

MUSIC

ROCK BY KATIE HASTY

Crow Picks 'Wildflower'

Walking The Line Between Art, Pop

"Now that I'm in my 40s, it's much easier to be an artist," Sheryl Crow says. "It's good knowing that I'm not in the game to be competing with really young groups of kids on the radio. Or to, you know, make 'beat' music."

With youthful, sunny singles like "Soak Up the Sun" and mature, wistful melodies in such hits as "If It Makes You Happy," 43-year-old Crow has already proved she can successfully compete with artists from across the popular music spectrum. Filling the three-year gap since her last studio effort, she took time off and headed to Spain, to write and to determine her next move.

The result: the introspective "Wildflower" (due Sept. 27) and leadoff single "Good Is Good," which is No. 11 on the *Billboard* Adult Top 40 chart.

Crow originally intended to release what she called an "art" record and a "pop" record this year. After putting down the initial tracks, she decided to combine elements of both, recruiting the talents of hot producer John Shanks, as well as longtime collaborator Jeff Trott, to keep her gentle songs grounded with string-filled orchestrations and upbeat production. Trott also co-wrote a number of tracks, including "Good Is Good."

"I had good intentions to do both [albums], and I started feeling like 'Wildflower' was that art album. But then I thought that any pop songs I did after that would make it overlooked," Crow says.

It is Crow's ability to tread the line between serious rock and agile pop that has kept her on the radio and in stores, Interscope head of marketing and sales Steve Berman says. Given her consistent output and a loyal fan base, Berman expects her listenership to grow with "Wildflower," especially if the label finds a foothold on mainstream top 40 radio with "Good Is Good."

But retailers are still counting on Crow's older fans to drive sales. "This crowd's 30 and up," says Joe Nardone Jr., VP of Pennsylvania-based chain Gallery of Sound. "I imagine [Interscope] is expecting her fans have grown up along with her, and that's their best hope. If the single's halfway decent, then [the record] is going to be big. You can rely on that crowd like that."

Audiences first heard "Good Is Good" earlier this summer when Crow was tapped by computer maker Dell to appear in its TV commercials. Additionally, Interscope is extending retail options for **continued on >>p56**

FACT FILE

Label: Interscope

Management: Scooter Weintraub, W Management

Booking: William Morris Agency

Publishing: Old Crow Music/Warner-Tamerlane Publishing (BMI)

Best-selling album: "Tuesday Night Music Club" (1993), 4.5 million

Last studio album: "C'mon C'mon" (2002), 2.1 million



SHERYL CROW (cont.)

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Crow by stocking shelves at gourmet supermarket chain Whole Foods with "Wildflower" and planning a second volume of "Artist's Choice: Sheryl Crow" at Starbucks—which, like the first album, highlights her favorite tracks by other acts.

"Because of her fan base, it's important to speak directly to her audience," Berman says. "In these ways, we take the product straight to them."

Feeding that audience between her last studio effort, "C'mon C'mon," and this year's output, Interscope released "The Very Best of Sheryl Crow"

keep private.

"I try not to edit myself too much, but I don't want to worry about what people will think of me if I leave everything in," she says. "Some people rely on selling everything based on celebrity. He and I are really careful about how we conduct our lives and what we let people be privy to."

Intimacy and meditative lyricism dominate "Wildflower," and Crow hopes to continue the tender nuance through a string of unique concert events in October. Heading out with her band and a 12-piece string section conducted by David



'Everything has to have such fine quality.'

—STEVE BERMAN, INTERSCOPE

in 2003. That title, bolstered by her smash cover of "The First Cut Is the Deepest," has sold more than 3.4 million units, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

"I didn't let the fact that I was putting out a greatest-hits record midcareer bog me down," Crow says, "but I didn't think it would do so well. In a weird way, it gave me the freedom to do this record, a real opportunity to make a record that I really felt. Basically, your life informs your art, and I'm at a different part of my life. I'm not interested in making a bunch of 'Soak Up the Sun.' "

Radio programmers are proving happy to give "Good Is Good" a spin, not only as an end-of-summer swan song, but as original material from a heritage artist.

"It's come at a good time. We need more hit songs from core acts," says John Peake, PD at adult top 40 KLLC San Francisco. "Acts like [Crow] are becoming more and more rare, and listeners still want it."

Crow's recent engagement to superstar athlete Lance Armstrong will also keep consumers interested, Nardone says. The public romance between the two has increased her visibility and, according to Crow, has also provided fodder for her songwriting. Much of "Wildflower" addresses their romance with happy tones and cautious detail, without flaunting publicly what they wish to

Campbell, Crow will perform new material as well as older songs on an eight-date trek.

She will continue to tour next spring with a smaller string section for more extensive dates. This fall, she has scheduled appearances on "Good Morning America," "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," "The View," "Late Show With David Letterman" and "The Early Show." She also appeared on "Top of the Pops" during a recent British press junket.

"The challenges with marketing Sheryl aren't unique to Sheryl. In the marketplace today, there are fewer opportunities for exposure in the traditional avenues," Berman says, referring to such outlets as radio, TV and touring. "Everything has to have such fine quality. We're lucky that we never worry about that with Sheryl. But even with that, we still need more."

Meanwhile, Crow is surprised that there was even a single to market. She had considered releasing "Wildflower" as a quiet, raw affair, with only her and her guitar.

"I just feared a little on how people would receive it," she says. "When I write a record, I'm thinking in an arc. Right now, this is where I am. I'd like to take the listener on some kind of travel with me, and to me, I wasn't making a hit record."

