two hours east of Memphis) first made her name singing while accompanying herself on piano inside the late-night bars on a revitalized Beale Street. That indelible experience and plenty more from her Memphis grounding inform every note she sings and every song she writes—and she’s written plenty with a host of talented collaborators in a variety of genres.

“I think from my years on the road and working on Beale Street, I just have that sound,” says Carroll. That sound permeates her new album for Blue Heart. Check out the uplifting “Love On It” for proof positive. “I wrote that one with Mark Narmore, who’s one of my main co-writers. We liked that one because it was up and joyful, and it was positive,” says Sandy. “You can worry something to death. And of course, you’re going to do it anyway. But it’s like, don’t worry about it. My girlfriend was talking about something, about so-and-so. I said, ‘Look, just put a little love on it and let it go!’ And that’s the whole idea behind that song. Don’t preach about it, don’t complain about it, don’t sing it. Just put a little love on it, and let it go.”

Contrast that with the moving “Soul Of The Heart,” a Carroll co-write with Buddy Leach, who contributes its soaring sax solo. “He came up with the music and asked me to do some lyrics for it. I had had the idea swimming around a long time, about how you can have your heart broken. I mean, you might even die. Who knows? But no matter what, the soul of it never stops. Whatever is in your heart, the deepest nugget is going to keep on beating,” she says. “You never give up on hope on love, because no matter what’s happened to your heart, you’ve got the soul of it that’s always there.”

The new CD is an outgrowth of the pandemic. “I didn’t really expect to have a new album, but we wrote so many songs during COVID that we started tracking. And it was like, ‘Well, you know, we’ve got these great songs and we work with these great people, so let’s just put one out!’” says Sandy, whose all-star backing cast included guitarist Will McFarlane, bassist Dave Smith, and drummer Steve Potts.

“We recorded it at our little studio here in West Tennessee, actually where I grew up.” “We” would be Sandy and her husband, Grammy-winning producer Jim Gaines, who specializes in blues and similar roots genres. Their studio is called Bessie Blues. “Jim said, ‘I will never have a studio. We’ll never have a studio.’ But we started moving some gear over, and it’s turned international. We’ve recorded all kinds of people over there, so it’s pretty easy to go over there and record.”

Gaines has been Sandy’s producer ever since 2006’s Delta Techno. “We met at a Grammy in the Schools event in Memphis. He was there by accident, and I was there by accident,” says Carroll. “I knew his name, and he actually knew my name just from the Memphis connection. And somebody introduced us. Then I took some songs by to pitch to Ardent Studios, and we found out we had both lived in San Francisco. Of course, he was there for a long time. And I talked about growing up in Tennessee and going out. So he asked me for a cup of coffee, and it turned into four hours.

“Jim’s not really a writer, but he comes up with some cool ideas. But I sort of have a say-so on that. When we’re in the studio, he’s the producer. I will try any idea he wants. He beats me up out there on the vocals. He’s tough. But I let him roll in the studio. Then when we come back to do business, select songs or whatever, then we’re the same,” she continues. “We don’t always agree, but I think we work well together because we have the same rhythm type. We have that same background.

“He’s not so much a lyric person, but he’s becoming one a little more as the days go by. And I love lyrics. And they don’t have to be real deep. Like ‘Love On It,’ it’s not a deep lyric, but it has some deep thoughts behind it. But you don’t always have to write big deep lyrics. You can just get them out there where people can understand them. That’s the main thing.” Writing songs for the new album during the pandemic required the help of some newfangled technology. “We Zoomed with co-

writers from everywhere: Dana Fuchs from New York, and William Lee Ellis from Vermont,” says Sandy. “It’s hard. It’s not easy. It’s much better being in the same room with somebody. But we just had Zoom dates, and honestly, that’s how we survived.”

