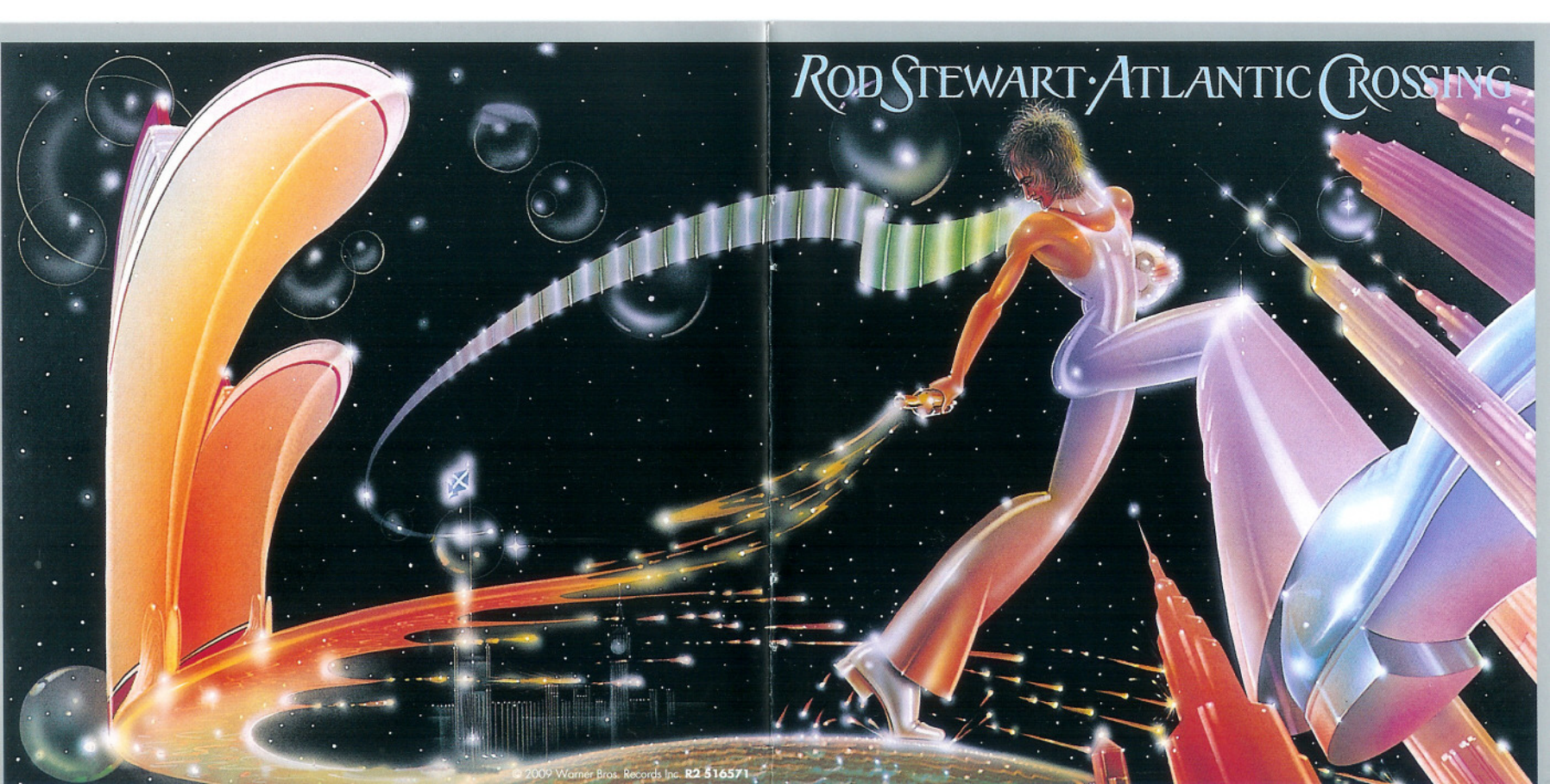


ROD STEWART · ATLANTIC CROSSING





Atlantic Crossing, Rod Stewart's sixth studio album, marked big changes for the artist, and it wasn't just the relocation to the United States to escape his native Britain's 83% taxation rate alluded to in the title.

