

ISSUE #89

American Music

The Blasters/Dave Alvin newsletter

APRIL 2021



Photo: Billy Davis

Gene Taylor July 2, 1952 – February 20, 2021

Latest news: Dave Alvin is planning to release a book via Bertelsmann Publishing Group Inc. He said: "End of this year I will put out a book of selected lyrics, collected music writing I did for the L.A. Times and other magazines. Also, music-related poetry, some that have been published before, but some not."

Los Lobos has recorded Dave Alvin's FLAT TOP JOINT for an album tribute to L.A. songwriters.

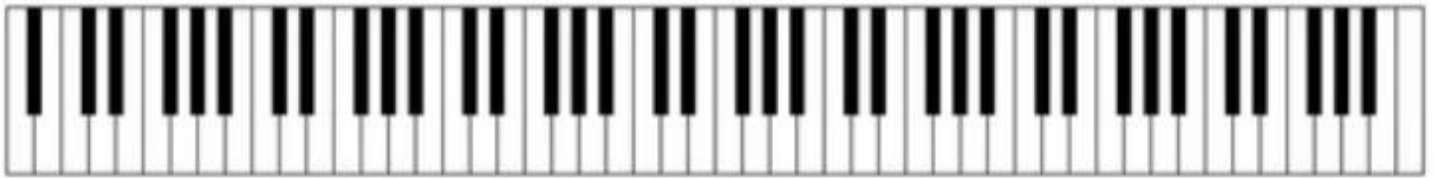
Dave was interviewed for an upcoming documentary about the Palomino Club in Los Angeles. The film called Palomania is tentatively scheduled for release in 2022. Renew Records/BMG will release an album of Americana inspired railroad songs. Various artists contributing songs include John Fogerty, Jackson Browne and Dave Alvin doing an original song called SOUTHWEST CHIEF. Actress/singer Ronee Blakely has released her CD ATOM BOMB BABY, which includes a version of Bob Dylan's HURRICANE featuring Dave Alvin on guitar. "I thought Dave would bring edgy fire and virtuosity and blues fire to HURRICANE, and he did that and more," Blakely told Variety in a December interview. The album is available on digital services. Keith Wyatt has been busy during the pandemic: "I have been very lucky that online teaching was one of the only parts of the music business that didn't shut down during the pandemic. I currently have over 750 students in my program at ArtistWorks, and I did a live-stream podcast on April 14 about the current state of blues with a lineup of great musicians - guitarists Scott Henderson and Josh Smith, bassist Nathan East and drummer Mike Clark. Otherwise, I have been doing a bunch of Zoom classes for music schools in Japan on the subject of roots music. It's great to be able to introduce young musicians over there to the same sounds that inspired the Blasters and help them to understand how the branches extend even into J-Pop. Long live American Music!"

Don Heffington, who played drums on multiple studio albums by Dave Alvin, died at 70 on March 23. "I've known Don for 40 years and he was always (and I stress always) an inspiration to me," Dave wrote on Facebook. Don drummed for a who's who of musicians, including Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, Randy Newman, Jackson Browne, Tom Russell, and the Jayhawks." Don also was a member of Lone Justice. **Ed Pearl**, founder of the legendary Ash Grove club in Los Angeles, died on Feb. 7 at 88. The landmark venue attracted top folk and blues acts from 1958 to 1973, and provided the inspiration for the title track of Dave Alvin's 2004 album. "My brother Phil and I owe him more than we could ever repay," Dave recalled in a Facebook post on Feb. 8. "Due to Ed's unwavering social conscience, going to The Ash Grove was not just about having a good old time but it was also about getting a real education in the often dire, unfair and unjust circumstances that all this beloved music grew out of. You couldn't separate the one from the other. At least not at The Ash Grove." **Gerald Locklin**, a poet, college professor and mentor to Dave Alvin, died at 79 on Jan. 17 of Covid-19 complications. "His influence on me, both personally and on my poetry as well as my songwriting, cannot be overstated," Dave wrote in a Facebook post on Jan. 18. "Locklin, who was one of the most published poets in the world of the small presses, taught me (among many of his wise lessons) the important lesson that poetry didn't have to be written in overly obscure, highly academic language. It could be written with words and images understood by people who didn't normally read or enjoy poetry." Rockabilly singer/guitarist **Ray Campi** died at 86 on March 11. Campi was a label mate of the Blasters on Rollin' Rock Records and had the band serve as his opening act. "In 1979/80, he spread the word about us among the small but passionate rockabilly/roots crowd," Dave recalled in a Facebook post on March 11. Dave played guitar and contributed vocals on TRAIN RHYTHM BLUE, an album that the Ray Campi Quartet released in 1998.

Bob Biggs, founder of Slash Records, died at 74 on Oct. 17 of complications from Lewy body dementia. Slash issued three albums and an EP by the Blasters; Poor Little Critter On The Road, the first album by the Knitters, and Un Sung Stories, the first solo album by Phil Alvin, between 1981 and 1986. — **Am**

A Gene Taylor Tribute

in Words and Photos from his friends



Gene Taylor, the legendary boogie-woogie piano player from the Blasters, died on February 20, 2021 in his home in Austin, Texas. Gene's housemate -- the filmmaker Monty McMillan -- found him dead in his bed. The cause of death was unknown, but is believed to have been related to the house having been without heat for five days in the dead of winter because of the statewide Texas power outages. "I don't really know exactly what happened." McMillan said. "I don't know if he had some underlying health condition, but I know the cold didn't help. We both stayed in our own beds trying to stay warm. I came out of it OK, and he obviously didn't." Gene Taylor was 68.

-- **Phil Alvin** -- The last time I played with Gene was a few years ago [March 21, 2017] here in Downey at a place called the Epic Lounge. The Gene Taylor Trio was playing, which includes his guitarist Chris Ruest, and Bill Bateman. I sat in and we played ROLL EM PETE, I WISH YOU WOULD, MARIE MARIE, and AMERICAN MUSIC. It was real good. [Ed. Note: Search YouTube "Gene Taylor Trio with Phil Alvin Roll Em Pete"]. That was the last time we saw each other, but I've talked to him over the phone more recently. It's a miserable thing that happened to him.

I first met Gene when our band was playing The Golden West Ballroom opening up for Black Oak Arkansas. Big Joe Turner, T-Bone Walker and Lee Allen



The Gene Taylor Trio with Phil Alvin at the Epic Lounge in Downey, CA, 3/21/17

had come down to play with us. Which was a big surprise because we had only met them one time before. We had an organ player named Tony Tanner. But while Big Joe was singing, I was hearing this boogie-woogie piano that I knew wasn't Tony. After the show, this guy comes up to me and says "I hope you didn't mind me playing piano along during your show?" I said, "Oh, that was you? I grabbed him by the arm and brought him back to the piano and had him play again. He started playing this great boogie-woogie, I immediately wanted him in my band [laughs]. Soon after, I started going over to his house and we became quick friends. That was in 1971.

We played with him on an off through the 70s, did shows, and parties and then he went off to Canada to play with Ronnie Hawkins. In 1981, when the Blasters really got rollin' pretty good, we asked him to play some shows with us. He then played on the first Blasters Slash record and he was officially in the Blasters. My favorite song that Gene played on was ROLL EM PETE, from the Blasters' Over There live record. That was always a great one to play with Gene. And of course NO OTHER GIRL, BORDER RADIO and HOLLYWOOD BED. He could always blend in perfectly on any song.

The Blasters 1981 Slash Records promo photo



Gene was a wild man on tour. I remember we were at a party in New Orleans and Gene was eating a bag of potato chips - I thought. It was actually magic mushrooms [laughs].

Gene had a great mind for sports, especially basketball stats. He was a big Sonny Liston boxing fan. If you wanted to get in an argument with Gene, you just had to bring up the Muhammad Ali Vs. Sonny Liston fight. If you started talking about it, you could never stop the conversation. Gene said the so-called "phantom punch" couldn't have knocked out Sonny Liston. A number of times, to get people to stop talking to me about something, I would bring up that boxing match and Gene would run over to them [laughs] to discuss it, as I snuck off.

Gene and I knew a lot of songs together. In the early days he and I planned to do some shows together. This is way before the Blasters. We sat down and wrote 65 songs - which was quite a bit. I can't even remember what the songs were, but they were classic blues songs style. The first band just before Gene was called 'Fresh-Water Bazz and the Delta Rabbits.' Then with Gene we had "Delta Pacific" and "The Nightshift."

