PLAY

Leon Bridges Is Ready to Play Again

Writer Rembert Browne watched Leon Bridges ascend to fame in real time. He checks in with the Fort Worth–bred musician as he prepares to play for the masses.

WORDS BY REMBERT BROWNE, PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHANIQWA JARVIS

IN JANUARY 2015, I got an email with the subject line "Leon Bridges." "Are you up on him?" the message said, about a name I'd never heard. By that February, I was watching him perform live, in a room packed with music industry people, all there to see if *this guy* could be the next big thing. These crowds — typically editors, music bloggers, and assorted media — while hopeful for a good show, are not known for being energetic, for dancing, or for doing much more than staring with a free gin and tonic in hand. Less than 15 minutes in, Bridges had won over the whole lot of us. He played for almost an hour, much longer than expected for someone without an album. There was dancing in the crowd and charisma on stage. Everyone in that room, myself included, left believing that they had just seen the future.

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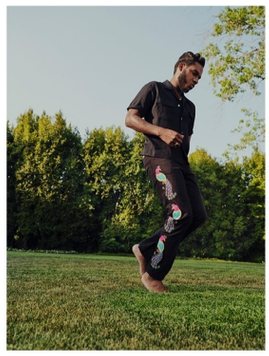
By March, I was sitting across from Bridges in Austin, Texas, hours before one of his early showcases. Seeing as this was 2015, I was probably wearing short shorts and a vintage basketball jersey. Leon — representing the opposite side of the fashion spectrum — wore black-and-white wingtip shoes, champagne socks, a pair of thick brown pants with a light brown belt, and a tucked-in, red-checkered collared shirt. He looked outstanding, though a tad uncomfortable, as if this '50s look wasn't his final form. An old colleague of mine once said that Bridges looked like the actor Leon (Robinson) playing singer David Ruffin in the four-hour "Temptations" mini-series. It was certainly a look, and one he pulled off. But much like the strict black-and-white dress code that fellow pop phenom Janelle Monáe adopted in the early years of her career, the initial fashion offering became, ultimately, limiting. "My style has evolved so much," Bridges tells me over the phone this past June, "even from the first time I saw you in 2015."



In the six years since that first meeting, Bridges has become one of the most beloved vocalists on the planet. He's been nominated for four Grammys, winning one, and his first two albums cracked the top 10 of the Billboard 200 album charts. His collaborations have ranged from country-pop singer Kacey Musgraves and blues rocker Gary Clark Jr. to legendary rapper Bun B and psychedelic funk trio Khruangbin.

Both his fans and his musical peers seem eager to be on the ride that is the evolution of Leon Bridges. And it makes sense, because with each passing year, song, and album — including his newly released third album "Gold-Diggers Sound" — he continues to surprise us with what's next.

Leon Bridges was born on July 13, 1989. Growing up, Bridges split his time between Fort Worth and Dallas. His foray into the arts was first through dance, a passion that started by simply being a Black Texas kid in the 2000s era of hip-hop, the songs being perfect instruction manuals on how to move your body. This blossomed into formal training at Fort Worth's Tarrant County College, which was where he started pouring himself into singing and guitar playing.

"There was this one cat who would bring his keyboard to school," Bridges says. "A lot of people would gravitate toward him and have these jam sessions." This became an early safe space for Bridges to express himself, until he had to leave college and pick up a job to help support his mother. Bridges describes this 2012 moment as a "repositioning" of his artistic priorities, and what his future could become. Dancing was put on the backburner in favor of songwriting, which led to playing open mics.

Long before a glimmer of fame was on the horizon, there were two things that stood out about Bridges: his look and his voice. His '50s look, contrary to some beliefs, was not a record label marketing scheme to make Bridges stand out in the crowd — it was all Bridges. And the voice, which many heard first on his 2015 debut single "Coming Home," stuck to you and wouldn't let go, like grits. It's a voice that is at once modern and full of history. When Bridges hit the scene, everyone assumed that his sound was simply harkening back to Sam Cooke and Otis Redding. But when you get Bridges to really open up and talk about the people who paved his way, it's easy to see how that wider mélange of sounds helped to birth his.

"When I look at 1950s R&B, I gravitate towards gospel music. The '60s, I would have to go with Roy C," Bridges shares, citing the Southern soul singer behind the 1965 hit, "Shotgun Wedding." "The '70s were when R&B music got a little bit more experimental, with more transparency and rawness in the songwriting, so Funkadelic and Allen Toussaint. In the '80s, you got Kool & The Gang and you got The Whispers. And then the '90s and 2000s, there's Usher, Ginuwine, and there's the whole boy band thing with 112 and Dru Hill."

