

Lang's Style Diverges On 'World'.

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2nd A& M Album Finds Guitarist Mixing Rock With Blues

LOS ANGELES--Teenage blues singer/guitarist Jonny Lang spreads his artistic wings on his sophomore A&M album, "Wander This World," due Oct. 20.

The set, produced by David Z, who also helmed Lang's platinum 1997 A&M bow, "Lie To Me," still boasts a hearty blues foundation but finds the preternaturally mature 17-year-old musician exploring new stylistic wrinkles.

A&M chairman/CEO Al Cafaro says, "Clearly, to Jonny, the blues are his core. That's something we always want to have and something that we think is an important building block for his career. Having said that, we have an interest in him growing and reaching beyond that. I did have a sense that I wanted a rock album from him--certainly a rock album that still has blues as an integral part of it."

Cafaro adds, "Going into this record, Jonny needed to strike the right balance of something that had continuity with the first record and [looked] into the future... We all shared the same view, and that was that Jonny needed to grow and needed to stretch a little bit, and David understood that implicitly. He worked with Jonny to get the right songs and the right performances, and we are absolutely thrilled with the result. I think we've got an album that's very broad in its appeal."

Senior VP of marketing/GM Morty Wiggins says, "He didn't make 'Lie To Me II.' He's not going to make 'Lie To Me III'... It's a different record. It's a growth record."

Lang himself says, "We didn't really go into the album with a preconceived idea of the outcome, as far as a genre of music [is concerned]. We just went in there and wrote some tunes and played, and it turned out good, I guess. My underlying little goal is to stretch out and explore different areas of music, as time goes on."

Asked if his new directions will surprise his fans, Lang says, "I hope so. I don't necessarily like being pigeonholed as any one thing. For me, I just love to play music, all kinds, so it's nice to branch out. Hopefully, nobody gets pissed off and says, 'Hey, what

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the...?' People say, 'All you should play is blues,' but the same people say, 'You're too young to be playing blues.' So when they hear this, then they'll go, 'Hey, why aren't you playin' blues?' Well, cause you told me I was too young to.

"[Blues will] always be a huge dipping well for me to go back into, and it's where my foundation is as a guitar player, definitely It'll always be there to influence me. I just like to branch out as well."

"Wander This World" was recorded at Oarfin Studio in Lang's home town of Minneapolis with most of the same musicians who appeared on Buddy Guy's recent album "Heavy Love," on which Lang guests (Billboard, May 16). A key player was one of Lang's idols, Booker T. & the MG's guitarist Steve Cropper.

Lang says of Cropper, "I had met him on the set of the 'Blues Brothers [2000]' movie a little while ago, and we got to be pretty good friends. He was gonna come up and write, and he just ended up playing on one tune and kept playing on more tunes. So he's on almost the whole record... It was great. He just gave it that old soul vibe."

Lang explores an astonishing diversity of material on the album, including the intense, gospel-flavored "Leaving To Stay" (penned by Lang's friend and frequent writing partner Kevin Bowe) and the hot funk number "I Am," written by David Z and The Artist Formerly Known As Prince, with whom the producer played for many years during the '80s.

Of the latter track, Lang says, "In '92 or something, [David Z] and Prince wrote that tune, and Prince never released it or anything... He just had this rough demo of it. It was a big dance-mix song. It turned out cool, though. We slowed it down and put a little groove on it."

About the only straight-up blues number on the album is its closer, a cover of Luther Allison's "Cherry Red."

Lang says he recorded the song as an homage to his friend and mentor, who died last year: "He was so good to me and so nice and always supporting young musicians. Every time he would see me, he always had a smile on his face and stuff. He was just the sweetest person, so I kind of owed it to him, I felt. His wife, Rocky, was really nice in letting me play his guitar on that song. It was one of those magical one-take songs."

A&M will launch the album by taking the rocking "Still Rainin'" to all rock radio formats on Monday (14).

Wiggins says the album holds a wealth of other possibilities: "When I hear a song like 'I Am,' which Prince gave to him, [I think about] even taking a shot in some of the clubs, which would be phenomenal with this kid. But first and foremost we're going to go to rock radio. We have a lot of room to grow [there]."

Wiggins adds, "We are going to do a video for 'Still Rainin'" right out of the box... Our belief and our expectation is that he won't be ignored by the video channels early on like he was before."

"Wander This World" will be issued as an enhanced CD. "It's going to include exclusive footage of Jonny in the studio, lyrics, interview footage, some live footage," Wiggins notes. "We think that's of tremendous value. It's a thank you to his consumers and to retail for supporting him early on."

A&M is putting together a retail contest that will award a Lang concert in the winner's hometown. A national chain, to be determined, will be involved.

Wiggins adds, "There'll be guitar giveaways. His guitar endorser, Fender, is also going to help us with the marketing as well at over 100 guitar shops."

Lang—who is managed by James Klein and Mild Mulvehill of Blue Sky Artists and booked by Garry Buck at Monterey International—has already toured the U.S. extensively this year; since the spring, he has been sharing dates with Guy. Instead, when the album is released in Europe in early October, Lang will be on the road there.

"He'll be touring in Europe early," Wiggins says. "He's going over in the fall to do festivals ... He's toured so extensively over here that we don't need him to tour to break this record over here."

Closer to home, "Wander This World" is being anticipated eagerly Steve Pearson, buyer for indie retailer Electric Fetus in Minneapolis, says the young musician has had a following at the store since his indie debut, "Smokin'," was sold there on consignment.

"'Lie To Me' was the biggest record we had last year out of the box, and I'm sure this one'll be even bigger," Pearson says. "He's kind of a phenomenon-all of a sudden, he's a star."