The Kay electric guitar that I've been playing for the last 25 years was originally Gene's guitar. He gave it to Gary Masi [a Downey guitar player in many of Phil's early bands]. Gary traded it to me for the Budweiser guitar that I got when we did that Budweiser TV commercial in 1986. It was a bow-tie shaped guitar with the Budweiser logo on it. If you ever see that type of guitar hanging on the wall in bars with neon lights, mine was the original one they designed. I kept the guitar for a

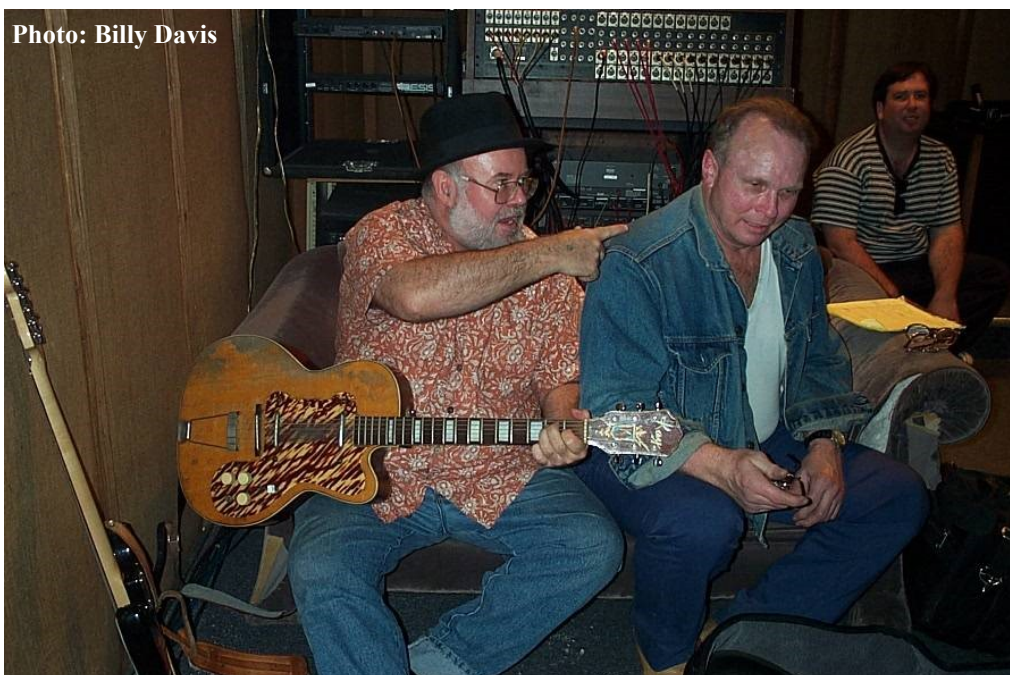


Photo: Billy Davis

Gene reminding Phil about who originally owned the Kay guitar.

long time, but never played it onstage. In fact, in that Budweiser commercial Gene got impatient because it took so long for the film crew to set up, so he left. Our road manager Wally sat in and even got paid to be a Gene impersonator [laughs] Back then, Gene could go crazy very easily.

Before the Blasters, Gene hated hippies. We'd be playing some place and Gene would nervously whisper over to me, "Oh, oh. There's hippies here." He'd get so nervous that I'd have to take him out of there [laughs]. One time in Huntington Beach we played a great party with lots of girls, so when we finished, I wanted to stay. But Gene said again: "Phil, there's hippies here." He started a big gang fight. It was Gene against 20 guys. We all tried to back him up, but he was fighting everybody. As he got thrown out of the party, he yelled, "I'll be back." The cops came, but they liked him and let him go. Johnny Bazz and I got out of there just in time. His craziness was brought on by his environment and his childhood, but he really calmed down over the last 20 years.

Gene was a sweet guy and much smarter guy than people knew. He was very well read and just a real sweetheart. He could get pretty crazy, but behind all of that was a really good heart.

-- **Dave Alvin** – About 1971, Gene became our friend the night he snuck onstage uninvited and played piano behind Phil's band who was backing Big Joe Turner. I remember he was living with his grandmother in 1973 and she passed away, leaving him a farm that was sold to clear the way for the expansion of the freeway. He made a lot of money, so he bought a new car,



The Original 5 Blasters reunite in 2002-2003

a fancy tape machine and was doing well. He was playing with Phil's band and James Harman and then he got offered the gig in Canned Heat. Then he went to Toronto to play with Ronnie Hawkins and the Downchild Blues band. In late '80 he came back to L.A. and joined the Blasters.

Gene was always nice to me and treated me like a little brother. He encouraged me. When I was in high school. He had an apartment near my school. He had the place mainly just to store his million records collection while he was on tour with Canned Heat. I'd ride my bike over to his house or sometimes ditch school to lis-

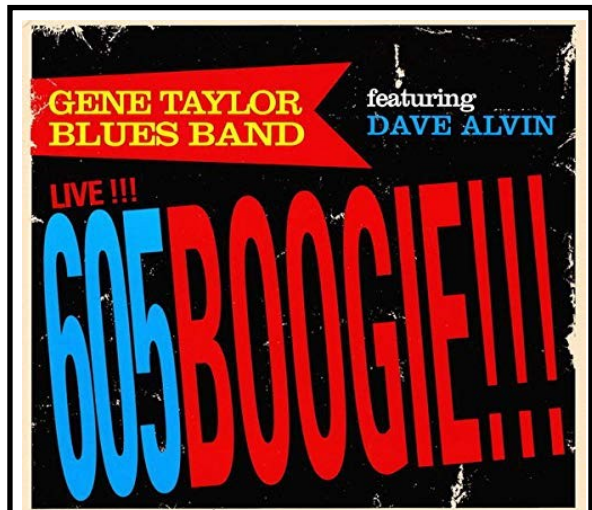
ten to 78s. He knew blues from when he was very young, so he'd explain to me what was great about the records. He might tease me about playing the sax or flute, but he was gentle and always encouraging. When I started writing poetry he had a gig at a place in a bar in Long Beach called the Falcon's Nest. It wasn't a fancy place but they didn't check IDs, so I would go in there and have a beer. He also played the West Coast Bodega. It was a beatnik place that I saw Bukowski do a poetry reading. So, I got to do a reading there with Gene backing me up.

I had a small-world moment years later; Me, Chris Gaffney, and Gene Taylor were talking and discovered that Gaffney's father lived in one of the apartments above the Falcon's Nest. Chris remembered living with his father for about six months while some piano player played five nights a week downstairs. Chris said to Gene: "Oh my god! You're that guy!"

When Gene joined the Blasters, it changed things musically. It was no longer strictly a guitar band. Gene gave us the classic Sun Records lineup like the Jerry Lee Lewis records. We suddenly had the classic sound and the ability to play the New Orleans stuff with more authenticity because Gene could play like Professor Longhair.

When the Blasters started touring, Gene was the guy that had the most road experience. No one else did. He told us: "Here is how we did it in Canned Heat or in Ronnie Hawkins band."

In the studio, recording the Blasters albums, Gene liked to get the recordings done. Phil was more particular, especially on his vocals. We



Dave Alvin Liner notes for The Gene Taylor Blues band CD Live!!! 605 Boogie!!! (2008)

When I first heard Gene Taylor play piano, back when we were mere teenagers, he was already a stunning boogie-woogie/blues pianist and he's only gotten more powerful in the years since.

Because Gene had been playing boogie, blues and country music since he was a young boy, I considered him the hippest, wisest and most experienced musician from our neighborhood gang in Downey, California. I still do.

He was the first of us to get on the road in the seventies and earn a living making music, starting with harmonica master James Harman then onto Canned Heat, Ronnie Hawkins, Rick Nelson, Charlie Musselwhite, John Hammond, Doug Sahm, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, and many others over the years.

And, oh yeah, in the early 1980s, Gene was also the keyboard powerhouse for the "hometown" band that I was part of with my brother Phil, bassist John Bazz, and drummer Bill Bateman called The Blasters.

