

Van Morrison **DUETS**

RE-WORKING THE CATALOGUE

On his brand new 35TH studio album **DUETS: RE-WORKING THE CATALOGUE** set for release in March 2015, Van Morrison is looking back over his career with a little help from his friends. How did this visionary performer make the long and tumultuous journey from the back streets of Belfast to Madison Square Garden and beyond? Assembling a roster of VIP guests, **DUETS: RE-WORKING THE CATALOGUE** creates a portrait of an artist who has always pursued his own idea of perfection.

One of the most influential musicians of the past half-century, Morrison had no shortage of material to choose from – or stars who wanted to work with him. But, always the maverick, he decided to avoid obvious classics such as “Moondance,” “Brown-Eyed Girl” or “Tupelo Honey.” Instead, he and his collaborators, from Michael Bublé to Bobby Womack (who, sadly, died soon after recording “Some Peace of Mind”) explore less familiar songs which illustrate the extraordinary range of the singer’s work.

As he explains: “I’ve done duets before, with John Lee Hooker, Tom Jones, Ray Charles, Carl Perkins and Bobby Bland. This project was partly about the fun of singing with artists I admire, but also about going back to songs that aren’t so well known. I’ve wanted to make an album like this since the early 2000s, but it was difficult to pull together the right people. The creative and scheduling sides had to be right.”

It was Morrison’s appearance at the 2013 Bluesfest at London’s Albert Hall that finally set the process in motion. With Womack, Mavis Staples and Natalie Cole also in town for the event, the time was ripe to book studio sessions. Always a fast worker (“I don’t like lingering, I’m from the John Lee Hooker school of, ‘You get in, you get out’”) Morrison set to work, sometimes suggesting songs to his prospective partners, sometimes following their own choices.

The list of artists who joined him over the next twelve months spans the generations, from Joss Stone – soaring on “Wild Honey” – to Sixties rock ‘n’ roller P.J. Proby, who drops in on “Whatever Happened to P.J. Proby?,” an affectionately nostalgic number Morrison originally released in 2002. Michael Bublé’s storming vocals on “Real Real Gone” reflect Morrison’s ability to reach out across the generations. Bublé may be renowned as a

Sinatra-style interpreter of The Great American Songbook, yet he also counts Van The Man as one of his prime influences: his solo versions of “Moondance” and “Crazy Love” are among the finest Morrison covers of recent times.

The 35th studio album of Morrison's career, ***DUETS: RE-WORKING THE CATALOGUE*** cements his unique position in popular music. Revered by rock, jazz, folk and blues musicians alike, he has been springing surprises since he first made his name on the British R&B scene. His classic album “Astral Weeks” – recorded in New York in 1968 – established him as one of the most innovative and unpredictable artists of his times. Rejecting conventional notions of superstardom – he has always thought of himself as a working musician rather than a rock star – Morrison has pursued a single-minded vision ever since. Uncompromising and outspoken, he is a restless figure who transcends categories, blazing a trail for successive generations of musicians on both sides of the Atlantic.

As he admits, choosing the material for *Duets* posed a major challenge. “It was very difficult. It’s not only difficult picking people because there are so many of them, it’s also difficult picking songs. You are working from about 350 songs. I don’t really ponder past stuff unless I want to kind of maybe redo it or do a different arrangement.”

He knew, though, that he could rely on his guests to rise to the challenge. “All these people they know what they are doing,” he says. “They have been through this many times, like me. They pick up where the song is, and just go. You don’t have to ponder it or anything. There is no pondering. It’s kind of jazz or R&B as opposed to a rock approach.”

All too many duets albums have an arid, pre-packaged ambience, with big names going through the motions, “Duets: Reworking the Catalogue” sounds fresh, loose and spontaneous. Jazz-R&B legend George Benson, who had expected to concentrate on vocals on “Higher Than The World,” found himself being urged to pick up his guitar once he was in the studio. (“Eventually he gave in,” quips Morrison.) On “Lord, If I Ever Needed Someone,” Morrison and the great Mavis Staples spur each other on to new heights of gospel emotion, while a relaxed Gregory Porter summons the ghosts of Count Basie & Co on “The Eternal Kansas City” and Natalie Cole adds elegance to “These Are The Days.”

Mark Knopfler and Mick Hucknall conjure up a pastoral mood on their respective numbers, “Irish Heartbeat” and “Streets Of Arklow,” Steve Winwood stokes the spirit of blue-eyed-soul on “Fire in the Belly.” Other

British collaborators include another Sixties R&B veteran, Chris Farlowe (“Born To Sing”) and Morrison’s long-time friend and musical accomplice, the singer-keyboard player Georgie Fame (“Get On With The Show”). A typically left-field choice for “Carrying a Torch” was Clare Teal a superb singer-pianist who shares Morrison’s love of vintage jazz and who came close to upstaging Liza Minnelli in a recent guest spot at London’s Festival Hall. Meanwhile, Morrison’s daughter, Shana, a fine singer in her own right, goes toe-to-toe with her father in a fiery performance of “Rough God Goes Riding.”

“Some of this is just spur-of-the-moment stuff,” explains Morrison in his typically off-hand way. A perfect example is the bluesy closing number “How Can A Poor Boy?,” recorded at a hotel in County Down where Morrison likes to play intimate gigs. He and the majestic roots revivalist Taj Mahal blast a path through the song before dissolving into laughter and joking at the close. It is a memorable snap shot of two giants enjoying each other’s company. In an era of pre-packaged, over-produced music, **DUETS: RE-WORKING THE CATALOGUE** embodies classic, flesh-and-blood virtues.