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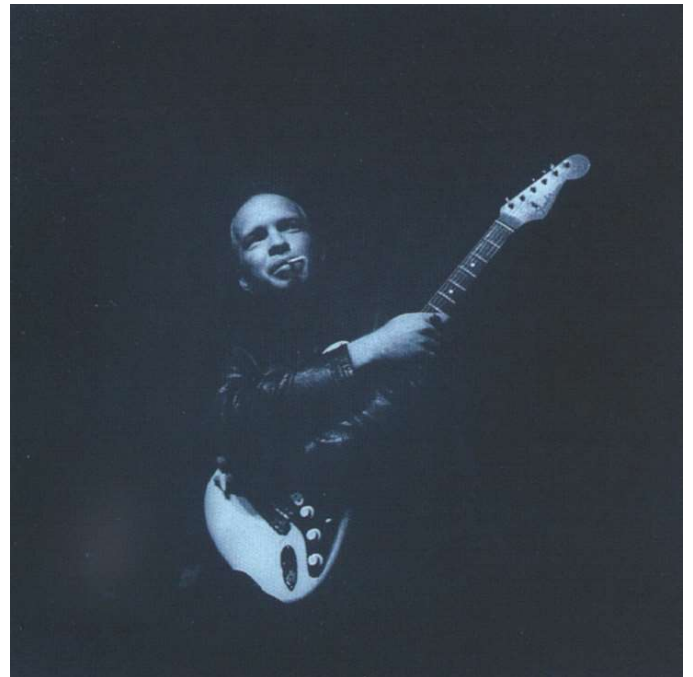
American Music

The Blasters/Dave Alvin newsletter

AUG 19, 2016

25th Anniversary of Dave Alvin's BLUE BLVD

Latest News: Bobby Rush releases Porcupine Meat on Sept. 16, on Rounder Records. Dave Alvin plays guitar on two tracks. Dave: "I was able to use the 'Dave Alvin guitar sound' on one of the tracks with my reverb and echo. And that's not really Bobby Rush's sound. I was really proud to do that." Keb Mo and Joe Bonnamassa also play on the record. -- Christy McWilson has a new EP coming in the end of the summer of 2016 and Dave plays an electric guitar solo on it. -- Dave Alvin has recorded tracks for the California band New West's next CD release. -- Dave Alvin hints something poetry-related is in the works. -- The Blue Shadows are due to release their new CD on Rip Cat Records in October. -- Dave was interviewed for a documentary on the Hong Kong Cafe, a famous L.A. club from the 1980's. -- Dave was quoted in the New York Observer for a story on the 50th anniversary of the release of the Beatles Revolver album. Dave: "My favorite track is probably TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS. I love the drums and the backwards guitar on that song. If anything, Revolver was the album where Harrison and Lennon really got their guitar sounds right—nice, fat sounds. The guitar parts are neatly twisted and abstract, yet still in the neo-rockabilly/Chuck Berry tradition that the Beatles came from." -- **AM**



In This Issue: Interviews from the makers of Blue BLVD and Keith Wyatt on his alternate career of guitar instruction.

DAVE ALVIN

25th Anniversary

The Making of

BLUE
BLVD

By Billy Davis and Tom Wilk

On August 19, 2016, we celebrate 25 years since the release of Dave Alvin's Blue BLVD album. It was the first of many CDs he recorded with HighTone records and the start of creative control over his own music. After a bad experience with CBS/Epic records releasing his first solo album Romeo's Escape, Dave moved to Nashville in the late eighties to start a new career as an assembly-line type songwriter. That didn't satisfy his desire to play music, so he returned to performing and recording for an independent label that didn't put the hit-making pressures on him that the previous label did.

Dave Alvin: I know its cliché, but it really doesn't feel like 25 years. It feels like 10. We're coming up on the 10th anniversary of (Chris) Gaffney dying, and that feels like it just happened. Touring does change your perception of time. People who don't tour, live normal lives, seeing kids grow up who go to school and get married. I guess it is 25 years! That's sobering to say the least (laughs). I know there's dead people on the record, so that's sad - and that reinforces that it was a long time ago. (Donald Lindley, Steve Young, and Lee Allen).

American Music: How did you get signed to HighTone?