Time and fate have sent all of us Downey guys down different paths (after living in Canada and Texas, Gene currently calls Europe home) so it is an extremely rare and special event for us to be able to get together and just play the music we love. It's always a big thrill for me to play with the tough rhythm section of John and Bill, but it's a great (and intimidating honor) to share a stage with the best boogie-woogie/blues pianist pounding the 88s today: Mister Gene Taylor.

produced Non-Fiction ourselves and it was a mess. It wasn't a good experience. The first album was the happy album. The biggest fight we had on the first record was about the song I LOVE YOU SO as to whether we should fade it out or end it. That was a two-hour argument and it ended when Phil punched a sound baffle. Hard Line got even worse. Gene was wild but was smart. When he had a suggestion, we'd eventually agree with him. Personally, he was always encouraging, especially my songwriting, and he was very good at suggesting things to make a song better even if it meant him not doing a piano solo and adding a guitar solo in place of it.

One thing that blows me away is that Gene Taylor was one of the greatest guitar players I've ever heard. True. In the early Blasters days, Bill and I were living together and Gene was staying with us. One afternoon, Gene was sitting on the couch with a guitar playing an old country song called FADED LOVE. The song could be played with four chords but Gene was playing it with like 47 chords [laughs]. My jaw dropped. He played a different chord inversion on each beat. That's the way the old jazz guys did it. He wasn't a great soloist, but he was one of the best at rhythm and chordal playing. He knew all the piano chords,

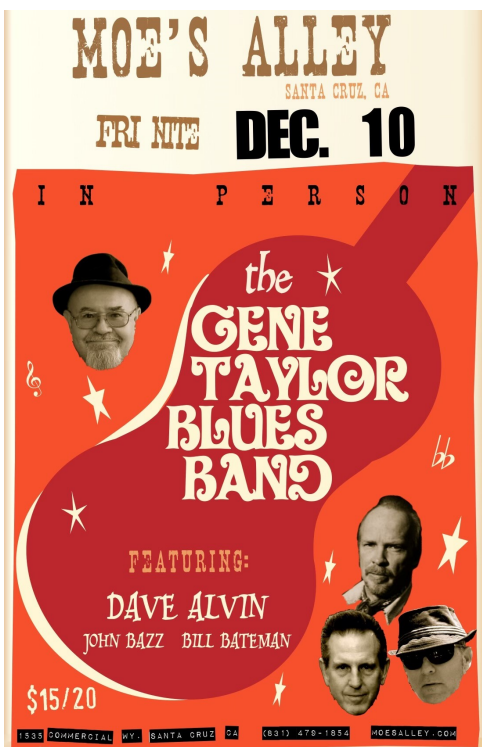
so he transposed them to guitar.

Playing live, when Gene was in the moment, was amazing. That's why I jumped around on stage like a goof ball. Cuz that's the way I felt inside when Gene and Bill would get locked in on songs like ROLL EM PETE or NO OTHER GIRL. It made me unbelievably happy. I feel fortunate to have been allowed to make music with the big kids. Moments like that were countless.

As for funny Gene stories, I'm saving a bunch for my memoir, but I'll tell you that Gene almost killed me three times [laughs]. He almost killed Bateman a million times [laughs]. It's a really weird thing to say but that's how Gene showed affection. I say that lovingly. Here's one rock 'n roll crazy road story about



Posters by John Bazz



Gene. It's not pretty. We played Boston a few times at a club called the Channel. But the next time we came back, we played the Paradise [4/25/83], which was really exciting because it was the place everyone went and was talking about. All the important New England rock royalty was there – Peter Wolf from J. Geils, two guys from the Cars were there and the entire lineup of Roomful of Blues, as were all the big Boston music writers. We played a great gig, but Gene was playing a little weird [laughs]. The audience couldn't tell, but we knew. After two or three encores we went back into the dressing room. All the guests came back to hang out and talk, but Gene laid down on the couch and didn't move. He just kept repeating: "I done fucked up. I done fucked up." Finally, after everyone left, our road manager Wally got Gene up and he told us what happened. In those days people in the audience would buy us beers or shots and we'd drink it. Gene had to take things one step further. Someone put a sliver of paper up on his piano and Gene thought it was cocaine and snorted the whole thing. It turns out it was heroin [laughs]. That's what life was like with Gene. He was our childhood friend, so we knew.

Gene had a family tragedy early when he was a teenager where his brother and his father died, leaving him as an orphan. Ever since, Gene had a deathwish. We expected him to go at anytime because of the way he lived. In 1982, when he joined the Blasters, we tried to make him a royalty-bearing member of the band. Gene refused and said:

"Just pay me a salary, I won't live long enough to need royalties."

The last time I saw Gene was in Burbank CA at Joe's [on 5/10/18]. I played with the Gene Taylor Trio. It was Gene, DJ Bonebrake, Chris Ruest and me. Gene didn't want to have a bass player, so I played a lot of bass lines on the guitar. I had talked to him since, every few months on the phone. We were talking about recording something in the future.

I think if he hadn't frozen to death, he would have lived at least another 10 years. I'll miss Gene very much as my big brother and musical teacher, but the thing that makes me the saddest is the realization that those five Blasters guys will



The Gene Taylor Trio with Dave Alvin in Downey CA 5/10/18

never play together again. When I talked to Gene on the phone in December, it kept coming back to; how do we get the five of us back together again for even just a moment. Maybe the only way to go now is for me, Phil, Johnny and Bill to return to Ronnie Weiser's [Rollin Rock Records] when it was just the four of us. It's hard to take that I won't be onstage with Gene anymore. I always thought the five Blasters were immortal.

-- **Bill Bateman** – He's the only one to ever play piano that drives me wild. I met Gene in the early 70s when we were putting together a band - me and Dave Carroll, Gary Masi, Downey Mike Roach on lead guitar, and Joe Clark on rhythm. Butch, Dave's brother, brought over another guitar guy because Mike Roach was



gonna back out - that guy was Gene Taylor. I saw him walking across my lawn looking pretty much like he did later in the Blasters. He had a business shirt with sleeves rolled up, wearing shades, with a Fu Manchu and going bald at 17 or 18 years old. He was my guitar player from then on. We hung

out a lot. About a year later Gene was playing in another band in Norwalk and they needed a drummer to play a gig at Norwalk High School. Gene drove me there and we were on a break between sets. I didn't see Gene around and suddenly I hear this piano sound. There was my guitar man playing the piano more than amazing. He was ripping on an Albert Ammons song. Right after that we formed the duo Piano Gene and Wild Bill. We've been a duo so long ever since then. We knew so many songs together.

Later Gene was in a band with Phil called Delta Pacific and The Nightshift. That was when Mary Franklin introduced them to Lee Allen. That was Phil with Gene, Gary Masi, Doug Allgood, and Johnny Bazz was on drums and I was an occasional

fill-in drummer when Johnny Bazz was off skiing or on a trip. They hung out at Rick's Blues Bar in Long Beach, but I never got to do that, so Gene met Phil and the boys before I did.

Much later, I was the one who put Gene in the Blasters. We wanted him in, so I promised: "Just watch. I'll get him for us." Gene was playing with James Harman. He joined the Blasters and quit James. Harman to this day won't forgive me for that [laughs].

Gene did a lot of crazy things but always when we were drunk. I remember Gene thought an opening band stole my jacket, so he took his buck knife and cut all of the drummer's skins [laughs]. But in truth, they didn't steal it, someone else did. That poor drummer [laughs]. Another time I remember we were in the Blasters van and someone cut us off and Gene was so mad he wanted to get to him. He said: "Pull this van over or I'm gonna cut my way through a wall of meat." He meant he was gonna cut through the other nine of us in the van, because he was sitting all the way in the back [laughs]. He was willing to fight me to get outside after the other guy [laughs]. Wally, our road manager threw Gene up against the van and said: "Are you willing to get back to work, Mr. Taylor?" He said: "Yes sir!" and there was no more trouble from Gene.

Gene left Canned Heat because they didn't get him a pizza after the show or someone ate it. He asked immediately for his \$10,000 payout, and got right on a plane and went home.



Gene Taylor playing guitar with Bob Hite

He never said anything about it. He stayed friends with the singer Bob Hite because Bob didn't have anything to do with the pizza [laughs]. Gene roomed with Bob on the Canned Heat tours and he had a job to do. He had to comb Bob's long hair because his arms were too short to do it himself [laughs]. And he had to tend to the corns and

bunions on his feet [laughs]. He'd cut them, sand them . . . Oh, and also roll joints [laughs]. Bob wasn't a hippie, he was blues royalty - a serious record collector – one of the biggest in the world. Gene had a huge, but smaller than Bob collection. Some of my favorite gigs with Gene was when we played a five-nights-a-week duo at the Falcon's Nest in Long Beach in the 70s. It was a long-shoremen's bar. There were knife fights there all the time, guys on parole. My mom and Aunt Jean came down there one night and Aunt Jean even got up on the bar and started dancing.