It was Rod's first album for Warner Bros. Records after the expiry of his solo contract with Mercury, his first to be informed by his love for actress Britt Ekland, and the first to not feature any of his colleagues from the Faces. Moreover, it marked the point at which Stewart left behind his frequently rustic, folk-inflected sound of the first half of the '70s and replaced it with the glossy stadium anthems that would become his new imprimatur. Some of his original fans did not like the change at all, but they were in a minority: Stewart proceeded to become more successful than ever.

Rod's new album would see him collaborate with a producer for the first time since Lou Reizner helmed his first two records, 1969's *The Rod Stewart Album* (released in the U.K. as *An Old Raincoat Won't Ever Let You Down*) and 1970's *Gasoline Alley*. Tom Dowd was a semilegendary figure, his name already attached to classics by Otis Redding, The Young Rascals, Cream, Dusty Springfield, Derek And The Dominos, and The Allman Brothers Band. Dowd, as was his wont, did his homework on Stewart, familiarizing himself with his keys and range before flying out to California to meet him.

The two discussed whether Stewart would use the Faces, with Dowd recalling that Stewart wasn't sure if he was going to record again with the good-time five-piece rock band. It so happened that the Faces were recording at that point, and Stewart and Dowd spent an hour listening to them from the control booth of the studio. Dowd concluded that the group displayed glaring weaknesses, not possessing the depth of knowledge or roots to change their playing style to facilitate the kind of album Stewart wanted to make. Dowd told *MOJO*'s Barney Hoskyns in 1995: "Rod had dreams about Otis Redding and Arthur Conley, and he asked me about Wilson Pickett and Aretha Franklin. Like a lot of English artists, he knew what he was talking about." Dowd was one up on Stewart, though, for he had actually worked with some of the people responsible for some of Stewart's favorite records.

Suggesting that they use two or three different rhythm sections to prevent all the songs from sounding the same, Dowd—in John Tobler and Stuart Grundy's book *The Record Producers*—recalled, "I said . . . 'I could get Steve Cropper, 'Duck' Dunn, and Al Jackson,' and he looked at me, and he was petrified. I said, 'Look, I can get them. They're friends and would be delighted to play with you.'" Stewart was delighted himself to obtain the services of this lineup, better known to the wider public as the "MG's" of "Booker T. & The" fame and to the cognoscenti as the house band behind countless classic Stax records.

However, Stewart was not aiming for a simple replication of that sound. "Of course you've got to mould them the way you want them to play," Rod told *Melody Maker*'s Chris Welch in 1975. "Apart from Steve Cropper, who plays a recognizable style, the others don't sound anything like the MG's or the rhythm section that made 'Spanish Harlem'; they really

play incredibly good white rock 'n' roll."

Stewart and Dowd could have opted to use the loose aggregation of musicians employed on Rod's solo albums but did not, possibly partly because there was a certain crossover of personnel with the Faces and possibly partly because Stewart's last Mercury album, *Smiler*, had been a disappointment, both artistically and commercially. This meant that guitarist Ron "Woody" Wood, with whom Stewart often composed, was out of the picture. Even Mickey Waller, the drummer he had always used on his solo work hitherto, was deemed surplus to requirements. Ironically, the only existing fixture of Stewart's solo career that he did want on board for his new direction turned him down. Guitarist and songwriter Martin Quittenton (cowriter of "Maggie May," the record that had catapulted Rod to fame in 1971) was invited by Stewart to work on new songs with him while he toured with the Faces, but the hell-raising life on the road the group was famous for was something the studious Quittenton decided he didn't want to be part of. A few months after the release of *Atlantic Crossing*, Stewart was telling *Creem* magazine's Barbara Charone, "I thought it was going to be strange making the album without Woody, but it wasn't . . . I must have had blinkers on these last five years. I must have been mad using the same musicians over and over again."

