

MARK RONSON'S **UPTOWN SPECIAL** - Nelson George, November 2014

Uptown Special, the fourth album by producer-songwriter-musician **Mark Ronson**, is a tale of several cities, a wide range of collaborators, and a road trip deep into the American South. However the story of Ronson's latest project really starts back when he was New York's hottest DJ. In the late 1990s into the early 2000s the New York club scene was percolating with booming hip-hop and glitzy R&B. In those days before he emerged as a multi-talented musical force Ronson manned the turntables of many great parties. *"It was a fun time to be playing music,"* he says. *"At clubs like Cheetah you didn't have to play a hip hop record until 1 a.m. You could play early '80s classics by Chaka Khan, Boz Scaggs and Michael Jackson and rock the crowd. I'd play Steely Dan's 'Black Cow' at 11:30 and it would work. Then, at 1am you'd play 'Hypnotize' by Biggie and the crowd would go wild. I come back to those memories."* This mix of vintage R&B and pop with contemporary hip-hop is what made Ronson a star DJ. *"I never get tired of hearing records like Earth, Wind & Fire's 'Can't Hide Love' next to 'Rock the Boat' by Aaliyah,"* says Ronson. *"I wanted this record to feel like hearing that kind of musical mix on great New York club night."* **Uptown Special** has all of the flavor of a night with Mark rocking the ones and twos with funk, soul, and psychedelic pop in a style that echoes classic productions by Quincy Jones and Steely Dan, and funneled through its creators sophisticated understanding of arrangement and melody. Of his three previous albums Mark feels like **Uptown Special** is closest in spirit to his 2003 debut, *Here Comes the Fuzz*, which came directly out his DJ experience. *"The difference,"* Mark says *"is I was reaching for things musically I wasn't quite ready to execute. With all the experience I've gained over the years I had the maturity and knowledge to really pull this together."* The first single, **"Uptown Funk,"** features GRAMMY® award-winning superstar Bruno Mars on vocals and drums, who sings with passion and plays drums with fire that will bring funk back on the radio. Joining Mars on the track is Mark on guitar, Mars' bassist Jamareo Artis and Jeff Brasker on keys. Mark produced Mars' massive hit single, **"Locked Out of Heaven,"** where they developed a close musical kinship. *"As a live performer no one out here now puts on a show like Bruno,"* says Mark. *"This record has that same intensity. When you hear him sing you are always aware of how much he puts into a performance."* Mark was so taken with the single's power that it inspired the album's title.

Though Ronson is now based out of London, most of **Uptown Special** was recorded in the United States with stops in Los Angeles, Memphis and Mississippi. Most of the music was recorded with live musicians with Mark anchoring the sessions on guitar, while surrounded by a complimentary mix of gifted young players and R&B vets. Several musicians, who worked with Mark on his historic production of Amy Winehouse's multi-platinum *Back To Black* and his own breakthrough album, 2007's *Version*, rejoined him for this album, including drummer **Homer Steinweiss**, bassist **Nick Movshan** and guitarist **Tommy Brenneck**. Also making guest appearances on

'Uptown Special' are bassist **Willie Weeks** (who played on Stevie Wonder's classic *Innervisions*) guitarist **Carlos Alomar** (who created the familiar guitar riff on David Bowie's "Fame") and drummer **Steve Jordan** (member of the John Mayer Trio).