I loved playing the Gene-sung songs in the Blasters like LIGHTS OUT and DON'T LIE TO ME. We were best friends. I was the only guy who would room with Gene on the road. We were always together until there wasn't any Gene now. I'm pissed that he had to freeze to death. The big frost got Gene. He didn't call anyone because he had no cellphone power. If people knew, he would have had help. I think that's a crime.

I imagine now that he's dead, he's saying: "Freezin' to death ain't that bad. You just go to sleep and never wake up again." I talk about Gene like he's still in the next room. He's probably getting ready, because we have someplace to go. He's constantly still alive around me.

-- **John Bazz** – It was at the Golden West Ballroom that Gene Taylor first came into our circle of friends. Kevin Fahy was a good friend and a drummer who also had a gift for organizing jam sessions and other musical events. It was Kevin who provided the music for his older



Gene and Bill switch at soundcheck in Glasgow Scotland in 2003



Photo: Steve Joseph

brother's weekly or monthly midweek event at the Golden West Ballroom in Norwalk, CA.

I'm not sure what the actual event entailed, but most likely it was a dance or card game or social gathering of some sort in 1971. The entertainment Kevin booked for the event featured Big Joe Turner with Lee Allen, along with Phil Alvin and a few other Downey blues musicians providing the support. Gene Taylor, who also lived in Norwalk, CA, heard about the Big Joe Turner gig and was in attendance.

-- **Kevin Fahy (drummer in the pre-Blasters band Delta Pacific)** -- At the Golden West ballroom, because my brother was the promoter, I wasn't playing that night. He had me greeting the musicians when they came, watching the stage, and helping at soundcheck. So I was watching the show and couldn't see the piano in the back. This guy who we would learn later to be Gene Taylor was playing along. And I think Gene didn't think he was bothering anyone. But our bass player Doug Allgood was taping the show from right by the piano. We might have never known Gene was playing if Doug didn't listen to the tape later. Gene had a great boogie-woogie style.

Most of us were going to Cerritos Junior High School in Norwalk. I think Gene might have come to me in school and said he really enjoyed the music that night. But I'm not sure we put it all together that he was the same guy playing the piano. When I think of Gene Taylor I remember that he and Phil argued about music all the time. I think they loved that. Whether it was a song or a tempo or anything. They both had strong personalities.



-- **Doug Allgood (bass player in the pre-Blasters band Delta Pacific)** – I listened to the tape in the next few days and heard the piano on there. It sounded really good and I knew it wasn't our organ player Tony. I immediately called Phil to ask him if he got Gene's number. None of our guys did. I saw what Gene looked like, so I knew well enough how to describe him. He was 5 foot square and all muscle. All I could get from our guys is that he lived in a certain area of Norwalk where they sold the houses for a right-of-way for the freeway to be constructed. And the build got stopped, so some houses were boarded up and some were lived in. So, I drove my dad's 1933 Plymouth through that area and asked around in the neighborhood.



Gene and Doug reunite in Tyler, TX on 9/16/00

One guy who was mowing his lawn told me Gene lived down the street and pointed out the house. I knocked on his door and Gene was there and invited me in. His grandmother lived there at the time, we sat down and he told me all about himself and then sat down at this old upright piano made in the early 1900s and started playing. All of us kids had piano lessons, but his playing was incredible. I could hear Albert Ammons, and Pete Johnson, Meade Lux Lewis, and Cow Cow Davenport as Gene's inspiration. He just blew me away and he was just 17 years old - the both of us were. This guy just reeked of authenticity. After that Gene played with us all the time.

I remember we were playing a party in one of the beach cities. It was upstairs in an apartment with everything open. I think Gary Masi was the guitarist at this point. Phil had his harmonicas on his amplifier. There was this real big guy who was really drunk. He walked over to Phil's amp and took one of his harps and put it in his shirt pocket. And then he took another one and put it in his other pocket. Now, Phil was always joyful, jolly, happy and having a good time. I saw him walk over to the guy talking, and joking and he's looking up at the guy and says, "Man. Would you look at that? Someone went and put one of my harps in your pocket." He reached up and plucked it from the guy's pocket. The big guy looked confused. Phil then said, "And look at that! Someone put another of my harmonicas in your

other pocket.” And he snatched that one out. The huge guy then snapped and said, “Are you saying I’m stealing?” Phil was speechless, when all of a sudden ‘5 X 5’ Gene is standing in between them, looking up at the big guy and Gene said, “No, Man. He never said you were stealin’.” The guy reared back like he was gonna punch and Gene beat him to it with a punch straight up and knocked him right out [laughs]. I heard there might have been more trouble after I left the party. But that wasn’t the first time Gene was the hero [laughs].

-- **Keith Wyatt** -- Gene bounced back and forth between Belgium, Austin and L.A., so he would join us whenever our tour dates intersected with his living situation. When the Blasters toured as a four-piece I tried to cover both the guitar and keyboard parts from the records, but it was never quite the same; when Gene sat in,



The Blasters 2006

he brought back that whole dimension of the Blaster sound. It was great to have him beef-up the foundation, but I also had to follow his solos, and since he was always at the top of his game it pushed me to a higher level. My favorite moment during the set was when he would stand in front of Phil during his harp solo on SO LONG BABY GOODBYE and hold his hat out for tips - the organ grinder and his monkey. Phil didn't always seem to appreciate the humor, but he rolled with it. Gene had an opinion on everything and was not shy about voicing it, whether the topic was music, current events, tour conditions or boxing. I was warned not to mention the Ali vs. Liston match unless I was ready for a tirade [laughs]. His mood could run from one extreme to the other, but he was never in neutral - his energy, passion and musicianship will not be replaced.

-- **Frank Furillo** -- Gene was one of a kind. His death was a shock to me, and I will miss him terribly. My favorite memory of Gene, was the couple months I lived with him and Phil, in Gene's house, which had been condemned to make way for the

new freeway in L.A.. It was the 105 (I think.), which wouldn't be built for many years! This was the first time I had moved out from my parents, and after a couple months, I limped home a total wreck. Absolutely the most fun I've ever had in my life. We all went to blues concerts at the Ashgrove, and the Golden Bear, playing music all night, getting up and starting again.

The last time I saw Gene, was at the Oscar Mayer Theater, in Madison, Wisconsin. It was in the late 1990s, and I was running the stage when the Thunderbirds came through. I set up one of my 78s players, in the Thunderbirds dressing room, with a bunch of my blues records. It was Gene Taylor who got me started collecting 78s. When "on tour" in the 70s, with our swing band The Mango Brothers, we stopped to visit Gene, and he gave me a copy of Cab Calloway's, JUMPIN JIVE. His music room was four walls of 78s records! I think he was managing Bob Hite's collection at the time.

Yeah, I'm going to miss that guy. We were born the same year.



Frank Furillo: Here is Top Jimmy at the Starwood, with Gene and I in the band. Also Steve Berlin, Dig, Gil T, Carlos Guitarlos, and Joey on drums. Once, playing at the Cathay De Grande, we had to haul a piano up to the second floor, for Gene Taylor. A standup, barrel-house heavy-as-fuck piano.

We ended the night eating pig's feet with Top Jimmy, sitting on the dance floor during load-out. Drunk.

Imagine that!

I wrote a song for my band The Rousers which featured the intro from PIGFOOT SHUFFLE. Carlos scared the shit out of our guitar player, trying to show him how to play it "correctly" while we were on tour through L.A. in the late 80s, at Raji's. Our sound man was Derf Scratch from Fear.

-- **Steve Berlin** -- Gene was certainly the best blues and boogie-woogie pianist that I ever played with, and just a remarkable and amazing dude. After I left the Blasters to join Los Lobos we really didn't see much of each other, so it was nice when I produced the Fabulous Thunderbirds record *Painted On* he was in the band and we got to reconnect and hang out a bit. We both had grown up a lot in the intervening years- he was kind of a wild dude back then as we all were so I was struck by how much he had mellowed, and what a multi-faceted player he had become. It's just such a tragic loss.

-- **Rick Brown (Blasters soundman)** -- It was the weirdest Blasters gig. They were co-headlining a show in Montreal, with The Fabulous Thunderbirds at the Spectrum [10/23/85]. Gene and I were in the van that got there first. Gene did the entire soundcheck, by himself. Every instrument, every vocal mic.

