

artist bio

CASSANDRA WILSON

On the surface, the elements of thunderbird, the inimitable vocalist Cassandra Wilson's seventh album for Blue Note, may seem familiar to those listeners who have embraced her past albums going back to 1993's Blue Light 'Til Dawn and the Grammy Award-winning New Moon Daughter. Pop songs, classic blues, folk ballads and jazz sensibilities all find common ground with Cassandra's honeyed vocals wrapped around them. But immediately upon first listen to thunderbird, an entirely new dimension makes itself known. Primal, warmly intimate and extremely detailed in its nuances, thunderbird is an aural delight to behold.

A postmodern expression of roots music produced by the acclaimed T Bone Burnett (their first collaboration), thunderbird does possess a very different *sound*: dense, humid, sensual, almost tactile. A sound characterized by live-on-the-floor performances accented by studio technology but still retaining their essential organic qualities. An acoustic bass line may play subtly throughout the track, then move into the foreground with sudden and dramatic impact. A lone slide guitar, intertwined with Cassandra's voice, can conjure the weight and density of a full band.

Credit Cassandra with once again breaking free of familiar formulae and easy routes. Credit T Bone with thunderbird's atmospheric magic and for assembling an exceptional supporting cast in sessions that took place between November 2004 through June 2005 at various studios in L.A. (Capitol, The Village Recorder, The Green Room, and T Bone's own Electro Magnetic) and New York (Dangerous Music).

"You know, most modern recording studios are pretty much the same," Cassandra notes. "That is, unless you doctor them. I think great producers know how to do that, and T Bone Burnett is certainly in that group of great producers. He makes certain modifications that I can't really go into detail about, because I think they're secret. There are personal techniques that he uses in order to cater the studio, to get the sounds he wants to get."

(Not for nothing was Burnett named Non-Classical Producer of the Year in the 44th Annual Grammy Awards. That 2002 ceremony celebrated his work on the multi-platinum soundtrack album O Brother, Where Art Thou? and its sequel Down From the Mountain as well as on the album Fan Dance by singer/songwriter Sam Phillips. T Bone has worked with everyone from Elvis Costello to Ralph Stanley, and produced and/or composed music for such films as *The Big Lebowski*, *Cold Mountain*, and most recently the much-heralded Johnny Cash biopic, *Walk The Line*.)

As to thunderbird's supporting cast: Keefus Ciancia (piano, keyboards, programming) has worked with Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Fishbone, Macy Gray, Allison Krauss, and Elvis Costello. Electric bassist Mike Elizondo has become a marquee name on the charts through his songwriting and production for 50 Cent ("In Da Club"), Eminem ("Just Lose It"), Eve ("Let Me Blow Ya Mind," featuring Gwen Stefani), and Fiona Apple (Extraordinary Machine). Canadian slide guitarist Colin Linden first worked with T Bone in 2000, when he contributed a version of Skip James' "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" to O Brother Where Art Thou?

Cassandra's thunderbird crew also includes two members of her most recent touring band, Reginald Veal on acoustic and electric bass and Gregoire Maret on harmonica. Other participants also include guitarists Keb' Mo' and Marc Ribot; drummers Jay Bellerose, Jim Keltner and Bill Maxwell; and engineer extraordinaire Mike Piersante. Cassandra herself plays acoustic guitar on the tracks "Closer To You" and "Tarot."

As to the album's title: the legend of the thunderbird is an ancient myth that survives today in some Native American cultures. In the eyes of the ancients, it was a divine and magical animal sent by the gods to protect them from the powers of evil. The thunderbird brought calm and growth to the region. For Cassandra, the spiritual and magical aspects to this creature perfectly described the environment from which these songs grew.

Cassandra Wilson Talks About thunderbird

"**Go To Mexico**" – Cassandra, Keefus Ciancia, and Mike Elizondo created "Go To Mexico" from a studio jam. The vocal sample—the only such sound source heard on thunderbird—came from a vintage recording by the Wild

Tchoupitoulas, a legendary tribe of New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians. Cassandra later added lyrics to the instrumental track.

“‘Go To Mexico’ was something we did at the tail end of the sessions. Mike started playing that sample, and we just started playing along with it. The sound and the tempo of those [sampled] voices is not a mechanical thing—it has a very life-like quality, and it became almost like another musician in the room. Collaborating with more than one writer to this extent was a whole new experience for me, and I really enjoyed it.”

“**‘I Want to Be Loved’** – Muddy Waters and the Rolling Stones recorded this Willie Dixon composition in up-tempo arrangements. But Cassandra’s version is slowed-down and playfully sensual, her voice framed by the guitars of Keb’ Mo’ and Colin Linden and the loose, funky duel drumming of Jim Keltner and Bill Maxwell.

“Colin Linden is someone I’d just met through T Bone, and he is *wicked* on that slide guitar! Colin turned me on to the song. I like to do these vintage blues songs, to make them part of my projects whenever I can.”

“**‘Closer to You’** – Composer Jakob Dylan introduced “Closer to You” on the Wallflowers’ 2002 album Red Letter Days. Cassandra plays acoustic guitar on this beautiful interpretation, with its remarkable Reginald Veal bass solo and Keefus’s keyboard accents.

“T Bone introduced me to that song and I fell in love with it. I *really* fell in love with the lyrics—I learned a lot about intimacy from singing the song and studying the lyrics. I think Jakob Dylan is like his father, an incredible songwriter. There’s so much depth of emotion in his simple words and plain language.”

“**‘Easy Rider’** – Cassandra transforms a Blind Lemon Jefferson classic of the Twenties into a dramatic, intoxicating seven-minute blues epic for the 21st century. It’s as close as we’ve ever heard her come—at least on disc—to the sound and spirit of Jimi Hendrix.

“There are two different blues songs known as ‘Easy Rider’—the one that’s often titled ‘C.C. Rider,’ and this one. I gravitated towards Blind Lemon’s song because of the lyrics, which are very strong, very powerful, and not typical: *‘There’s gonna be a time when a woman don’t need no man/So hush your mouth, stop raisin’ sand...’*

“I’m a big fan of Blind Lemon Jefferson and that whole Texas crowd. I like to study all those different country blues styles—from the Delta, from southern Mississippi, from Louisiana and East Texas.”

“**‘Lost’** – This romantic ballad, with its echoes of Edith Piaf and Billie Holiday, is one of two tracks (along with “Strike a Match”) composed by T Bone for the Wim Wenders film *Don’t Come Knocking* (2005, with Sam Shepard and Jessica Lange). Co-produced by J.D. Foster, the song is perfectly rendered with nothing more than Cassandra’s tender vocal and Marc Ribot’s electric guitar.

“‘Lost’ is definitely from that ‘standards’ school of songwriting, and this track was a whole performance with Ribot—a master, one of my favorite guitar guys.”

Cassandra describes the thunderbird recordings as “a blueprint for the way these songs will be performed live I still consider myself a jazz musician and a jazz vocalist in the way improvisation naturally becomes a part of whatever we do on stage. You want the songs to grow in public, to develop a life apart from the recording—and I’m sure they will.”

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