

PERCY SLEDGE RETURNS, WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS

After nine years, soul singer Percy Sledge is introducing a country-shaded album called "Shining Through the Rain," underwritten by his fans, the Bross family of Chicago

WHEN A FAN LOVES A

BY DAVE HOEKSTRA • STAFF REPORTER

The forgotten soul singers of the 1960s often encounter stormy weather. Country-soul great Arthur Alexander spent 20 years driving a Cleveland school bus until his touching comeback album was released in March 1993, three months before his death. After working forever in the trenches of the chitlin' circuit, Solomon Burke only crossed over a few years ago.

And now the ship has come in for Percy Sledge.

"Shining Through the Rain" is his first album in nine years. Sledge, 63, is best known for the soul hits "When a Man Loves a Woman" and "Take Time To Know Her." He is on the final ballot listing this year's nominees for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

His high country twang is an essential conduit for the new record's title track as well as a "Percy pleading" classic, "Love Come Rescue Me," and a chilling version of Steve Earle's "My Old Friend the Blues." Jakob Dylan of the Wallflowers lends his vocals to the country gospel ballad "Misty Morning," co-written by Carla Olson, formerly of the Textones.

"I'll never stop singing, but I was ready to stop recording," Sledge says in a phone call from a promotional stop in Washington, D.C. "But [co-producer, blues guitarist and Chicagoan] Barry Goldberg told me we were going to record in the old way [with tube amplifiers, analog machines, vintage microphones]: B3 [organ], drums, guitar. He was talking right down my line."

Despite a glorious 40-year career, Sledge has never headlined in Chicago. Last year he appeared on PBS' locally produced "Soundstage" with Michael Bolton, whose 1991 version of "When a Man Loves a Woman" was as big as his hair. We won't go there.

"Shining Through the Rain" (on Varese Sarabande) was underwritten by the Bross family of Chicago. Jonathan Bross for-

merly worked with Arthur Anderson, and his wife, Sophia, has a CPA and an MBA from Northwestern's Kellogg Graduate School of Management. His younger sister Lisette holds a theater degree from Northwestern University and was a member of the Sacred Fools Theatre Company in Los Angeles.

"The Brosses were fans," Sledge says. "They knew Barry. They felt they wanted to take a chance on me, and I'm glad. They mean more to me now than just recording. They've become good friends."

Sledge's warm vocals befriend everyone.

He was born in the country junction town of Leighton, Ala., six miles from Muscle Shoals, home of the legendary Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. On his 1966 hit "When a Man Loves a Woman," Sledge was backed by Muscle Shoals session players Spooner Oldham (keyboards), Roger Hawkins (drums) and Arthur Alexander bassist Albert "Junior" Lowe, and the session was engineered by studio founder Jimmy Johnson. The record was

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Sledge sang country as a child in Alabama

produced by Quin Ivy at his Quinvy Studios in Muscle Shoals.

"When I worked in the fields as a boy picking and chopping cotton, all I heard was country music," Sledge says. "Hank Williams Sr., Marty Robbins and Jim Reeves. The only time we could hear soul and pop was late at night, when we got 'Ernie's Record Parade' and 'Randy's Record Hi-Lights' [hosted by Randy Wood, president of Dot Records] out of Nashville. I sang country as a boy, and that may be where that little slang of country comes into my sound. For years, my fans thought I was a white guy."

That's why Earle's "My Old Friend the Blues" is a good call for Sledge. There he applies the similar spacious vibe that he put on his recording of the 1968 Elvis Presley hit "True Love Travels on a Gravel Road."

"Steve came out to the studio [in Hollywood] when we recorded that," Sledge recalls. "Just about everybody who wrote a song for this CD came out. And Phil Upchurch [the former Chicagoan who played guitar on Sledge's rendition of the Bobby Moore chestnut 'Searching for My Love']. He's picked on so many artists' records [Otis Rush, Bo Diddley, the Staple Singers]."

Paul Jones, lead singer of Manfred Mann, dueted with Sledge on the bawdy, Fats Domino-influenced "Big Blue Diamonds."

"Shining Through the Rain" has already found an audience in the beach music scene of the south Atlantic Coast. The rocking "24-7-365" and "Big Blue Diamonds" have garnered airplay around Virginia Beach, Va., and Myrtle Beach, S.C.

"In our younger days I played that circuit with [the late] Joe Tex," Sledge says. "I still play the House of Blues in Myrtle Beach and the steakhouses along the beach, back in the countryside up to Muscle Shoals."

Here's some insight into Sledge's giving nature. When artists are asked about their favorite Muscle Shoals moment, they cite a hit record or a fantastic session. Sledge answers by recalling the region's beauty.

"Every time April rolls around, I always think of Muscle Shoals," he says. "That's the month Clayton [Ivy] and them always wanted to record me. The bees were out and the flowers were blooming. It was exciting. I'm going to tell you our secret. We had one of the best bass sounds in the world. That's why everybody was coming to Muscle Shoals. We were so far below sea level. The Tennessee River ran right through there."

There are two rivers in the world that run against the equator and the Continental Divide. The Tennessee River is one of them.

The soul of Percy Sledge absorbs this environment.

"All the studios were six feet in the ground," he says. "Michael Jackson came to Muscle Shoals to do some tracks on 'Thriller.' I was up the hill cooking country corn and steak and they said, 'Michael wants to meet you.' I said, 'I got

grease up to my neck. I can't leave.' That's how I missed meeting Michael Jackson."

Sledge met the Bross group by serendipity. A member of the Brosses' company was on an elevator in Los Angeles when he bumped into Saul Davis, who co-produced Sledge's "Blue Night" nine years ago. Davis and Goldberg

produced "Shining Through The Rain."

Lisette and Jonathan named their four-month-old company Velvet Steamroller after a term their parents used for people who got the job done in a gentle way. The Brosses grew up in Lincoln Park. Their late mother, Louise Smith Bross, was an art historian

who worked with the Art Institute of Chicago. Their father, John, is a retired attorney and trust officer.

"We were lucky to find Percy," Jonathan Bross says. "He is a gentleman and a fantastic performer. What made it compelling from a business side is that we were able to structure a deal that made a lot of sense. We basically said, 'We'll

produce the album if you guys [Universal, the record label that is distributing "Shining"] do the marketing.' It made sense for us, them and Percy. It seemed like a straightforward thing to me, coming from outside this industry, but I've learned it's unusual for everyone to have a fair deal in the music industry."