I was going to my hotel room, to sleep before the show. Wally, our tour manager, asked me what room I was in, so he could call me. I woke up, to the phone ringing.

A voice said, "Where are you? You're going on soon." I jumped into my clothes, grabbed a cab, threw all my money at the driver and said, get me to the Spectrum as fast as you can. He did. I got down to the soundboard, set everything in haste. Then the Blasters walk out. I totally missed the T-Birds' set. During the set,



Gene and Rick getting a quick bite on the road in 2002

Phil's monitor, stopped working. He started swinging it back and forth by the handle to show it was useless. Phil wasn't happy with Bill's tempo either, and throwing shade on Bill, in the lyrics of the song. After the song, Bill jumps off the drum riser, comes to the front of the stage, grabs the mic from Phil's hand, and apologizes to the crowd, if his tempos weren't good enough for the singer. Such weirdness. Phil, dedicated a tune to Kim Wilson. Kim comes out on stage as if he were asked to come out. So they changed the song they were gonna do to a slow blues. The entire night was like that.

After the show, I went backstage, to a Phil and Gene argument. Gene was frustrated that Phil wasn't talking to him. As everyone was shuffling out, to our vehicles, Gene looks at me, and says, "I know a way he'll listen to me. . ." As the band and I were in the van for Phil, we see Gene get on the T-Birds bus, with the band. We all looked at each other, like, what is happening? That's how Gene quit the Blasters.

-- **Greg Lewerke (Blasters manager)** -- When we were heading for a flight out of Amsterdam one day, Gene was standing in line behind me and Bill and had his shades and headphones on and I turned around to ask him if he had his passport ready as we were entering immigration. He wouldn't answer and as I was trying to get any reaction from him, Bateman tells me that Gene has dropped acid and won't be able to answer me. Needless to say, it was an interesting trip.

-- **Rick Shea** -- I didn't know Gene Taylor very well, just sort of greeting conversations and a few messages on Facebook, but he played blues, boogie-woogie, barrelhouse and rock 'n' roll piano like no one I'd ever heard, and he seemed to have a pretty wicked sense of humor.

My favorite memory is getting to play with Gene and all The Blasters two or three times - that was very cool - during the time I was touring and playing with Dave Alvin as part of The Guilty Men. We'd play a few times a year in Long Beach, The Blue Cafe or some other place, and if any of those guys, Gene, Bill Bateman, Johnny Bazz or Phil was around, they would usually stop by and end up sitting in on a few songs. Long Beach was kind of their old stomping ground. And a couple of times Gene, Phil, Johnny and Bill were all there at the same time and got up to play, including Dave, so all the original Blasters. Joe, Bobby and Gregory, the other Guilty Men would hop off stage and those guys would come up and play all of The Guilty Men's gear; bass, drums and piano.

Phil would play Dave's acoustic guitar or just sing, Dave would play electric and since I had my guitar and pedal steel setup they invited me to stay on stage and sit in with them. I remember they played whatever they felt like, old blues and rockabilly, but at least one time I remember them just tearing into a short set of five or six Blaster originals and songs they used to cover. Dave and Phil were pretty generous with passing around the instrumentals to me as much as to Dave and Gene.

I first saw The Blasters in probably 1981 or 82 at The Palomino Club in North Hollywood. I was totally knocked out and saw them probably a dozen times in those days and a few of the reunion shows later on. So getting to sit in and play some of

those songs with them was a big deal for me, just as playing with Dave all these years has been playing with one of my musical heroes, and as I said, very cool.

-- **Chris Ruest (solo artist and guitarist in the Gene Taylor Trio)** – Gene Taylor was one of the best friends I ever had. He was by far the best musician I ever worked with. Gene used to say “onward and upward” and not to dwell on things. I received his cremated remains this morning. It’s kind of a hard day, but one step at a time.

-- **Nico (Tutt) Vanhove (drummer)**

-- The first time I met Gene must have been somewhere in 2005/2006. Of course I knew him as a musician much longer than that. With our band Rusty Roots we were the backup band for Louisiana Red and that night Gene



Gene and Chris Ruest (photo: Courtesy Chris Ruest)

played with James Harman. Shortly after that I got a phone call from his tour manager asking if I wanted to do a duo performance with Gene in a bar.

I was very nervous that night, but Gene quickly reassured me and from then on, we played together many times at festivals as well as in small clubs and bars. He also gave me the opportunity to go on tour with James Harman and play concerts with Joey Buddy, Steve Freund, Chris Ruest, and many more.

The respect he gave me made me a better drummer. It was always very pleasant to play with him. He knew so many songs as if he was a living jukebox. Sometimes we played for more than four hours. We had so much fun.

The day I heard Gene had died, I couldn't believe it. Gene was full of lust for life and his passion for music was still huge.

I am going to miss him very much along with his great stories and his passion for music. Thanks for everything, Gene Taylor. Rest in peace, my friend.

-- **Javier Matos (The Blue Shadows)** – Gene was such a character. One time he and I, Bill Bateman and our friend Chendo were having some beers. I went to crack a new one open leaving the remaining 1/4 inch of beer in my old bottle. Gene picked it up and looked at Bill and said: “Chick beer.” I stood corrected after that.

Gene Taylor was a musical genius, incredibly smart, and will be missed every day until we meet on the other side.

— **Jeff Eyrich (Hard Line album producer and James Harman band bassist)** -- Gene was the best boogie-woogie barrelhouse piano player I've ever known. He and I go back even before the Blasters. When I used to play bass for James Harman, Gene was one of a few piano players who would come by and sit in with us. Playing bass with Gene, with that rolling left-hand of his, was always a challenge and a pleasure. I used to go see Gene play solo in this little bar down in Long Beach, CA on Sunday nights. Besides his great piano playing I remember how he used to kick the piano with his left foot right in time — the Gene Taylor version of tapping your foot. But it was really loud and I'll bet that wherever that piano is now, I'm sure Gene left a big mark down there where his left foot hit the piano. Gene was a consummate player and he showed up on the scene already playing that boogie-boogie stuff expertly — full of soul. We'll all miss him.

-- **Billy Davis** – Gene Taylor was a legend. I can't imagine a piano player more talented than he was. His personality and playing will be missed by so many.

I first met Gene Taylor in 1996 when he was playing a gig in New York City at the Bottom Line with the Fabulous Thunderbirds. I had only started the Blasters Newsletter two years before and didn't have much experience in the interview process. I went to the venue around soundcheck time and knocked on the door and asked for Gene. I hadn't arranged for access or



Billy Davis and Gene on the 2002 Blasters reunion tour

permission, but Gene graciously invited me into the dressing room and we sat down for an interview. He was such a nice and pleasant guy and I was in awe of his accomplishments. He took his time answering all my questions and invited me to stay for the show that night. I'm including a reprint of that interview in this newsletter.

The next time I saw Gene was in March of 2002 when the original five Blasters started their reunion tours. I was fortunate enough to be invited in for the Blasters rehearsals. When all the original Blasters arrived, I expected it to be a let's-catch-up-on-old-times type of meeting but it wasn't. I learned quickly that these guys are like family. Even if they haven't played together for a long time, they still talk or see each other all the time – so playing together was natural. Watching the rehearsal process, I realized how great a player Gene really was. I traveled with the band in 2002-2003 to 37 of 40 reunion shows and I got to spend some fun time with Gene backstage, at soundchecks, in the hotel lobbys, and eating lunch on the road at various stops. He was always full of conversation with a touch of humor. I

remember hanging with him backstage at Fitzgerald's in Berwyn, IL after the Blasters reunion show and Gene found this old upright piano and started playing old barrelhouse and boogie-woogie blues songs. There were only a few people in the room. It blew me away to stand right next to him as he played and sang beautifully on this old instrument. He had a way of singing the lyrics and occasionally looking straight into my eyes with a smirk. I could tell he loved playing this music more than anything in the world.

After the reunion tour, the next time I saw Gene with the Blasters again was at



Gene backstage at Fitzgerald's in Berwyn IL March 2002

Fitzgeralds for the July, 2006 American Music fest, where he played two shows with the Phil, John, Keith and Jerry Blasters. Around that time, he sent me a collection of print photos of him from the old days with his handwritten captions that he wanted me to keep safe in my Blasters collection. I printed them in Issue #49 May of 2006.

Gene was always kind to me and respected my passion as a Blasters fan. He thought the Blasters Newsletter was important. In 2008 he wrote a nice tribute about Chris Gaffney and he contributed to the newsletter's 40th Anniversary of the Blasters issue in 2019.