DA: I was always aware of HighTone from its formation in 1983. Bruce Bromberg, one of the owners (who co-produced BLUE BLVD), has been an influence in my life long before I met him. When I was 12, I got an album called Underground Blues which had tracks cut in the 50's by Howlin' Wolf, B.B. King and Lightnin' Hopkins. The liners notes were written by this guy Bruce Bromberg. I saw his name on other blues albums through the years. More recently, I saw his name on the first Robert Cray record (Bad Influence, 1983) on HighTone as producer. So when I started thinking about putting my

own records out again, I decided I wanted a label that didn't put the pressures on me like at CBS records for Romeo's Escape and also in the latter days of the Blasters and 'X'. I realized and accepted that I would never have a hit record in the sense of a solo act. I would never be on "American Bandstand." So I went where I felt the love. I talked to Bruce and Larry Sloven (the other HighTone Records owner) about my songs that wouldn't be meant to be played on the radio. And I would write and record whatever songs interested me, not worrying if it's a hit or not.

What I went thru at CBS was just terrible. It beat me down. If this is what I have to go through to play music, then maybe I don't want to play music. That's why I just gave up and went to Nashville to be a songwriter. It still bothers me to this day. If you talk to any artist who was involved with major labels, they all have horror stories. The pressure put on me, I couldn't handle.

I thought about the Blasters' song KATHLEEN that I wrote. I loved that song and still do. To this day I think that is the best recording of the Blasters ever in a studio. The Blasters playing live in a studio - that was it! That captured us. One of the A&R guys at Warner Bros. said: "That's a good track, but it sounds too much like the Blasters." That's when I started to get to the point of, and pardon my profanity but, 'Fuck You!' (laughs).

So it didn't even wind up on the record. (*ed. note: It can be heard on The Blasters Collection CD and Testament: The complete Slash Recordings*)

Then I saw 'X' go through the same thing with Elektra Records. One of the guys at CBS gave me a Eurythmics tape and said "Try to sound like this" (laughs). I'm not kidding. It's funny, but it meant they didn't like me or my songs. CBS tried to move me to the pop division.

The president said "I like you. I think you're a great guy and you're really talented, but here is what we're gonna do. We'll hire songwriters to write half of your next album. We'll pick the musicians and the producers and you write the other half. I'll go to the wall for you." I said: "Ahh, That's okay (laughs), I got this. That ain't me. I'm a rock n roller who likes country. I'm not a country guy who likes rock n roll." There is a big difference. I didn't want to be stuck in any one style. I wanted my songs to dictate



Photo: Beth Herzhaft

what style it wanted to be. After a while in Nashville, I said: "Well, this is what I do, I play music. It took me a while to get in that frame of mind.

So I chose HighTone for a few reasons: **1.** I knew they would keep my albums in the stores, because they kept all their others in print. If you did a record on a major label, and you didn't sell enough in the first month of release, it would be put in the cut-out bins, you'd lose your deal or they would leave you languishing. Then you play gigs and your records aren't in the stores for people to find. I always knew that the blues guys were all on independent labels that didn't have to sell a lot of records to keep them in print. If you were in print, you existed.

I came to this realization when I was playing in Syd Straw's band in the fall of 1989 as her musical director. Virgin Records was paying me a lot of money to do it. We went to a party with some music industry people, I didn't know anyone. A music industry executive said to me: "So is any of your stuff available on CD?" This was just when everything was switching over from Vinyl to CDs. I thought and realized none of The Blasters, 'X', or The Knitters or the Flesh Eaters were on CD and my solo album was no longer in print. I had nothing in stores. I don't exist!

2. I knew that Bruce Bromberg, Larry Sloven, and I had the same taste in music. Meaning, I knew they loved blues, old-time country, and rock 'n roll. I knew I'd never have to explain to them what I was doing. I knew they would get it. And they did. That was a huge relief to me.

Photo: Beth Herzhaft



My manager at the time, Shelly Heber was dead set against an independent label. She said: "They are just a little-itty-bitty blues label and they're not hip." I said: "Yeah that's the point, I like that (laughs)." I let her try for a long time to get the classic big label, big producer, big deal - but it never happened and that wasn't me.

3. I needed a workshop for music. I was still learning how to sing and figuring out what I do. My identity was so locked into what I was in the Blasters and I had a different identity with the Knitters and 'X'. I really didn't know what I was, and HighTone was an opportunity to make mistakes and try things that a major label would never let me try.

AM: The album was credited with three producers: Bruce Bromberg, Chris Silagyi, and yourself.

