



The Motor City soul legend Leon Ware talks candidly to Charles Waring about love, music, life, death and his new Stax album 'Moon Ride.'

"I love the age of sixty nine because it's a precious number," announces soul music's durable love man, Leon Ware, who then breaks into a raucous laugh that sounds like a mixture of a Mutley-like wheezy chuckle and a low-pitched hacking cough. Despite the fact that he'll be seventy next year, the veteran Detroit singer/songwriter has not let go of his youth entirely - he confesses he still possesses a boyish streak and has a penchant for saying provocative things: "I can't tell you how much joy I get from saying something shocking and which makes people say 'what did you say?' It was part of my spirit as a kid. I was a mischievous little boy - I was pulling the girls' hair and peeking up under their skirts...and nothing's changed!" Ware starts laughing again. It's hard not to share his mirth. His sense of joie de vivre is certainly infectious. But then Leon Ware has a right to be happy about his life these days. He's lucky to be alive for one thing. Three years ago he was diagnosed as having prostate cancer.

"I was given six months to live," he reveals in sombre whisper. "They found lymphs that were affected and operated. They closed me up and gave me six months. The Doctor said 'there's nothing we can do for you.'"

Sadly, cancer has claimed several other members of Ware's family: "My daughter passed away three years ago. She had cancer as well. Cancer has taken my father, my mother, two of my sisters and three of my brothers. I've had, if you want to call it that, a relationship with that particular disease or affliction - but I'm not afraid."

Thanks to his friend and fellow songwriter, Adrienne Anderson, Ware found a surgeon who worked "outside the box" and after another operation his symptoms subsided and his disease went into remission. "I'm going into my third year now and every time my Doctor looks at me he sees I've gained weight" states Ware. The songwriter's experience has made him want to help others: "It makes me want to say things to people that are going through the process of living with a disease or getting ready to make the transition - because I don't call it death. I may be able to say something that will help them deal with it a little better."

Musically, Ware feels re-invigorated and for the first time since he was at Elektra in the early '80s he is back with a major record company - in this case, the re-activated Stax label, which is distributed by Concord (Ware reveals he signed to Concord initially, with Stax's involvement coming later). 'Moon Ride' is in fact Ware's first album since 2004's 'A Kiss In The Sand' and follows his recent cameo appearance on a re-make of his Latin-infused classic 'Rockin' You Eternally' on the Jazzanova album 'Of All The Things.' 'Moon Ride' follows the same stylistic trajectory manifested on his previous work - the subject matter mostly focuses on sex and romance while Ware's sensual vocals are framed by richly textured grooves. "It's a continuation

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of my adventure," reflects Ware, who once declared to me that "sex is my religion" in a previous interview a few years ago. "It's a romantic album," he continues, "and it's sensual - I flow in and out of certain different levels of nastiness, you know. It's another serving of my romantic and sensual delicacies."

Leon Ware, as you'd expect, is vociferous when it comes to the subject of love and romance. He sees himself as an ordained minister of erotic love. "The earth needs romance" he declares. "We don't have enough of it. It doesn't touch a lot of people. Maybe the people it doesn't touch are untouchable. But I'm an optimist and maybe in my devoted service to that process I'll reach them." Certainly, Ware believes in the redeeming power of music: "Music has become medicinal. It's become therapeutic and it's become a religion."

But for all his optimism, Ware admits that planet earth and its inhabitants are on a potentially perilous path: "The world is in a state - not only from a financial perspective but a spiritual one also. We're not looking at a world which promises young children a future that they can stand up and get really excited about - it's a world where a digit is much more important than a human being. We are at Hell's doorway and the devil is having his day. In that light, I look at what I'm doing as much more than entertainment."

Ware's association with Stax - "I couldn't be more honoured" he says - may mean that his musical and philosophical message have a greater potential for being heard and making a telling impact on a larger number of people. He's certainly excited about the liaison with a big label but as for the music business as whole, he expresses deep reservations. "The music business is filled with opportunists and superficial artists," he laments. "And their whole agenda is about making money - not about making art. But what can you say? It's the world we live in." Undoubtedly, Leon Ware is not a superficial artist. His CV as a songwriter, producer and singer speaks for itself and is replete with a long list of significant R&B recordings - ranging from his crucial involvement on Marvin Gaye's "I Want You" and Quincy Jones' "Body Heat" LPs to memorable recordings of his songs by Michael Jackson, the Isley Brothers, the Main Ingredient, Bobby Womack, and numerous others. Even Madonna, Robert Palmer and Todd Rundgren have covered his songs.