But December of 2007 was the last time I saw Gene in person. It was the Gene Taylor Blues Band holiday California tour, with Dave Alvin playing guitar and singing a few. With Bazz and Bateman, it was the Original Blasters minus Phil. I went along on that tour and it was amazing. See Issue #55 January 2008 for full coverage of that tour. I could always count on Gene to say something funny to me. He greeted me on the first day of the tour after seeing my newly shaved bald head and said: "Billy, I see you've finally given up the fight." I said: "Yes, Gene. Now we're in the same club." —~~Am~~

GENE TAYLOR INTERVIEW by Billy Davis 3/14/96 (originally printed in The Blasters Newsletter #11 May, 1996)

Former Blaster, and the only Blasters piano player, speaks of his Blasters tenure (81-85), his early influences, past projects and current musical ventures. This interview took place at a Fabulous Thunderbirds gig in New York on 3/14/96.

AM: Tell me about your earliest involvement in music.

Gene Taylor: I was born in Los Angeles but moved to Fort Worth TX when I was 2, so I was back and forth between L.A. and Fort Worth. My mother played piano, violin... but we didn't have a piano. We had neighbors when I was about 7 years old and they had a piano. Everybody in their family played mostly boogie-woogie and they were all teenagers who collected records. They had a drum set and immediately I could play because I had rhythm. I would go over and play with them but I wanted to play piano. It took a couple of years before I could get the nerve to ask anybody to show me. By that time they were taking me over to Meade Lux Lewis' house who is a boogie-woogie piano player. He lived in Watts [L.A. area] and they used to hang out with him. I wasn't playing then, but it was really cementing the idea of wanting to play the piano.

AM: I heard one of Bob Wills' guitar players was a mentor of yours in your youth.

GT: Yeah, this fella George Devore, who played with Bob Wills during the war. He replaced Eldon Shamblin, who went in the Army. George had a family band that lived down the block from us. His step-

son played guitar and piano, his wife sang and played piano. I played guitar and was learning piano at the time. On the weekends I would go play music with them and when I was about 11, I did my first professional gig. We played at the Norwalk women's club in Norwalk, CA. I made 5 bucks. When I was 14 we had an instrumental band that would back up strippers - so I would sneak out of the house and go down to the Purple Bunny in Norwalk, CA and sometimes we would get guys like Joe Houston, or Chuck Higgins to play with us and we had this band that would back up whoever was in there. When I was 16, I went down to Central L.A. and hooked up with T-Bone Walker and I met Phil [Alvin] when I was 19. Actually, I met Phil in a place called the Golden West Ballroom in Norwalk. He was doing a thing with Joe Turner. We didn't know each other, but we knew some of the same people like Big Joe and Lee Allen. I remember I just got up and sat in with him. At the end of the night I left, but somebody made a tape of it. Dave Alvin heard the tape and said: "You guys have got to find that piano player again, he fits into the sound real well." So then we ran into each other in a bar in Whittier, CA and at the time I had two or three things going on. I was working with T-Bone Walker, Joe Turner, Pee Wee Creighton, Margie Evans, Lowell Fulson, sometimes Roy Milton and guys like that who were gigging. [James] Harman moved to L.A. in 1970, but I was always busy playing with Phil and Dave in those years. At that time Dave was playing saxophone.

Photo: Billy Davis



Gene interview backstage at the Bottom Line in NYC in 1996

AM: You played with Canned Heat, didn't you?

GT: Yeah. I played with James Harman for a while in '73 and '74, then I went with Canned Heat in late '74 to about the middle of '76. I knew Bob Hite [Canned Heat lead singer] from record collecting, for quite a while. His brother Richard is a year older than me and we were buddies. Bob came down to some place that I was playing and Richard was there with another band. So that's where I met him, but he was a rock star already and I was just a kid out of high school.

AM: Did you do any recording with them?

GT: Nothing that came out. Right before I joined the band they had just done one record on Atlantic [One More River To Cross] and they were recording another one when there was some problems in the band and they had to let Henry the guitar player go. Atlantic dropped us because they weren't informed about letting Henry go.

AM: What was next?

GT: After Canned Heat, I did a lot of solo work. Up until I moved to Toronto, I had a regular gig at a piano lounge called the Falcon's Nest in Long Beach, CA. Then I went

with my good friend Morgan Davis, who was a draft dodger in the late '60's and went to Canada. I met him in '76 in Long Beach when he got his pardon from President Carter. Me, him, and [Bill] Bateman were playing together a lot and with James sometimes. Morgan couldn't get anything going so he moved back to Toronto, so I ended up moving up there too.

AM: So, this is when you joined Ronnie Hawkins band, did you record with them?

GT: Yes. I've done a lot of recordings with Ronnie but none released. I also recorded with Merle Travis, Ray Campi, Rick Nelson, Joe Turner and T-Bone Walker. Most of the time I just went in, did the gig, got paid, and left. I don't keep track of releases.

AM: How did you come to join the Blasters?

GT: I was playing with Hawkins until he just didn't want to work more than a couple of times a week so I said, "Ronnie, I've got to do something else." I went back down to L.A. because Harman had a lot of gigs and he needed me. The Blasters were working, but it was sporadic, where as Harman was working steady, working bars. The Blasters would have a great gig once in a while like opening for Queen, but it wouldn't pay a lot of money. We always figured we would work together again. I worked with Harman for a while and the Blasters got to the point where they could afford to add another guy. I liked playing with James, but these were the guys that I grew up with and a chance to do something special was there.

AM: James Harman told me that the Blasters kind of stole you from him.

GT: There is some truth to that. But I was playing with them long before Harman came to California. I love James dearly, I play on all his records whenever I get a chance. Back then James was a wild man. He's married with kids and he's almost 50 years old, but back then James was the wildest thing going. He would do anything.

AM: Tell me about the recording of the Blasters' first album on Slash records.

GT: We cut that stuff in July of '81 and I had been playing with the band for about a month and a half. I knew the tunes and stylistically I knew what I was going to do. It wasn't complicated music but some of those old rock n roll things like TWENTY FLIGHT ROCK or UBANGI STOMP, I've heard those songs since I was a kid.

AM: Tell me about the album picture where you completely dressed standing in a pool.

GT: I was over Phil's and there were some old ladies over visiting. I wanted to go swimming in my underwear, so I said: "Hell I'm going in." Photographer Gary Leonard happened to be there and then I just jumped in the pool.

AM: You sang lead vocals on TAG ALONG on the Non Fiction album, how was that choice made?

GT: I didn't even want to cut that thing. We just did that so Phil could get a breather in the middle of the set. Eventually it got to where I was doing four or five songs a night, just so Phil could have rest spots...because Phil always sang very hard, he puts all his energy into singing. We just stuck it on the record even though I never liked the song. Dave Alvin heard me sing that song in a bar and he said: "You ought to start doing that in the set, do that TAG ALONG!"



MORGAN DAVIS AND THE CATFISH

BullHead
RECORDING ARTISTS

AM: How involved were you in the technical decisions in the studio?

GT: I don't try to pay attention to the recording. I find listening to the recordings hard. I don't like to listen to the nuts and bolts of music. I try to divorce myself as much as possible from the recording process. I won't listen to the music for months after that, no rough mixes or I don't want to hear any of it. When I started recording I found it's hard to hear the music as a whole. Instead, you're hearing the work that went in, the arguments, the technical difficulties, the strings breaking. The things I remember about going into the studio is...a big blur!

AM: On the Hardline album you were listed as one of the band, but you weren't in the photos. What happened?

GT: We were supposed to shoot the album photo on a specific date and the schedule changed last minute. I was up in Toronto and I didn't want to go back - I was fishing. Dave even called me and asked: "Do you mind not being on the cover?" and I said: "It don't mean shit to me, it's meaningless. It has nothing to do with the music."

AM: You looked thrilled to shake Dick Clark's hand when the Blasters appeared on American Bandstand.

