



CLINT BLACK

SPEND MY TIME

The ninth full-length studio release from Clint Black is two things. First and foremost, *Spend My Time* is the latest chapter in a musically significant body of work. Furthermore, and as hinted in its title track, it is reflective of meaningful and unprecedented changes in the life and career of singer, songwriter, producer and performer Clint Black.

Five years removed from his last studio album and three years since his departure from RCA, Black has, for the first time in his life, completed an album that faced no externally imposed deadlines. "I feel like I've given birth," he jokes. "There was a long gestation and a lot of labor."

The album is, at least to his fans, a belated addition to the lineage that stretches from his debut album to his most recent studio offering, 1999's *D'lectrified*. Between those bookends, Black achieved, quite literally, every conceivable measure of success to which a recording artist can aspire—sales, airplay, awards and critical acclaim. Beyond the quantifiable, Black's artistry and craftsmanship were affirmed to an extent that hyperbole would only diminish.

The youngest of four brothers and a self-described country boy, Black was raised on the outskirts of Houston. "We ran out of our neighborhood down to the bayou, hunting snakes and fishing with our hands," he says. "We were Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer." The family was also drawn to country music and Clint picked up both the harmonica and guitar as a teenager. He displayed an affinity for music, and joined his brother Kevin's band as a bass player.

Before long he was performing solo on the club circuit, working his way into the music industry's attention. His 1989 RCA debut *Killin' Time* opened a decade of furious creativity and success, both for Black and the genre. At the time, Black's arrival was the most rapid ascension to stardom country had ever seen. A decade later, with *D'lectrified*, he moved from co-producing to become sole producer of his albums. Black had evolved, in many ways, into a fully formed music maker.

And yet that ten-year evolution quickly gave way to a succession of life-changing events. The 2001 release of his second greatest hits collection effectively marked the end of his relationship with the only label he'd ever known. He and wife Lisa Hartman Black brought their first child into the world, daughter Lily Pearl. They moved across country, selling their California home and settling in the Nashville area where, not so incidentally, he built a home recording studio from the ground up. And he became a founding partner in a record company with no less ambitious a goal than to redefine the entire structure of the music industry.

To hear him tell it, each event built on the one before. "I was supposed to deliver one more studio album to RCA, but managed to get out of the deal early," Black says, "It was time to move on. We'd already gone ahead with the release of my second greatest hits CD because Lisa was pregnant and a 'hits' project wasn't going to take as much of my time."

As might be expected with an artist of his stature, Black's manager began receiving offers from other labels. "The closer I got to making a decision the more I was resistant to it. I really just didn't want to go back into the major label system. There's a growing gulf between the artist and the label. It's widening for so many reasons."

Discussions of starting a record company came to fruition when veteran label executive Mike Kraski left Sony. Equity Music Group was formed, with Black engaged not only as the flagship artist, but part of the ownership group. The label's convention-breaking model has artists owning their own masters, sharing in profits, but also contributing to the label from other revenue streams like touring and merchandise.

"Journalists have told me this is a pretty brave move," Black says. "To the contrary, it would have been pretty brave, being a free agent for the first time in my career, to go right back into a system that has so much room for improvement."

And so the 2003 launch of Equity started the end game for an album project he'd worked on intermittently for more than four years. By contrast, his *D'lectrified* CD was completed in only ten weeks. "That was the fastest I'd ever done an album, so it was nice to be in this situation," he says. "I ended up with an abundance of material, which in a way made it more difficult. I had to determine which of these songs would make the best album."

There are other concerns peculiar to someone with a hit-laden repertoire that includes "Summer's Comin'," "We Tell Ourselves," and "Something That We Do." Black explains: "At the end of my career, I want to be able to go back through it all in one sitting without hearing any repetition...and still be country. I don't want to record *Killin' Time* again, because I did it once and what would be the point?"

Instead, like his previous albums, *Spend My Time* bears a spirit all its own. The title track's melodic mantra gives way to flavors like the vivid fantasy in "My Imagination" and the dot.com blues of "Haywire." Each track represents the carefully shaped and occasionally carefree workmanship of an expert, punctuated with the moody heartbreak of the album closing "A Lover's Clown."

"The tracking sessions are where the songs first come alive," Black says, "and it's an incredible feeling. I either complete the vision I'm after or I get something I didn't expect. The excitement of playing it back and loving it...I just turn it up as loud as it will go. And then I start singing."

He likens the process to a familiar but always fresh cycle that keeps him energized. "I've finished the record and I'll direct the videos for the album, which breaks things up," he says. "I'll undoubtedly be touring to some extent, maybe some acting things will come up. Suddenly I'll find myself having received all of another year or two of life experiences and then I'll need to spit it all back out again in the form of writing songs. So I'll go back into the studio and get to hear new music come alive once again. It's like the seasons. Before I get too tired of winter, spring is here and it all feels new."

This album, particularly its title cut, defines a renewed focus even broader than the tidal pull of creativity. "It was born out of what led me back to Nashville," Black explains. "I asked myself what I wanted to be doing five and ten years from now. When you have a child you go through a reassessment period, I guess.

"When I first moved here, years ago, people talked about how this is a magical valley—the highest concentration of talent in the world. Once we decided this is where we'd deepen our roots, wonderful things started happening. Everything, except for Lily, has happened since we moved here. And for a Houston kid, this feels a lot more like home than a big city like Los Angeles. I spent a day in the woods at a friend's place on the outskirts of town the other day, and I found myself reflecting on childhood memories long forgotten of my days on the bayou in Houston. Nashville's the next best thing to home sweet home."

The album is *Spend My Time*. The label is Equity Music Group. And Clint Black is a country boy in Spring.