A new 19-track CD on Expansion Records called 'Leon Ware & Friends' is a compilation that features a mixture of performances by Ware and host of other people who've recorded his songs during the last thirty-six years. It includes Donny Hathaway's awe-inspiring rendering of "I Know It's You," an intensely soulful ballad which the Chicago singer/pianist recorded for his 1973 Atco album, "Extension Of A Man." Says Ware: "I can remember walking across the A&M lot heading for the studio when someone said 'Leon! Leon Ware! Come here, you gotta hear this.' Atlantic Records had sent a demo before the song had strings on for us to hear.

Everybody in the office was floored. I had tears in my eyes - it was a song I'd written to my mother because she was extremely religious. I want you to know that that was one of the most pleasant days in my life. Donny did it so good that nobody else has ever touched the song. Roberta Flack made it very clear to me in a conversation with her one-time many years ago after it was already a classic and Donny had gone. She said 'the reason nobody has touched that song, Leon, is because Donny peed on it.' Ware laughs again, a deep husky chuckle. He's understandably proud of the fact that Donny Hathaway - who also wrote some decent songs himself - recorded one of his tunes: "When you service another writer, that doesn't put a feather in your cap, it puts another hat on your head as far as I'm concerned. There's no greater honour than to have your peers to do your work, especially somebody who can do it by themselves."

Ware's collaboration with another long-gone soul great, Minnie Riperton, is also represented on

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'Leon Ware & Friends.' He worked on her 1975 album, 'Adventures In Paradise,' which contained the classic slow-jam, 'Inside My Love.' "That was a song that was written out of a request from Minnie that she wanted to write something that was provocative" explains Ware regarding the song's birth. "Oddly enough, it happened at a time when I was playing with an idea that came from my childhood. I was in the Church seven days a week with my mother until I was nine or ten years old and every night we would go there after she came back from work. The pastor would stand in front of the congregation and say 'won't you come...won't you come inside the Lord.' It was so compelling and the people were almost in a hypnotic trance. So when I told Minnie the lyric 'come inside my love' she had this look on her face. Then she said 'do you know what they're going to think?'"

Riperton may have been initially horrified by the risqué sexual connotations of 'Inside My Love' but recorded the song and it became a Top 30 US R&B hit. Says Ware: "The first week it was out I was driving down La Brea in California and a DJ was playing it on KTLH. He played the record and then stopped it almost before it got to the end and said 'hang on, let's run this back again. I want you all to listen to this. I'm not sure if I'm getting this. Is Minnie really inviting us inside her?' I laughed but then I was kind of slightly pissed because I wanted people to reach for the better part of it."

As for Riperton, who died of breast cancer in 1979, she has a special place in Leon Ware's heart. "I had the blessing and the gift of her friendship and she was a fan of mine," he says. "She became a large part of my family. I was with her when she made transition. We were very close. She was like a sister - she was sweet, very loving, and a very maternal woman. She mothered the world that was in her presence. She still lives with me. In my mind, Minnie and Marvin (Gaye) are never gone: their essence, their spirit, their whole being is a part of your psyche, a part of your soul and a part of everything that you are."

Despite having a fascinating past, Leon Ware's primary focus is now the future. To the relief of soul music fans, he's not contemplating retirement just yet, and is wholly devoted to his art: "As long as the oxygen flows through my system I'll be putting out music" he says defiantly. He's already contemplating the follow-up album to 'Moon Ride' - "I have half my next project in my head" - and reveals he's preparing to publish a book. "It's actually a children's adventure book that I've been writing for several years that I'm about to finish," he discloses. "I have a Parisian co-writer and a Dutch illustrator so it's going to come out in three different languages."

With his creativity undimmed and a clean bill of health, there's no doubt that Leon Ware seems to be enjoying the ride of his life. Long may he continue to do so.

'Moon Ride' is out now on Stax/Concord.