GT: Oh that was great, man! I love that guy. He is one of the hardest working human beings I have ever met in my life. He is friendly and accessible; he is everything you think he is times 10. He is a workaholic but still makes time to sit and talk to you. I remember I showed up an hour early for the American Bandstand shoot. I thought our call was at 7 but it was at 8. There was the production crew, me, and Dick Clark. I was sitting there and Dick sees me, he knows who I am. He is very thorough. Not only does he have you on his show but he knows your name, what instrument you play. He's fuckin pretty unbelievable. So, he's sitting there talking to me and he's telling me about all these shows he's got and I said: "Damn, I don't see how you do it." He says: "Yeah I wonder, I haven't had a vacation in a while." He starts laying this shit on me and I'm like, wow! He's saying: "I've got so many hours a week of network television, so many hour of advertising, so many hours of writing my shows, I have so many meetings, and I'm making all this money but..." It's almost like he's telling me he ain't got a life. I remember him sounding off on this stuff and I was sitting there thinking this guy is one of the giants of the industry. I remember that right after that, he cut out a lot of things that made him so busy to make time for himself.

AM: Anything particularly memorable about the Blasters years?

GT: A lot of good gigs. We always did real well at The Ritz here in N.Y. We got written up in Time Magazine. I thought that was great. I made sure to send copies of that to all my relatives. A lot of it runs together. I remember meeting George Putnam at KTTV on the Alan Thicke show. He used to be the big news anchor in L.A. and I saw him and he was in his 70s. When I was a little kid my parents used to watch him on the news, so I had to go introduce myself.

AM: How did you wind up leaving the Blasters?

GT: It just got to the point where I didn't see us getting anywhere. The record company and radio wasn't going to do anything for us. I knew Dave and Phil had a lot of friction there. There was too much stuff detracting the band from making music. We were going to have to go



The Blasters on tour in England 1982 (Photo: Art Fein)

through some changes to move up the rung of selling records. I think putting out that first Rollin Rock album hurt them because people heard that and said, "Well this is what they do." Then we self-produced those first few records and the radio hears it and they decide: Blasters great live but no radio. That's the mind set.

AM: When you left, did you go right to the Thunderbirds?

GT: No. I just did solo stuff. A lot of jazz festivals and folk festivals and put out a solo record [Handmade on Spindletop Records].

AM: How did the solo album idea come about?

GT: Well, it was just something to do. Me and Bill Bentley [producer] kicked it around one night and Bill said: "Let's see if I can get some recording time." It was an after-thought really. If I had it to do over again, I would have gotten some musicians and rehearsed. Me and Bateman went in and just cut some shit, just the two of us. There was no rehearsing and every instrument other than drums and piano was over-dubbed. The saxophone player Andrew Woolfolk was in there cutting a record with Madonna. Madonna was on a break and he came in and liked what I was doing. So we just did this blues thing and he cut the sax over it. So that's how it was. All the originals I wrote in the studio. There aren't a lot of out-takes because we conserved tape but Bentley had us go over about a hundred tunes. All kinds of stuff. Songs like even LOVER'S QUESTION which I could barely remember the changes.

AM: How did the connection with Spindletop Records come together?

GT: That was a guy that was a friend of Bentley's, Barry Wilson was his name. He had the label and I believe now it is defunct. I also had it released in Canada.

AM: How did it sell?

GT: Oh, it didn't do shit! I made some publishing money on the originals that got played on the radio, but I didn't do any kind of touring on it or promotion.

AM: You dedicated the album to Rick Nelson and his group.

GT: That was for Rick Nelson's people because I had been working with them since the early '80s. When the Blasters weren't on tour, I would go out with Rick. It was so sad that those people died in the plane crash. I was getting ready to go back to work with Rick after I left the Blasters. I was going to call him to do fill-ins because I knew his whole show. It was Christmas time and I figured in January I would call and say I'm available again, but then the accident happened.

AM: What did you do after the solo album?

GT: I worked with the Downchild Blues Band in Toronto. That was the band that the Blues Brothers were based on. They had some hits in the early '70s up in Canada and the Blues Brothers cut two or three of their songs on their albums.

AM: In '89 you cut the Formerly Brothers album with Doug Sahm and Amos Garrett. How did you meet them?

GT: We played together at the Edmonton Folk Festival in 1986. The gig went over so well that they decided to fly us out to make a record. The core of the thing was me, Doug, & Amos. We used Kit Johnson on bass and Bodan Paluosco on drums, they were from Toronto, great session guys.

AM: How did rejoining the Blasters in 1992 come about?

GT: I didn't have any gigs, so Phil offered me that. It was fun to see the guys and hang out. Actually it was '91 into '92. I also did the Red Devils stuff with Bateman. That was at the same time.

AM: How did you find Smoky Hormel on guitar different when Dave Alvin was in the band?

GT: It was a different kind of thing. See Dave and Phil kind of fueled each other. There was a tension thing there, where Smoky didn't bring that to it. It has nothing to do with his playing. There was never go-

ing to be friction between Smoky and Phil like there was between Dave and Phil. That natural friction was part of the Blasters sound.

AM: Any opportunities since to play with the Blasters?

GT: No opportunities have arisen. I'm busy full time with the T-Birds.

AM: How did you join the Fabulous Thunderbirds?

GT: I started cutting Kim's [Wilson lead singer of the T-Birds] solo Tiger Man record in late '92. Soon after the T-birds guitarist Duke Robillard left. They were looking for a fifth member, but instead of a second guitarist, added me on piano for a fuller sound for live shows.

AM: Tell me about the new T-Birds album Roll the Dice.

GT: It should be a hit, man. An undiscovered gem. As good as the record is, come out and see the band live. If you like the record you'll love the band. If you love the band live you will dig the record. How can you lose. —~~Am~~

Dave Alvin on Tribute Albums by Tom Wilk

Tribute albums date to at least the early 1950s, when pianist Oscar Peterson recorded an album of Duke Ellington's music. Over the last 30 years, tribute albums have proliferated to the point of becoming a separate musical genre. Since 1994, Dave Alvin has become a steady participant on tribute albums, giving him the chance to showcase his skills as an interpreter with occasional help from his older brother, Phil.

Five of his tribute contributions were featured on From an Old Guitar: Rare and Unreleased Recordings. That just scratches the surface as Dave's performances have been featured on a dozen other tribute albums and one tribute DVD. [Dave has been the subject of a tribute album himself. Seventeen of his songs were covered by roots-music acts on Blastered: A Musical Tribute to the Blasters, released by Run Wild Records in 1998.] Here is a look at the tribute recordings in chronological order.

Tulare Dust: A Songwriters' Tribute to Merle Haggard. HighTone Records co-founder Larry Sloven has said the label hoped to release a Haggard album. That never happened, but this 1994 release is the closest thing. Dave and Tom Russell served as executive producers of the album, which features 15 of Merle's songs covered by a cross-section of roots artists, including Joe Ely, Iris DeMent, Billy Joe Shaver, and Katy Moffatt. Dave contributes a haunting version of KERN RIVER, a song he would record again on his West of the West album in 2006. Tulare Dust was both a critical and commercial success, becoming the No. 1 album on the Americana chart when it was launched in 1994 and staying there for six weeks.

Step Right Up: The Songs of Tom Waits finds Dave paying tribute to another California songwriter in 1995 with an intimate version of OL '55 that would have been at home on the King of California album released the previous year. Lisa Meldnick Powell, who played accordion on the track, has fond memories of the session. "Dave, Greg Leisz, [the song's producer] and I were good friends," she says. "I was flattered as hell to have been asked to play." After listening to the track in 2021 she adds, "I like the ending." The song fades out on a wistful, dreamy note.

On One Step Up/Two Steps Back: The Songs of Bruce Springsteen Dave tackles SEEDS, one of Springsteen's lesser-known songs and gives it a bluesy, spooky overhaul for a 1997 release. "I choose SEEDS because I didn't think I could do justice and put a new spin on any of his classic hit songs," Dave explains in the liner notes. "Seeds was a place where stylistically Springsteen and I meet." The recording also is notable as future Guilty Woman Sarah Brown plays bass and future Guilty Man Chris Miller plays steel guitar.

Treasures Left Behind: Remembering Kate Wolf finds Dave honoring the California singer/songwriter who died of leukemia at 44 in 1986. THESE TIMES WE'RE LIVIN' IN is a folk/country track that features just Dave and Rick Shea. The song, which was released in 1998, brings back good memories for Rick: "It was a fun session, partly because I played so much but mostly because it's such a great song and Dave played and sang so well. We tracked the song in one or two

takes, Dave sang and played his acoustic guitar part live and I played acoustic guitar along with him and then started adding my other parts, mandolin, Steel guitar, another acoustic guitar, bass, and harmony vocals. It all went pretty quick, two or three hours and then I packed up and left while Dave and Mark Linett mixed the tracks,” Rick recalls.