Precisely classifying Carroll can be difficult. “I don’t fit into anybody’s box. I really don’t,” she says. “One of my records, *Southern Woman*, actually charted for six weeks on the contemporary country chart. So it’s been a very puzzling thing for people that want to market me. But anything I sing, even if it is sort of country, it’s going to have that bluesy feel to it. I like to say it’s the Mississippi mud. I like to say it’s just that groove. It’s singing a little bit behind.”

Sandy grew up in Stantonville, a dot on the map housing only a few hundred people. “Before the Depression, it was sort of a little town,” she says. “It had a little department store and a bank and all that, and it was wiped out during the Depression. So it’s just a little burg. We did have one yellow flashing light, but I think that went out!” She started learning music early. “I’ve been playing piano since like five, but I’ve been performing professionally since I was 15 years old in a high school rock and roll band.” That first group was called the Avengers. “I was the chick female, the piano player, which at that time, women didn’t play anything. They just sang. I guess I was the Diana Rigg of it.

“We played all over our little area, and I made money. Then I went to college and I worked singing jingles and gigs, and then graduate school, and I worked in a bar gig. Then I went on the road and did cover tunes, but I was starting to put my own songs in every once in a while. But we were paid to do cover tunes. So I’ve been doing it as long as I can remember.”

Some of Carroll’s early bands spotlighted her strictly as a vocalist. “One was called the Pac Band, after Pac-Man. One was called Centerfold. There were three women in that band.” Eventually it was time to return to Tennessee. “I moved back to Memphis in ‘82-‘83, and Beale Street was just reopening,” she recalls. “Because they were reopening Beale Street, there were only a few clubs that were ready to reopen, and Lafayette’s Corner needed music. Somebody called and said, ‘Can you do this, please?’ And I’m going like, ‘Well, okay!’ And I worked there for probably over a year. They had a grand piano in the window. All of Beale Street had open windows and amplifiers on the street, so I would sit in that piano in the window and play. And I played five or six nights a week.

“On the weekends, when all the rowdy people would come, I had this little funky drum machine that had like four rhythms in it. Waltz I would never use. I would keep it on funk, rock, and something. Honestly, people would be dancing on the tables. I just played until my fingers bled on those keyboards. So I did a little boogie-woogie and a lot of stuff like that. I consider that a major musical milestone for me, because I had people come in from everywhere. Phineas Newborn, Jr. would come in, and I would ask him to play and I’d just sit there in awe.”

Sandy made a couple of 45s in 1984 for the short-lived Mother Memphis label with the Memphis Horns backing. “If You Got It” (backed with a funky “Street People”) and “Memphis In May” were produced at Ardent Studios by local icon Jim Dickinson. “There were two people that took an interest that used to hear me play, and wanted at least to put out a single. And one of those guys was a friend of Jim Dickinson. So I was like petrified. But he heard either a demo, or he came to hear me or something, and that’s how I met him. Oh, he was such a trip!” says Sandy. “That’s where I first met the drummer Steve Potts, who’s been on all my records but one.” “If You Got It,” which Sandy wrote with Dickinson and Bobby Keel, had legs; the great Albert King included it on his 1991 album *Red House*. “I was just thrilled beyond words,” says Carroll.

Beale Street couldn’t contain Sandy at that point; she headed for San Francisco. “Some people from California came in and offered me a contract, and then I went out there. Of course, then they tried to change everything I had done,” she remembers. “They wanted me to be Madonna or something. I was like, ‘I’m not Madonna!’”

Memphis kept calling Carroll home. She began working with legendary producer Willie Mitchell, whose Royal Studios legacy included an avalanche of hits with Al Green. “When I was in San Francisco, I would fly back to work with Willie,” says Sandy. “We didn’t release anything, but I’ve got some great demos. And I learned so much from Willie Mitchell, because I was writing and writing and writing, and I would come in with pages and pages of stuff, and he would sit there at that desk and look at it. He said, ‘What are you doing with all of these pages? You don’t need all of this. Strip it down!’ He was tough, but he was a master at it.

