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Singer puts heart and soul into his music



By Nat Binns/Daily News staff

NEWPORT - Hints of jazz, blues, country and rock came through in Woody Russell's performance Sunday, some elements more prevalent in certain songs.

His style defies genre because of the unique blend of influences he fuses together, and he doesn't care what you call his music.

For Russell, every song he has written has to have one thing at its core - soul.

"Somebody told me it's thinking man's Americana," Russell said of his style. "I don't care what they call it, if it's got soul, it works for me."

Russell made his second straight appearance at the Newport Folk Festival, playing the Waterside Stage on Sunday at Fort Adams. But this trip to the festival was a bit different for the Montana native.

Russell was the runner-up in the Apple and Eve talent search last year, but apparently



Woody Russell jams on guitar Sunday on the



impressed event organizers enough to be the only one from the talent search on the bill this year.

Waterside Stage during the Newport Folk Festival at Fort Adams. (David Hansen/Daily News photo)

Russell said his experience at the talent search in 2004 has helped give him exposure and landed him more work during the past year.

"It made all the difference in the world being on the roster," Russell said. "It's an honor to be here, it's such a traditional, classic event."

During the time that passed between his two visits to Newport, Russell wrote and produced a new album called "Salt" in Austin, Texas, where he lives.

Russell showed off his soulful voice, which has tremendous range, on songs from the new album. Russell said he recorded the album with a new crew backing him, giving him more creative freedom to incorporate the blues and soul aspects he has wanted to include in the past.

"Salt" is Russell's third effort and is a new beginning of sorts, he said. The songs feature more gospel vocals and horns for a soulful flavor.

"I took some adventures into new territories," he said.

One of the highlights of Russell's set was the title track, "Salt" - a love song with a catchy blues guitar riff. The song is about his wife and her support of his music career, something he said he can't live without.

"She tells me don't give up, she knows I'd be a dead man walking," Russell says in the song.

Russell said he tries to write songs that are universal, but the passion for the songs must come from a very personal place.

"As I get better as a songwriter, I can make those connections that are universal, but you have to write from a pretty deep place," Russell said.

Russell closed his set with a song that is close to his heart, but was made famous by Marvin Gaye in the late 1960s. As soon as Russell started playing "What's Going On," audience members gave a nostalgic sigh.

Russell said he plays the song because it is just as relevant now as it was in the 1960s. War is an issue that has affected every generation, and the anti-war lyrics still hold weight, Russell said.

"It's one of those songs that never goes out of style because of the subject matter," he said.

Sunday's set was the unofficial release party for Russell's album, which is now available in stores and at www.woodyrussell.com.

Russell is set to tour the West Coast in the fall, and will continue to promote the album around the country and in Austin, where he has found receptive music scene.

Russell said Austin is much older and more dynamic than the Seattle scene, where he recorded his first two albums.

"What I do is more welcome in Austin," Russell said. "They know where it's coming from."

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