He adds: “I’d done a couple other sessions with Dave up till then and I was just starting to work with him sort of full time, but this was the first time it was just he and I in the studio, along with the engineer. Dave is generally pretty focused in the studio but he doesn’t always give you a lot of direction, he wants to hear what you bring to the song. He knows what he likes and doesn’t like and makes his decisions pretty quickly. It’s such a great song by Kate Wolf and such a great performance by Dave. It’s one of my favorite sessions, with Dave or anyone, but I hadn’t listened to it in a while. There’s some magic there. “

In the liner notes, Dave calls THESE TIMES WE’RE LIVIN’ IN, a “beautiful unsentimental love song. The images are hard, lonely and true, like a good blues song, and say more about loving someone than any of the Hallmark card lyrics and sentiments that usually fill love songs. I don’t know much about Kate Wolf’s life and loves but in a few raw and tender lines, she sure knew a lot about mine.” Dave recorded a new version of the song for his album with the Guilty Women in 2009.

Frisco Mabel Joy Revisited: For Mickey Newbury was released in November 2000 and is a re-creation of Newbury’s 1971 album by various artists, including Chuck Prophet and Kris Kristofferson. Dave and the Guilty Men recorded MOBILE BLUE, a lively rocker that starts off with a short instrumental prelude by guitarist Bill Frisell before segueing into the song. Rick Shea sets the scene: “We’d just finished a week of recording PUBLIC DOMAIN (SONGS FROM THE WILD LAND) with a pile of songs and lots of friends and guests in and out of the studio and we were back to the core band of Guilty Men when Dave said he had one more song for the Frisco Mabel Joy Revisited album we needed to do. I don’t think we even ran this all the way through before we tracked it, we were all warmed up and we just played the song, one time, that’s it. Dave nailed the vocal live as we recorded and The Guilty Men played their asses off.”

Rick adds: “I’ve gotten to play on a few tracks with Dave over the years, but this might be my favorite.”

Ernie: Songs of Ernest Noyes Brookings, which was released in 2001, could be considered the most obscure tribute album to which Dave has contributed. Brookings, who died at 88 years of age in 1987, began writing poems full of quirks and wordplay in the last six years of his life. Dave set the poem NOVEMBER to music and sang it as a talking blues, accompanying himself on acoustic guitar. The lyrics had special significance for Dave as it mentions Veterans Day (Nov. 11), which is his birthday.

Avalon Blues: A Tribute to the Music of Mississippi John Hurt finds Dave teaming up with Peter Case for a spirited duet on MONDAY MORNING BLUES on this 2001 release. Hurt was a veteran bluesman whose music was rediscovered in the early 1960s. Avalon Blues, which also features performances by Chris Smither and Lucinda Williams, was nominated for a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album in 2003.

Lonesome, On’ry and Mean: A Tribute to Waylon Jennings, released in 2003, finds Dave recording AMANDA, a No. 1 single on the country charts for Jennings in 1979. Dave gives a respectful reading, emphasizing the regrets of the narrator and his treatment of the woman he loved.

Touch My Heart: A Tribute to Johnny Paycheck celebrates the music of the country rebel best known for TAKE THIS JOB AND SHOVE IT. Dave adds some rock grit to 11 MONTHS & 29 DAYS, a jailhouse lament in the spirit of FOLSOM PRISON BLUES, with vocal help from Robbie Fulks. Released in 2004, the album also features recordings by George Jones, Marshall Crenshaw, and Neko Case.

Highway 61 Revisited Revisited finds a cross-section of artists, including the Drive-By Truckers and Paul Westerberg, covering Bob Dylan’s landmark 1965 album in its entirety under the auspices of Uncut magazine. The CD was included with the magazine’s September 2005 issue. Dave gives the title track a dark, funky groove in contrast to Dylan’s lighter interpretation. The guitars of Dave and Greg Leisz give the song a sinister sound. Dave would later use an instrumental portion of the track as the theme music for his “9 Volt” radio show on the XM Network.

Lowe Profile: A Tribute to Nick Lowe is a double-CD release from 2005 that spotlights the musical diversity of the British rocker and producer. Dave’s rueful rendition of FAILED CHRISTIAN is a song that Lowe recorded on his 1998 album Dig My Mood. However, the song was written by Henry McCullough, who played guitar in Wings with Paul McCartney.

A Case for Case: A Tribute to the Songs of Peter Case offers 48 performances spread out over three CDs from 2006. Dave offers a freewheeling version of ON MY WAY DOWNTOWN that’s both celebratory and mournful, thanks to the instrumentation of Amy Farris [violin] and Chris Gaffney [accordion]. The song was remixed for inclusion on From an Old Guitar and the title altered slightly to ON THE WAY DOWNTOWN.

Keep Your Soul: A Tribute to Doug Sahm was released in 2009, which marked the 10-year anniversary of the Texas singer/songwriter and bandleader's death. DYNAMITE WOMAN, originally released by the Sir Douglas Quintet in 1968, receives a carefree reading from Dave and puts the spotlight on Danny Ott's guitar.

The Man of Somebody's Dreams: A Tribute to the Songs of Chris Gaffney was a project close to Dave's heart. After Gaffney's death in April 2008, Dave set out to create a tribute album to his friend. He recruited the artists and contributed a strong version of ARTESIA, a bittersweet tale of growing up in Southern California, including a spoken word introduction. Released in May 2009, the album concludes with the emotionally moving GUITARS OF MY DEAD FRIENDS, Gaffney's final studio performance.

The Mississippi Sheiks Tribute Concert – Live in Vancouver. Dave and Christy McWilson were among the roots music performers who took part in a 2010 show to honor the contributions of the Mississippi Sheiks, a popular guitar and fiddle group of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Dave and Christy deliver a playful version of WHO'S BEEN HERE, which became a frequent addition to Dave's shows with the Guilty Women in 2010. For the finale, which also included Geoff Muldaur and Van Dyke Parks, Dave sang a verse of SITTIN' ON TOP OF THE WORLD. The tribute concert is only available only as a DVD.

Common Ground: Dave and Phil Alvin Play and Sing the Songs of Big Bill Broonzy. This 2014 release marked the first time the brothers had collaborated on a full-length studio album since Hard Line, the final studio album by the original Blasters lineup in 1985. "We argue sometimes, but we never argue about Big Bill Broonzy," Dave observed. The brothers take advantage of Broonzy's deep song catalog and show his timeless appeal with the blues standard KEY TO THE HIGHWAY, the rollicking TRUCKING LITTLE WOMAN and the socially aware STUFF THEY CALL MONEY. For their efforts, Dave and Phil earned a Grammy nomination in the Best Blues Album category.

Link of Chain: A Songwriters Tribute to Chris Smither features Dave and 14 other artists honoring the longtime bluesman on the 50th anniversary of his musical career in 2014. Dave sings the philosophical title track in his intimate baritone. Dave performed the song at the request of Smither, who was part of the Monsters of Folk tour with Dave in 1998.

If You're Going to the City: A Tribute to Mose Allison is a combination CD/DVD that serves as a first-rate introduction to the jazz/blues pianist and singer/songwriter who died at 89 in 2016. Dave and Phil team up to put their own stamp on WILD MAN ON THE LOOSE. Dave contributes some propulsive guitar work while Phil's understated singing recalls the vocal style of Allison. As of March 2021, this track, released in 2019, is the most recent studio recording featuring Dave and Phil.

Another tribute album is in the works. In March, Dave recorded AVENUE C for a Don Heffington tribute album. The song was released on his Gloryland album in 2014. Heffington, who died at 70 in March, played drums on several of Dave's albums, including Ashgrove and Eleven Eleven. No date for the release of the tribute album has been announced.

The Blasters Newsletter is now on Facebook

***American Music: The Blasters/ Dave Alvin Newsletter* launched a page on the social media platform Facebook on April 11, 2020. The page is a place for fans to post things and converse about the Blasters/Dave Alvin and their related musicians. More importantly, it's a place to find the latest Blasters newsletter release and back issues in free downloadable PDF files. Since the group page was created, over 1500 members have signed on and the membership is still growing. This group is strictly moderated by the Blasters Newsletter team. There is no selling of merchandise, no ads, and no sharing of your personal information. It's all for the love of our American Music. Check it out.**

**AMERICAN MUSIC: The Blasters / Dave Alvin newsletter
editor/writer: Billy Davis copy editors: Nick Cristiano / Lesah Smith
writer: Tom Wilk
www.BlastersNewsletter.com**



Gene Taylor July 2, 1952 – February 20, 2021