The first song composed for *Uptown Special* was "**Summer Breaking**," a jazz influenced track with harmonies and chord changes that fans of smart pop like Steely Dan will respect. "*That's a track I couldn't have written in England*," Ronson says. "*I had just started working out in Los Angeles with **Jeff Bhasker**, who is a Berkeley trained jazz pianist who is also equally gifted in gospel and soul. I was a massive fan of his work and eager to write something that would impress him.*" Bhasker came to fame working closely with Kanye West on his *808 & Heartbreak* and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and the West-Jay Z collaboration *Watch the Throne*. But it was after hearing Bhasker's song for Alicia Keys, "Try Sleeping With A Broken Heart", Mark knew he had real musical soulmate. So he invited Bhasker to co-produce *Uptown Special*. Another key collaborator on *Uptown Special* was revered novelist **Michael Chabon**. Chabon, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his 2000 novel, *The Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, met Mark at a book signing. As Mark began writing music, "*I wanted lyrics to push farther than most of what's going on in R&B and pop today. So I wrote Michael and a letter and asked if he'd be interested in writing lyrics for the album.*" Chabon, a huge pop music fan whose last novel, *Telegraph Avenue* (2012) was largely set at a Bay Area record store, was excited by the creative challenge penning lyrics posed. As a result of Chabon's contribution the lyrics on *Uptown Special* are more allusive, whimsical and poetic than on most contemporary popular music. Chabon's first foray into lyric writing was "**Crack In The Pearl**," spacey ride "*nine exits north of Las Vegas*" that brings psychedelic imagery into contemporary pop. Some of Chabon's lyrics were written independent of the music, which Ronson then edited into a song form. For already composed songs Chabon walked around New York listening to the music on headphones, fitting words into the existing song structures as a professional tunesmith would do. The evocative vocals on "Crack in the Pearl" were provided by **Andrew Wyatt** of the electronic pop band Miiike Snow, while musical legend Stevie Wonder adds his distinctive harmonic playing to the song.

Also crucial to the sound of *Uptown Special* are the trippy, emotive voice of **Kevin Parker**, leader of the popular Australian indie band Tame Impala. Parker sings lead vocals on three songs on the album ("**Summer Breaking**," "**Leaving Los Feliz**," "**Daffodils**"), while also contributing backing vocals, song writing and even played drums on one song. While much of the music was composed in Los Angeles, a fateful road trip across the South helped shape the album's final form. With "**I Can't Lose**" Ronson knew he had a record with the punchy groove of a real '80s New York club jam that demanded a young Chaka Khan on the lead vocals. But where was that voice today? Bhasker suggested they take a Southern road trip, feeling sure the voice they

were looking for could be found in the country's heartland. Starting out of New Orleans, where they began work on the producer/writers drove down into Mississippi and visited churches throughout the region before landing in Jackson, where they held an audition at the Penguin bar on the campus of Mississippi State University. In walked **Keyone Starr**, "a cool looking girl with an amazing rasp in her voice," Ronson recalls. She agreed to come to Memphis to take a stab at recording. Though she had never been in a studio before Starr, under the guidance of Mark and Bhasker, truly blossomed, adding soul powered vocals to "I Can't Lose", "Silver Dagger" and background vocals to "Crack In the Pearl". One of the songs recorded in Memphis was "Daffodils." One night in the studio Kevin Parker played Michael Chabon a song by celebrated UK rapper the Streets about coming down from ecstasy. Inspired by the track Chabon made up a fantasy drug (aka daffodils) and a sexy night at very fun house party. The track has an R&B groove built around a hooky rock guitar riff, while the song's last section is highlighted by a vibrant solo by Australian guitarist **Kirin J. Callinan**. The funk really flows on **Uptown Special**. "Feel Right" is a neo-James Brown jam with a killer hook written by **Bruno Mars** and his longtime writing partner **Philip Lawrence**. New Orleans' **MC Mystikal** brings his roaring rambunctious voice to the track, bridging the gap between hip-hop rhyming and old school soul shouting. Another track that taps into Ronson's hip-hop pedigree is "Broken Dream," featuring co-production by Scottish wunderkind producer Hudson Mohawk, who Mark regards "as one of the best rap producers to come out of the UK." Mark Ronson's **Uptown Special** is a unique blend. It's an album with a serious literary pedigree matched to down home greasy funk. It features a progressive pop vocalist from Australia and one reared in Mississippi, the spiritual root of American music. Hot young contemporary players dominate while some tracks are spiced with legendary musicians. It's a mix that reflects the musical taste and life experience of its creator.

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