

Craig
Leon *Cassell*
Webb

An Austin Musical Collaboration Goes International



Craig Leon



Cassell Webb

STORY & PHOTOS BY
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Sparks ignited mutual passions between two stellar talents – sparks that later crossed the ocean, launched romance, and an unprecedented flurry of musical successes with the Who's Who of punk, pop, rock, country and classical music.

There are musical collaborations that originated in Austin that have exploded worldwide, branching out so far that their roots are almost forgotten and should be retraced for Texas music history. Such is the case with the meeting of singer/songwriter Cassell Webb and songwriter/composer/producer Craig Leon. Their electric collaboration began at Pecan Street Studios on Sixth Street in Austin in 1980, and led to producing internationally famous artists such as Deborah Harry, Luciano Pavarotti, Sting, Joshua Bell, Ofra Haza and flutist Sir James Galway.

Texas born Cassell Webb enjoyed a career of late Sixties psychedelia as a member of The Children, a band represented by Houston's Lelan Rodgers. Webb also worked with Billy Gibbons and ZZ Top, The Bubble Puppy and Lightnin' Hopkins at Houston's psychedelic venue The Love Street Light Circus, before disappearing into the early Seventies. After a

year away from Texas, Webb resurfaced at The Vulcan Gas Company and Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin, only to leave again for California and New York, working as a session singer while learning production. She then returned to Austin, blossoming as a songwriter and working for several years with country and folk artists such as Jerry Jeff Walker, Guy Clark, B. W. Stevenson, Willie Nelson, Steve Fromholz, and Bill and Bonnie Hearne. Currently, Webb is working on her own album, her seventh, as well as a new concert piece related to her Texas roots and written with Leon.

Craig Leon was a child prodigy whose musical education can be traced through mentors in direct lineage to Mozart. A native of Florida, Leon worked extensively in New York before coming to Austin. In his book *Behind the Glass: Top Record Producers Tell How They Craft the Hits*, Howard Massey describes Leon as "a classically trained musician with finely honed composition, harmony and arrangement skills . . . who became the primary architect of the second-wave New York punk movement of the mid-1970s."

Leon has produced a myriad of pop bands – The Bangles, The Roaches, Blondie, Cowboy Junkies, The Ramones, The Pogues, Rodney Crowell, and Arthur Brown, to name only a few. Leon's composi-

Craig Leon is listed as one of the world's greatest producers. He has discovered or produced music artists such as the Ramones, Blondie, the Talking Heads, The Wailers (Bob Marley), Rodney Crowell, Guy Clark, Roches (with Robert Fripp), The Fabulous Thunderbirds, and the Bangles in the United States.

In the UK, he produced many projects, some with co-producer and singer Cassell Webb, including LuLu, The Pogues, Jesus Jones, Shonen Knife, Cowboy Junkies, Joshua Bell, Luciano Pavarotti, Sting, and the London Symphony Orchestra.

He is the first producer to successfully produce two sensational hit records in completely different musical genres within the same year -- Blondie's "Maria", a No. 1 pop single, and Izzy's "Libera Me", a No. 1 classical album. Cassell Webb co-produced both of these projects.

tions have been choreographed by noted dancers Twyla Tharp and the Kosh Dance Theatre.

Leon and Webb produced Doug Sahm and The Sir Douglas Quintet album "Border Wave" in Austin in the early Eighties, as well as recorded a young Charlie Sexton with Sahm on the Quintet's "Live" album, both for Chrysalis Records, and worked on The Fabulous Thunderbird's "Tex" soundtrack for Disney.

Describing his approach to production, Leon says, "I originally came from an arranging background – orchestration, composition, and piano – and a lot of that ended up in my method of production . . . I would lay it out in blocks, like you would with normal orchestration." (*Behind the Glass*, Massey)

And Leon is an innovator. In the 1996 book, *Good Vibrations: A History of Record Production* by Mark Cunningham, Leon predicted many of the technological changes that have transformed recording production in the past several years, musing about ". . . video links to enable on-line sessions between people in different cities. And with the ability to record digitally on hard disk, you will be able to involve live musicians and bring about a global workshop . . . and a greater number of people will . . . present demos in an instantly accessible way."

Leon and Webb relocated to Europe in the 1980s and then moved to England, where they settled and Webb began her solo recording career while Leon continued to expand his vast production career. Webb recorded her first album, "Llano", with Statik Records, and then went on to record "Thief of Sadness" and "Songs of a Stranger" with Venture Records.

In 1999 Leon became the only producer in UK chart history to produce both a No. 1 pop single (Blondie's "Maria") and a No. 1 classical album (Izzy—"Libera Me") in the same year, albums for which Webb was Production Assistant. Webb also sang background vocals on Blondie's "No Exit" album that included the hit "Maria". All three of the albums Leon produced with British artist Izzy have achieved No. 1 ratings.

In addition, Leon produced and Webb co-produced Joshua Bell's album, "Romance of the Violin" for Sony, that became U.S. Billboard's No. 1 bestseller in the Classical Artist category for 2004. Their recent production of "Wings of Song" for Sir James Galway (DG) reached No. 1 on the UK and No. 2 on the U.S. classical charts. Future projects include musical supervision for the film *Maestro*, starring Klaus Maria Brandauer.

Visiting them in their home in the Buckinghamshire countryside outside of London, I noticed that the orchestrations for which they are known are reflected in their lifestyle. Leon, a chef and wine connoisseur, and Webb, the consummate conversationalist and entertainer, discuss fine art, music and its history, Webb's singing and coaching of singers, and Leon's arrangements as recordings of their favorite composers and clients play in the background.

In a return to his classical roots, Leon has produced Elysium, The Vienna Royal Symphony Orchestra, and The London Symphony Orchestra performing his own works.

Joshua Bell's album "Romance of the Violin" for Sony, produced by Leon with assistance from Webb, was U.S. Billboard's No. 1 Classical Artist CD for 2004.



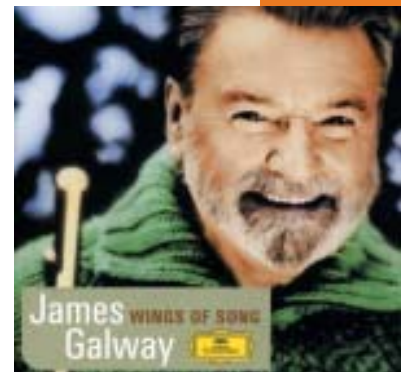
"We quit producing the rock stuff after Blondie's *Maria*," Leon says. "We're really excited about our classical music connection since we're working on a new piece for Cassell to sing next year with symphony players in Houston and New Orleans, conducted by Klauspeter Seibel who worked with us on the James Galway Deutsche Grammophon project. The settings will be of Texas folk songs from the pre-cowboy era, not the ones that you would expect at all, and Cassell's own writing about her family's early days in Texas. There'll probably be a CD as well."



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Leon's advice to those who hope to succeed in a musical production career? "Go do what you feel, regardless of what anybody tells you. Use any means necessary to get the best performance out of the artist. Sublimate your ego and focus on whatever techniques you can use to get the artist's vision on the record in the best possible way. That way, you'll be the next *you*, rather than the next anybody else." (*Behind the Glass*, Massey)

To learn more about Craig Leon and Cassell Webb, visit www.craigleon.com.



Sir James Galway's recent album "Wings of Song", which reached No. 1 in the U.K. and No. 2 in the U.S. was produced by Leon and co-produced by Webb.

Craig Leon & Cassell Webb



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