“I remember going in and singing on the mic where Al Green sang, and I was so intimidated! The guy from San Francisco, one of my backers, came into Memphis, and he came over to the studio. And he said, ‘You’re singing with all this asbestos hanging from the walls!’ I hadn’t even noticed it, because I was working with Willie Mitchell. But he was so great to me, and the people that got to know him called him Papa Willie. He would have me over for dinner, because I was actually living in San Francisco then. Nothing was released, and I regret that.”

By 1992, Sandy was back in Memphis full-time. She cut her first full-length CD, *Southern Woman*. “I remember that Warner Bros. was interested in it and told me, ‘Don’t release it except regionally, because we want to pick it up!’ Of course, they never did, so it was never released except regionally.”

Sandy’s 1997 album *Memphis Rain* came out on Eddie Dattel’s *Inside Memphis* label. “He liked to record local artists,” she says. “At the time, he had his own studio in the back, and the players were really great. Jim Solberg produced it.” Solberg, blues legend Luther Allison’s longtime rhythm guitarist, also channeled one of Sandy’s compositions to his boss. “I went up to Eau Claire, Wisconsin to write with Jim Solberg,” she says. “We wrote several songs, and then Jim took them to Luther, and he loved ‘Just As I Am.’ So he rewrote the bridge.” Luther included their collaboration on his Grammy-nominated 1997 CD *Reckless*, produced by Gaines. *Inside Memphis* also featured Sandy’s “Forecast Blues” on its 2002 anthology *The Memphis Belles: Past, Present & Future*, sharing groove space with Ann Peebles, Carla Thomas, and Jessie Mae Hemphill.

Gaines picked up the production reins for 2006’s *Delta Techno*. “We did that ourselves. I told Jim, ‘We’ve moved out into the country. I have no creative energy here. We’re gonna have to do this ourselves.’ So we did most of that record in our office with a Mackie. Guitarist Rocky Athas came and played on that. A few people would come by and would play on it, but we didn’t have the studio until the last song, called ‘Bound For Glory,’” says Carroll. “We didn’t have a real drummer. It was the only thing Steve Potts never played on. ‘Toolbox Blues’ and ‘King Of The Mountain,’ which I co-wrote with William Lee Ellis, they were the two picked up by SiriusXM radio.” The CD came out on the Ringo logo, owned by singer Nancy Apple.

Rhythm of the Rivers, Sandy’s 2007 EP, was a labor of love. “We just sort of did it as a gift to the community,” she says. “We live now in a place called Pickwick. It’s not far from the little town I grew up in, but it’s on the Tennessee River. And when I moved out here, I wrote this little song called ‘The Pickwick Song,’ and it’s just kind of a goofy little boogie-woogie song. And we thought, ‘Well, the people love that.’ We did that EP, and they sold it at the little store.”

In 2011, Carroll signed with Bob Trenchard’s *Catfood* label and released *Just As I Am*. Its title track was the song that Luther Allison had done so memorably a few years prior. “Bob liked how I wrote with him. I write for several of his artists,” she says. “I enjoyed that label very much, but it was really very, very soul blues. Johnny Rawls and Zac Harmon, just these really heavy-duty guys, and Barbara Carr was on there. But I enjoyed writing with Bob, and we just put it out. He always thought I should be country, and I never thought I should be country.

“That one did pretty well, so we ended up doing three more.”

Next came 2013’s *Unnaturally Blonde*, its cover photo picturing Sandy checking out a blonde wig on the head of a mannequin. “They have all the blonde jokes, right? So I wanted to take up for the blondes, though I’m not a blonde,” says Carroll. “I wrote this because I thought, ‘Somebody should stand up for blondes. They’re treated unfairly. I know a lot of smart blonde people!’ So ‘Unnaturally Blonde’ was a little satirical thing against all the blonde jokes. In essence, it’s just saying, ‘Quit judging women and stop with the blonde jokes already!’”