DA: Chris Silagyi was a member of a band called 20/20, like a power pop new wave band in L.A. He was also the brother in law

of my manager. He had pop sensibilities. Bruce was the polar opposite. My manager thought if it was just me and Bruce producing the record, that it would be too rootsy, so she said I'll let you sign with HighTone if Chris is co-producer. I liked it. He produced a few hit records while living in England, so he knew what he was doing. He could put some pop sheen on the recordings, but no doubt he was a rock 'n roller. I had no complaints on his production on BLUE BLVD. It didn't work out though on Museum of Heart with Bruce, me, and Chris, but that's another story for the 25th Anniversary of that.

I wanted to learn everything I could from Bruce Bromberg. One of the first records he ever produced was by Lightnin' Hopkins (California Mudslide (and Earthquake) on Ace Records, 1969). You had to like that! Chris was very 'hands on' and Bruce was very laid back. It worked.

All the musicians that played on the record were guys in L.A. that I played with. Often in those days I got gigs before I had a band to play them. Then I'd put a band together just for that. A place called The Paradise in San Francisco gave me a lot of gigs, so that's how the Guilty Men concept came about. The advertising needed a band name so I made it up on the spot. I would get guys like Bill Bateman or DJ Bonebrake, Donald Lindley, Greg Leisz, Rick Solem on piano or whoever was available. Don Falzone is a bass player that I knew from playing in Syd Straw's band - a great young bass player.

AM: What was pre-production like for the album or early discussions of what to expect?

DA: I didn't want there to be too many instruments. I didn't want mandolins or harmonicas, but really all guitars, some pedal steel and of course I wanted Lee Allen. That was the limit of the pre-production.

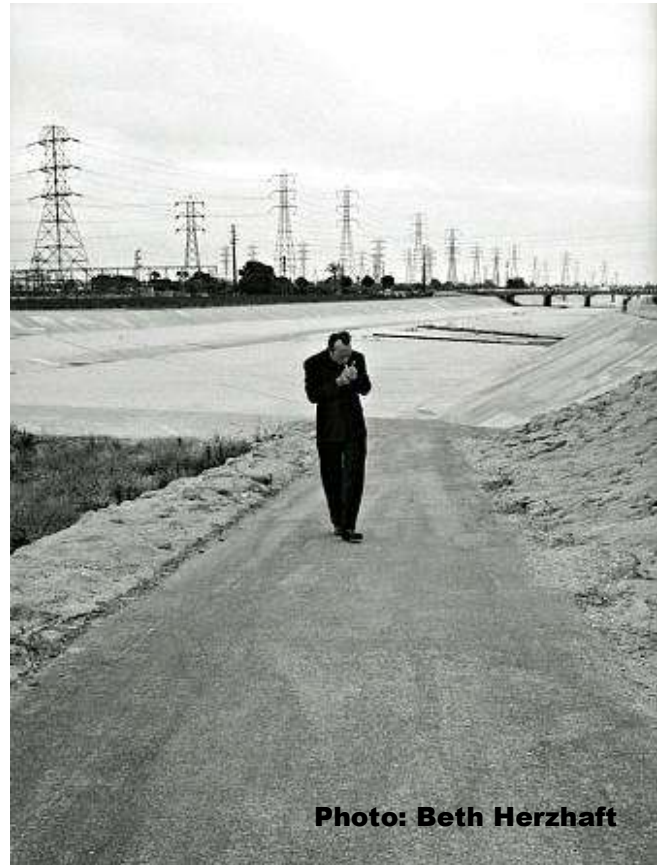


Photo: Beth Herzhaft

BLUE BLVD — The Songs

1. Blue Blvd I wrote that in Nashville. Michael Woody from Colorado was a real good songwriter who wrote some big hits from acts that were big then and no one remembers anymore like the Desert Rose Band. We went bowling a few times with his wife. I had the idea of the lyrics. Michael came up with the musical part especially the bridge "Baby, Drive me Crazy" part.

Right before we recorded it, Del Shannon committed suicide. I knew him casually and liked his records. It was such a strange blow that he died. The owners of Bug Music, my publishers, were his managers - so that's how I got to know him. I was really writing the song about the world that my cousin Donna grew up in - the cruising world of the late 50s and early 60s - as a tribute. So I dedicated it to Del Shannon because

he was an important part of the cruising music era. Steve Young sings the harmony on it. We was a great songwriter and amazing singer. He had a voice like Del Shannon, so I asked Steve to sing like that. He wasn't used to singing harmony parts, so Katy Mof-fatt worked with him on that. He did a great job. His background vocal is probably my favorite thing on the track.