When Bridges released his first full-length studio album, "Coming Home," in 2015, life changed. "During that time, I was just so ecstatic about this transition into this different life. And I was just kind of taking it all in as it came." One of the pressures of "blowing up" musically is to uproot your life, especially if you don't already live in New York or Los Angeles. For Bridges, trading coasts was one thing he never had to worry about. When Bridges says home, he means Texas. "Unlike some other artists who end up moving to other places, I still keep Fort Worth home. I rep for Fort Worth and I rep for Texas hard, got it tatted on me." Repping hard could be seen as a bit of an understatement, as Bridges is currently the official Texas State Musician. "It's a wild thing to be deemed that. It's kind of an overwhelming title, but I get it. I'm so grateful to be recognized in that way, because I look at the musical lineage of Fort Worth and Texas, and I'm like a speck amongst such a rich lineage. You look at Erykah Badu, Ornette Coleman, and King Curtis. I had an opportunity to do what I love, and I really rep for Fort Worth."

The title of that profile I ended up writing in March 2015 was "Watching Leon Bridges Get Famous in Real Time." But it wasn't just that he was becoming increasingly known with each passing week. Bridges also seemed to be navigating it all with a grace and ease that we'd want all of our stars to settle into. "I think what helped me to navigate through fame while still having these milestones was not forgetting home," he says. "I think what kept me grounded was just my community. No one in my camp ever encouraged me to make the move," Bridges says, chatting from Dallas. "From the time I put out the music and signed to Columbia and moved into this new spot, I was like, Yeah, this is easy for me, I can live here and still commute to wherever I need to go."

With his 2018 sophomore release, "Good Thing," Bridges earned his first Grammy, for the single "Bet Ain't Worth the Hand." But even in the years between albums, Bridges was showing up in places, sometimes unexpectedly but always well received.

In 2019, Bridges premiered the song "That Was Yesterday" on the season two finale of the HBO hit show "Big Little Lies." This was two years after his standout track "River" made a standout appearance in the show's first season. The impact of these musical syncs for an emerging artist such as Bridges really can't be understated. The right song placed at the right moment within the right episode of a highly bingeable show is how a large swath of the listening public finds new music. These two crucial placements opened Bridges' fan base up in ways he hadn't anticipated.

"I have done well for myself and in my career. But 'Big Little Lies' just totally put me on people's radar in a big way." At this point, Bridges begins to laugh to himself, clearly not done with this story. "So I'm on this dating app, Raya. And I started to notice all these models trying to ... you know what I'm saying." I can hear the blushing in his voice. But I don't bail him out; I want to hear what comes next. "Our conversations were initially like, Oh, I discovered you through 'Big Little Lies.' So that was a moment where I could feel my influence reaching beyond the R&B soul purist crowd."

With 2019 coming to a close, Bridges was in a period of gearing up for the next project. Unbeknownst to him, a global pandemic was only months away. "I was doing little sporadic shows here and there. On the cusp of lockdown, I did a benefit show in New York. And the day I got back, there was an article that one of the artists who also performed had COVID-19." What came next for Bridges was a loss of taste, smell, and some quarantining. When his condition improved and symptoms subsided, he turned his attention to his third album, named for a place he stumbled on in 2018 and which continued to loom large in his life.

From the outside, Gold Diggers is simply a Hollywood bar. But when you search it on Google Maps, you find out the real story: "Bar, hotel, & recording studio in one." So, for two months, Leon Bridges moved in. He knew what he wanted from this process, and what he wanted to leave behind.

During the making of his previous album, "Good Thing," Bridges felt like he was simply hunting for the best beats that his collaborator Ricky Reed had in his catalogue. "It's like, these beats could potentially be for Shawn Mendes or Lizzo. And that's great. But I thought, How do we cultivate this unique R&B that's unique to me?" Upon hearing this, Reed suggested a single place where the heart and soul of the album could be created. And the place was Gold Diggers.

"We threw a pre-Grammy party, the year I won, at Gold Diggers. When I walked into the hotel part of it, I was just blown away. The decor and the aesthetic of the rooms reflected my taste and style and fashion. It's important to live in a place that's inspiring in that way." After Bridges and his team decided to take up residence at Gold Diggers, commuting to a recording session was no longer necessary. "This is a whole different thing where I'm living and creating in one space. I could literally walk downstairs from my bedroom and I'm in the studio. I would say the vibe [of this album] was definitely contingent on the space," Bridges tells me, almost longingly, about the process he clearly adored.

The end product is "Gold-Diggers Sound." It's an 11-track album that shows range, romance, and a type of R&B that will challenge some of his early fans and thrill those of us who love a complex, but not complicated, work of art. I'm always fascinated by the first 10 to 12 minutes of an album. Those first three or four songs basically pose the questions, Do I want to keep listening? Am I going to make it to the end? On "Gold-Diggers Sound," the early sequencing of "Born Again"; "Motorbike"; "Steam;" and "Why Don't You Touch Me" hit back-to-back like, boom, boom, boom, boom. It's an album with very little reason to hit fast forward.