The album's recording got off to a slightly peculiar start. The Bee Gees' "**To Love Somebody**," Lee Dorsey's "**Holy Cow**," and the old Elvis hit "**Return To Sender**" were laid down by Rod S. & The MG's (as it were), but none of them ended up on the record. ("**To Love Somebody**" appears here in a sweeping orchestral mix, while the latter two make their long-awaited debuts on this package). "I was the last guy to sing with the entire section, [Al Jackson, Jr. was killed in October 1975.]" Stewart later reflected of the MG's in *MOJO*.

Dowd recalled in *The Record Producers*: "He said that if they were all like that, he'd like to meet another rhythm section. Now he'd begun to get a little bravado about it, because he had an idea for a song with them." Three or four further songs were rehearsed before the sessions relocated to Muscle Shoals, Alabama, so Stewart and Dowd could avail themselves of the services of another renowned rhythm section. There, Stewart got two

surprises. The first was that the crack sessioners at the legendary studio weren't, as he had always assumed for people with so much evident soul, black. The second was the ease involved in translating his ideas. "Barry Beckett, the big piano player down there . . . he'd listen to the song and write it down in figures," Stewart revealed to *Melody Maker's* Chris Welch. "They don't write music in the traditional way, they put four, four, dash, dash, two, two, dash, dash . . . and they say: 'Is that how you want it?' and play it back to you." Once it was ascertained this was indeed how the artist wanted it, the peculiar transcription method was Xeroxed and handed out to the band. This Muscle Shoals invention was something Rod found refreshing after a lifetime of "It goes like this" discussions with musical colleagues, ones he described as "a real headache."

Less happy for Stewart was the fact that Muscle Shoals was located in a dry county, something that inevitably posed something of a problem for a man who, along with the Faces, had turned inebriation into an art form. Stewart, Cropper, and Dunn were sharing a couple of rooms at a local Holiday Inn and having to split a single bottle of rum, which they'd had to send across the state line for. The rum had to last the entire recording process, so they rationed it out carefully, drawing lines on the bottle to indicate each day's drinking allowance. Because of such privation, Stewart's vocal on "Sailing" was, by his own admission, one of the few he has done without any alcohol in his system at all.

However, those who assumed that *Atlantic Crossing's* quick turnaround was motivated by the desire to make headway for a state where drink was not in such short supply would probably be wrong: Stewart had always recorded quickly, so the "three weeks' solid recording time" Stewart estimated was involved in putting the record together was about par for the course. "When an album is only 40 minutes long, I'm a firm believer that it shouldn't take a year to make," he related to Chris Welch. He added, "I knew what the vocals would be like 'cause I'd prepared all the tracks before I went down there."

Stewart's then-manager, Billy Gaff, has said, "I remember saying to him once, 'Can't you just put all the fast stuff on one side and put all the slow stuff on the other side so that I don't have to skip tracks and turn the thing round?'" With *Atlantic Crossing*, Gaff got his wish.

The fast half got underway with **"Three Time Loser,"** a Stewart-penned tale of a man thrice stricken with venereal disease; at one point Rod was hoping it would be released as an American single. Ostensibly as ribald and strutting as any Faces rocker, the smooth collective harmonies accompanying Stewart on the chorus rung the changes, as did the easy-flowing sax break. **"Alright For An Hour"** saw Stewart collaborating with guitarist Jesse Ed Davis on a song that took an easy-come, easy-go attitude toward romance. So enamored was Stewart with Davis that he took him on tour with the Faces that year.

"All In The Name Of Rock 'N' Roll" was another Stewart solo composition, this one examining the carnage of the road, the sort that Quittenton was so wary of. Stewart's revival of **"Drift Away"**—a 1973 hit for Dobie Gray—celebrated popular music's healing properties and provided proof of that balming effect as it did so. **"Stone Cold Sober"** was a Stewart/Cropper collaboration that may have been rooted in their alcohol deprivation. Musically, it could have been The Rolling Stones circa 1972.