I wish I would have played a different style of electric guitar. I would like some Chuck Berry or blues guitar. And I regret that we didn't have enough time on the vocals. I don't sing BLUE BLVD anymore because I don't think I sing it right. The verses I can get away with singing low, but the choruses you have to belt 'em out. When I did it live years ago, my voice would be gone afterwards. I'm much more comfortable singing a song like KING OF CALIFORNIA. I would love to hear somebody cover it. People tend to not cover songs anymore.

2. Guilty Man I just wanted to write a nasty little blues number. I probably wrote this when I was pissed off. It might have been triggered by news on the radio. I was never close with violent guys, but I knew some, so I knew their frame of mind. Those characters pop up once in a while in a Dave Alvin song like this or OUT OF CONTROL.

AM: There were extra verses that you played live before the recording of the album that didn't make it to the studio recording.

DA: Yeah, I was trying it out live and for whatever reason didn't use all the verses. If a verse is left off, it's not the producer forcing the issue; it's usually me. Often I write extra verses that people never hear or rarely hear. I'll get in the studio and realize it's too long and we don't need it.

Greg Leisz and I each took solos because we both play so differently that it's night and day - which I like. It inspires me having another guitarist - whether it's Greg or Rick Shea or Chris Miller. All of them play very differently. When I was making the album I wasn't thinking about touring yet, so the musicians weren't playing parts as if it would be an arrangement meant to played live.

3. Haley's Comet Katy Mof-fatt sent me a Tom Russell tape, and I was just floored by it. So I arranged to meet him, and we became friends. In 1990, I toured with him and his band. We wrote this song in my hotel room in New York City. We ordered room service and he said: "We're not leaving until we have a song."

As we were writing it, we called a few people to double check facts. The author John Swenson who wrote the 1982 Bill Haley biography got a hold of us later and said: "You pretty much nailed it." We actually played it live the next night at the 9:30 club in Washington, DC.

Tom cut a version that's a little different. We argued over the line "The screams of the women filled the hall." I said it should be children. We're talking about Bill Haley,

***Extra verse from
GUILTY MAN live 1989***

**The guy behind the counter don't speak
good english but I bet he skinned a few /
He can still see that gun stuck in his face
as the cops are searchin' for clues /
soon they put out an A P B / try to catch
me if they can / they'll search this city /
hoping all night for one more guilty man**

not Elvis. He made the kids wanna rock and break things; he wasn't a sex symbol.

Dwight made the track with his background vocals. The guitar parts are cool but having Dwight on it made it soar higher. He was brought in near the end of the album's sessions.

4. Why Did She Stay With Him

I'm a big fan of Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, and I was trying to write a Curtis Mayfield song. I have a few where I was trying to write like that. Some work and some don't. When I first started writing *FOURTH OF JULY* and I was fussing with it on guitar, I was thinking Curtis - but that one turned out nothing like Curtis. For this one, I really wanted to write a sad R&B romantic song - a bittersweet one. We did a version that kind of sounded like Jackson Browne. Sometimes I wish I used that version on the record. Greg Leisz was playing lap steel and Rick Solem on the acoustic piano. We all thought it sounded too much like Jackson Browne which at the time didn't seem right for the album. So we changed it and made it more guitar heavy.

AM: would you play this one live anymore?

DA: Last time I played it was a sound check with the Guilty Women. I think lyrically it's really good. I don't think I did a great vocal on it. I was thinking of a great R&B singer who would knock it out of the park. I might be able to do it acoustic, but not with the band.

5. Rich Man's Town

That's another angry Dave blues number. Katy is known as a folk/country singer, but she's a pretty good R&B singer when you cut her loose. Greg Leisz was playing a late 30's Rickenbacker lap steel that looks

Katy Moffatt

Katy Moffatt is one of three backing musicians to appear on both *Blue BLVD* and *Romeo's Escape*. The others are Greg Leisz and David Hidalgo.

In an email interview in June, she remembers her work on *Blue BLVD* began in an unexpected way. "What I recall about my in-

volvement with the album is calling Steve Young in, as per Dave's wishes, to sing on the title track, and coaching him through it, because Steve had never done harmony vocals before," Katy says. Dave originally had wanted Del Shannon to sing on the song, but he committed suicide at the age of 55 on Feb. 8, 1990.

Katy also contributed backing vocals on *RICH MAN'S TOWN*, providing a memorable and bluesy counterpart to Dave's lead vocal.