Regarding the very smooth “Sho Nuff,” Bridges explains it as “a very simple, soulful, almost Otis Redding kind of guitar thing, juxtaposed with this sexy R&B thing.” The song feels like a three-minute flirt. There’s a 90-second run in “Sweeter,” his song with Terrace Martin, that is *outstanding*. Written in response to the murder of George Floyd, “Sweeter” hits you with its beauty, solemnity, and pain. Then there’s “Steam,” a roller skate–ready jam that will have your head dancing back and forth all day, a song that makes you want to roller skate, frolic, and feel your most free. The album’s closer, “Blue Mesas,” is a gorgeous finale that leaves you wanting more, while also appreciating it for what it is — the *exact* way this album should end.

It’s an album and a sound that Bridges can’t wait for people to feel, whether they’re listening to his new songs, watching his music videos, or seeing him grace stages around the world. “I’m ready to get back on stage and really perform this album. The beauty of what exists on the album is one thing, but the live version is different. Performing live is a drug.”

Bridges is a true performer — you can see that from simply watching him once. But he’s also a true bandleader who is always thinking about his team. “The pandemic was hard. I miss the camaraderie of traveling and doing shows with my band. To really witness our collective effort — playing the show, then going out and experiencing the city and checking out bars. And I mean, I keep forgetting, like, Oh, shit. This is my job. So I just can’t wait to get back on stage and put out energy and have that energy reciprocated from the audience. I’m really ecstatic to create a memorable experience for people.”

“Gold-Diggers Sound” is not a departure, but more an artist growing and arriving. His vision for this new era of his artistic trajectory is crystal clear. “This album is just a continuation of unfolding my layers as an artist,” Bridges says. “I have a beautiful body of work. It looks like people are embracing my evolution and growth as an artist. I can say, at this point in my life, I’m totally content.”

Wardrobe Stylist — *Mac Huelster*

Levi's jeans, shirts and jewelry: Leon's own.
All wardrobe: Leon's own.
Dior Men shirt, Gucci loafers, trousers, scarf, and jewelry: Leon's own.
Levi's jeans, shirt: Leon's own.
Dior Men trousers, Gucci loafers, shirt, tank, and jewelry: Leon's own.

Our Contributors

Rembert Browne Writer

Rembert Browne is a writer from Atlanta. He lives in Los Angeles.

Shaniqwa Jarvis Photographer

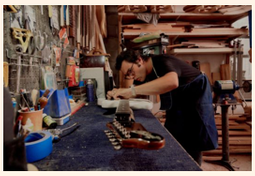
Shaniqwa Jarvis is an artist known for combining a modern fashion aesthetic with sensitive and emotional portraiture. Jarvis has executed large-scale portrait projects and exhibits in London, Tokyo, Los Angeles, and New York. In 2018, Jarvis released her first book, a collection of work in a limited-run, self-titled debut.

MORE PLAY

Up Against the Net

On the 51st anniversary of the Original 9, tennis icon and Love and Love Tennis Foundation founder Rosie Casals recalls the crucial fight for women's equality in tennis.

WORDS BY CEDAR PASORI, PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCES TULK-HART



Anyone Can Play Guitar

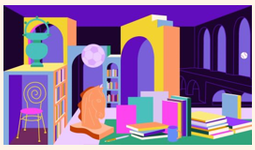
Musician and guitar luthier Jimmy Carbonetti carves his own path.

WORDS BY STEFAN MAROLACHAKIS, PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTOR LLORENTE

Hello, Dolly!

Child's play, minus the children, at one of America's best theme parks.

WORDS BY T. COLE RACHEL, ILLUSTRATION BY JESS ROTTER



Shall We Play a Game?

Sloane Crosley rolls the dice.

WORDS BY SLOANE CROSLEY, ILLUSTRATION BY MARINA ESMERALDO

In the Spiri

Artist Jayson Fann's li
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WORDS BY NINA RENATA ARON, PH
MARK HARTMAN

EXPLORE MORE

PLAY

Up Against the Net

On the 51st anniversary of the Original 9, tennis icon and Love and Love Tennis Foundation founder Rosie Casals recalls the crucial fight for women's equality in tennis.

WORDS BY CEDAR PASORI, PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCES TULK-HART

UNDEFINABLES

Jayus

(Indonesian) When someone tells a joke so badly, in such an awkward or not funny way, that you cannot help but laugh out loud.

ILLUSTRATION BY JESS ROTTER

IMPRESSIONS

Mara Hoffman

The fashion designer on her morning rituals and otherworldly dreamscapes.

WORDS BY MARA HOFFMAN, ILLUSTRATION BY HISHAM AKIRA BHAROOCHA

UNDEFINABLES

Månåata

(Swedish) The glimmering, road-like reflection that the moon creates on water.

ILLUSTRATION BY RAISSA PARDINI

HOW TO

How to Imp
Your Memo

A cognitive scientist
best care for our over
brains.

WORDS BY T. COLE RACHEL, ILLUST
ESTEFANIA LORET DE MOLA

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