With Gaines continuing behind the board as producer, *Catfood* unleashed Carroll’s *Last Southern Belle* in 2015. “We decided we wanted to try more Americana on that, so we actually have fiddle, we have steel guitar, we have things we’ve never put on there before,” explains Sandy. “That record, being from the South and living all over the place, sometimes I would get very tired of the stereotypical thing: ‘Oh, you’re from the South, so you must be blah-blah, blah-blah-blah.’ Fill in the blanks. So after being gone for such a long time and returning home to this little area, and looking at how I grew up from all these years and different people, I decided I wanted to write about that.

“It was sort of a push against another stereotypical thing on ‘The Last Southern Belle,’ so that title song was like maybe what my mother would have done. ‘She loved Elvis and Jesus and her red Cadillac, riding with the top down and the sun on her neck. She goes to church every Sunday, dressed to the nines, no doubt about it, she’s the last of her kind.’ So that was about the last of her kind,” she continues. “Then there’s another song called ‘Southern Woman’ that is what a modern Southern woman is. And then there’s a funny one called ‘Southland Rules.’ I tried to present the South in a light that people might say, ‘Oh, okay, you can be kind of cool. You can be a little hip. You can be in the 21st Century, even though you live in the South.’”

2018’s Blues & Angels was Sandy’s last Catfood release, boasting an all-star backing cast that included guitarist Will McFarlane and Muscle Shoals mainstays David Hood on bass and keyboardist Clayton Ivey. One of its guests was guitarist Bernard Allison (Luther’s son). “Bernard was here recording. The band had one more day. They’d finished, and it was ‘you want to come over and cut a track?’ So we’re doing ‘Headin’ Home’ with his rhythm section. And all of a sudden, Bernard just comes in, picks up this guitar, and plays this incredible intro riff,” she remembers. “He just appeared, picked up the guitar and played, and we were blown away.” Sandy and Rawls wrote “Love Is A Wonderful Thing” and cut it as a duet on the set.

“Blues & Angels kind of started with the ‘Wrapped In An Angel’ thing,” she adds. “You’ve got to have the devil in you to do the blues, right? People that party on Saturday night and go to church on Sunday morning, all that old stuff--Robert Johnson at the crossroads. All that lore, I wanted to try and combine that, blues and angels. It’s like you can’t separate them. One leads to the other. And I had written several songs: ‘Wrapped In An Angel,’ ‘Headin’ Home,’ and ‘Movin’ On,’ some of those. So that title just sort of came about that. I wanted it to be a spiritual kind of blues record. Not all of them are, but I wanted people to listen to it and feel good. If they had the blues, if they were feeling bad, I hoped it would make them feel better.”

If you take a stroll down Beale Street some balmy evening, you’ll stride across song notes laid right into the sidewalk honoring Sandy and Jim’s contributions to the Memphis music scene. “At the time, we were the only couple to have our notes on Beale,” Carroll says. “Jim tells a funny story about it. He said, ‘I figured we’d be back in the parking lot, or in an alley or something!’ So we look, and here we are, and here’s my note, and here’s Al Green. And here’s Jim, and a couple of concrete squares down is Sam & Dave. So we thought, ‘Hey! We did good!’”

Like every other musician on the planet, the pandemic brought Sandy’s gigging and touring activities to a halt. Yet staying safe at home has resulted in one of the best albums she’s ever made. “We like to keep busy creating. And I just feel like that’s what we ought to be doing,” Sandy says. “It doesn’t feel like work. It’s just our way of life. It’s everything to me.

“I think at heart, at least at this stage of life, I am a writer. And I’m a stylist vocally, and I do play. But what I love right now is creating the songs. And I still love to perform. I feel like I still have something to say, and I can say it with the best musicians on the planet. So why not? I like for people to hear it. I think that’s the important thing.”

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Written By Bill Dahl