"I don't remember anything about the actual vocal I did on *RICH MAN'S TOWN*, though I began performing the song myself, and it ended up on a live-in-studio record I made in Switzerland called *Indoor Fireworks*, she says. That album was released in 1992 and makes her the first artist to cover a song from *Blue BLVD* after its release. (Tom Russell recorded *HALEY'S COMET* on *Hurricane Season*, his 1990 studio album).

Katy holds *RICH MAN'S TOWN* in high regard. "Show me a great song that I think I can get my vocal teeth into, and I'm gonna try to sing and play it. *Rich Man's Town* is one of those."

Katy Moffatt's latest CD is Now And Then, a duo album she recorded with Hugh Moffatt, her singer/songwriter brother is available at katymoffatt.com. She is continuing to work on her next solo album and hopes to complete it by the end of 2016.



like a frying pan. On the Allnighters tour we nick-named him "Chefy" for the frying pan.

AM: Greg Leisz later became your producer but was just a player on these sessions and knew you very well from the year-long touring with you in the Allnighters. How did his role as a 'producer in waiting' work at these sessions?

DA: He would make suggestions on Blue BLVD and Museum of Heart about keys or re-singing a part, but most of the time it would be ignored by all three of us producing. But occasionally they would be recognized as great ideas. Usually a session musician keeps their mouth shut. There were some bad vibes in the studio on Museum of Heart, so on King of California having just one guy producing, that's Greg Leisz, it was beautiful. Greg understood my voice real well and he knew what I could do. My voice wasn't being taken seriously enough before the King of California record.

6. Gospel Night We had the soul duo of Terry Evans and Bobby King from sing on it. They also sang on SAMSON & DELILAH on the Blasters' Hard Line.

7. Plastic Rose It was another bittersweet R&B number channeling Curtis Mayfield. I wrote this in Nashville, but finished it in L.A. It was a "sanity song" because I was really trying to write money-makers in Nashville. I have to laugh at that now. I was trying to be the guy living in Nashville who keeps saying: "Oh, I wrote that and that and that and here are my checks." It took me a while to realize, I'm not one of those. I have high respect for guys and girls who do it, but I can't. In Nashville, I showed this song to a few artists. One named Richard Bennett, a Grammy winning producer of Steve Earle and Emmy Lou Harris and many others - he also was the bass player for Neil Diamond. I played a version for him that was more of a folk song. He said: "I can hear Dolly (Parton) doing this." I said: "I doubt it" (laughs). He loved the song, so I knew it had promise.

It has one of my favorite Lee Allen solos on any record. When he played that solo in the studio, we all died (laughs)! The solo breaks your heart. Greg Leisz and I, our jaws dropped. It was beautiful. Lee was always after me in the Blasters days to write a ballad like this, because he loved playing ballads. So when we cut it, he said: "David this is the way you should play."

AM: What was Lee Allen's process in the studio?

DA: He would grab on to the melody of the song and play along - then change it as he played. If you listen to I'M WALKIN' by Fats Domino, you can't imagine the song without that sax solo. His solos became important melodic parts of the songs. On PLASTIC ROSE he did in in about four passes and the last one was amazing. He creates melodies all of their own within songs. He could honk the saxophone, but he really liked to play with melodies - so that's one of the things as a guitar player that I let sink in from Lee.

8. Brand New Heart I was dating a girl who didn't like my history. I wrote this as me saying: "This is what I do. And what I am, is what I am." I was going for a modern blues feel. I wanted it to sound like a HighTone record like Robert Cray and Joe Louis Walker. The Paladins cut a great cover of it on their album (Ticket Home,

9. Wanda and Duane

I had a '61 Cadillac that kept breaking down, so I brought it in to be serviced, and he said it was gonna take a while. They lent me an El Camino to use, but it was pretty trashed. The accelerator was rigged with a clothes hanger (laughs), but I really loved the car. I drove it for two months. Nancy Sefton, my current manager, was working for my old manager at the time and had a beat up car - like a Dodge Dart. She named the car 'Wanda.' She asked me what mine was called, and I immediately shot out: "It's Duane (laughs)." So she said: "Wanda and Duane?" I thought they were funny names together. That car didn't have a radio, so I'd drive around writing songs and singing them out loud. So I wrote the first verse driving home one day.

10. Andersonville

I was driving on the Northern California coast and this melody came to me - but as I was driving. I started singing it. I had a bunch of verses by the end of the drive. I changed some later, and wrote more. I wrote a lot of extra verses, but I threw them away. I don't keep a record of them. I'm a slow writer who writes a lot, but then cuts. I have a trunk in my music room with stray papers, but I don't have much. I had stuff in my garage, which was completely destroyed by a mud slide.