"I Don't Want To Talk About It," which opened the slow half, became one of the album's two smashes. An exquisite lovelorn number with slightly mysterious imagery, it was tailor-made for one of Stewart's famously sensitive readings. Its sparse basic track (no drums, live vocal) was then decorated with strings by

Arif Mardin. It remains an in-concert Stewart favorite to this day, with such an audience-participation tradition that Rod rarely bothers singing the chorus himself. Unfortunately, composer Danny Whitten never got to see his song belatedly become a U.K. #1 for Stewart in 1977. The former Crazy Horse member had died of a heroin overdose in November 1972, aged just 29, a waste that motivated Neil Young to write the forlorn "The Needle And The Damage Done." **"It's Not The Spotlight"** was an achingly tender ballad written by the combination of Barry Goldberg and Gerry Goffin. Stewart did its reflective bliss justice.

One of *Atlantic Crossing's* big ironies was the fact that although Stewart had jettisoned his old colleagues for his soul ambitions, by his own admission the album's only soul number turned out to be a cover of the 1966 Isley Brothers hit **"This Old Heart Of Mine."** It was Stewart's idea to record a version of this creation from the famous hit-factory-within-a-hit-factory Motown team Holland-Dozier-Holland, while Dowd was the one who decided that smooth soulster Al Green's rhythm section would provide the ideal accompaniment. The song—noticeably mellower than the original—became a U.K. #4 but only crept into the U.S. Hot 100. Come 1990, though, Stewart secured a stateside Top 10 with it as a duet with the man whose vocal had originally inspired his love for it, Ronald Isley.

"Still Love You" was the artist's one writing contribution to the slow side, and if some felt that the echo on his voice rather over-egged the pudding for a man whose singing hardly needed artificial assistance to convey emotion, it was compensated for by a song dripping with the humanity and tenderness that had always been Stewart's stock-in-trade.

The sleek, anthemic closer, **"Sailing"** (with another grandeur-granting Arif Mardin string arrangement), was the album's *coup de grace*, both artistically and (in European territories anyway) commercially. It was the closest Stewart ever got to a plan he spoke vaguely of at the time to record a chunk of an album with Sutherland Brothers & Quiver, a British ensemble who were then making a name for themselves and would secure their first hit the following year. Instead, he settled for this new composition by the group's Gavin Sutherland. Though credited to Sutherland alone, it's a song one suspects some Stewart input on, for its homecoming motif, heartsick lyric, and swelling melody gave it an uncanny resemblance to

"Flying," a track he'd written in collaboration with Ronnie Lane and Ron Wood, which was issued as the Faces' first single in 1970.

Though "Sailing" failed to crack the U.S. Top 40, it became a hit in the U.K. twice over. A chart topper in Rod's homeland in 1975, it made its way into the Top 10 all over again the following year when it was used as the title theme to a British TV documentary series about HMS Ark Royal. Possibly just as gratifying to soccer nut Stewart is that the song became a football terrace anthem. Attending a Scotland game with his father one day, Stewart came back from the toilets to find his dad crying: the Tartan Army had been singing "Sailing" while he was away.

If *Atlantic Crossing* didn't do quite as well in Stewart's new country of residence as he and Warner Bros. had hoped (he would have to wait for his follow-up, *A Night On The Town*, for that breakthrough with his new label), it was a huge success in the Rest of the World. For Stewart, his new methods conferred a benefit perhaps just as important as sales. "All the fun has come back into recording for me at last," he told *Creem's* Charone. "I've never liked going into the studio, and now I can't wait to go back."

Some of the old guard missed the fat, rasping tone and cheerful anarchy of the Faces' albums and the pastoral and Celtic flavors of previous Stewart solo records. The bulk of the public clearly disagreed with them, however. In his review, Bud Scoppa of *Circus* spoke for many when he said, "Happily, that horny, rank, exuberant rascal who romped through Rod Stewart's masterpieces . . . has returned. This irresistible character . . . infuses Stewart's sixth solo album with such life that its several notable stylistic and technical shifts are rendered secondary . . . The best rock 'n' roll singer of the '70s still has it."

—Sean Egan

Sean Egan is the author of the forthcoming Rod Stewart And The Faces: Never A Dull Moment.