AM: This song may have defined you as a singer-songwriter. Do you think that's true?

DA: I never wanted to be a singer-songwriter. I begrudgingly became one because if I wanted to continue writing songs, I would have to sing them, because I just don't want to have to write with other singers in mind. I wrote as many songs for Phil as I could - or for anyone else. I didn't want to worry that a singer wouldn't want to sing it the way I wrote it. I didn't want to have to worry about anything.

Usually on my records there is a song that's totally uncommercial and might be the best song on the record. Like on Blackjack David, was KITCHEN TABLE which might be the best song. On Ashgrove, was MAN IN THE BED. ANDERSONVILLE was the one for this album. I don't think we got the ultimate version of it on Blue BLVD. I think the song was too new. If you can play a song for 5 years before you record it, then you usually find the definitive version. I've done it a few times lately in acoustic shows and I do it differently - folky and in the 'King of CA' vein. It really works. I'll pull it out if it's a real Dave Alvin-type listening audience or at a 'songwriter in the round' situation. At the 'song writer' things, the singers always throw out their best shit. I call it: "Guns on the Table." My favorite version is on an album that Vince Scelsa did called In Their Own Words of his shows at NY's The Bottom Line. Richard Thompson plays guitar on the song. I started playing it, and he just joined in. I thought it was great! I also like the live version on the Out in California CD.

The song did have a different reaction when played in the South. I remember playing a bar in Nashville, and it wasn't a redneck bar or anything. The Skeletons were my backing band and everything was going great until midway thru my set, I played ANDERSONVILLE and about a third of the place left. After the show, the owner of the club said: "You know that ANDERSONVILLE song is a good song - but I wouldn't play it down here too often." I can laugh about it now. I mean, it wasn't a screaming indictment of the confederacy. I tried to balance it out (laughs). 150 years later - still kind of touchy.

11. Dry River The song lyrically builds. You can say it's an environmental song. You can say it's about the loss of childhood. You can say it's a broken hearted love song. But it's a song about hope and that comes from me, a pessimistic optimist. I inherited that from my Dad. Even though I can see horrible things, I can see the best in things. Duane the El Camino broke down, and I remember walking for a mile from my house to a restaurant to get dinner. I had been going out to Downey to see my dad. I was hanging out one day at the San Gabriel River and thought about how important the river was to me while I was growing up. So walking the mile to the restaurant, the song completely came to me. When I got home, I grabbed the guitar, wrote down the verses, and it was done. It's rare, but songs do happen like that.

We cut it acoustic with just me and Greg. It might have been Greg's idea to do it like that. We cut it late at night at Paramount - just me, Greg, Bruce, my girlfriend at the time, Chris Silagyi, and the engineer.. Everyone thought it was a great idea to do it acoustic. It was a long time before there was ever a band arrangement for the song. The band version that appeared on The HighTone Years CD was recorded for a PBS special documentary local to San Diego. It was about an immigrant that was murdered by skin-heads. So since I was in the studio doing music for that, I took the opportunity to cut different versions of DRY RIVER and OUT IN CALIFORNIA.

Merle Haggard loved DRY RIVER. I had a long conversation with him in Cleveland at a Chuck Berry tribute. He said: "I'm gonna steal your song" (Laughs). I said: "I stole your 'river song' (KERN RIVER), so feel free to steal mine." His road manager said that Merle really loved the song and that he would cut it. I sent him a few versions of it. Maybe he did cut it, and it's sitting in a vault somewhere. If it ever comes out, It will be great to hear Merle sing my song. I've had some great compliments. I had Bob Dylan tell me how much he loved KING OF CALIFORNIA and Merle on DRY RIVER. I'm done!



AM: There have been so many versions of DRY RIVER by bands you're affiliated with. Should artists keep tinkering with songs?

DA: It always amazes me how many different ways you can play songs. I'm in the camp of 'keep working at songs.' Bob Dylan takes the attitude that everything is up for renewal. I believe that. I told Phil that I didn't like the Blasters version because he moved the arrangement around, dropping one chorus. I was still glad they did it, though.

AM: Are there any unreleased recordings from these sessions?

DA: In the days of using 2-inch tape we were on a budget, so out-takes often would be recorded over. Nowadays it's all on hard drives, so everything is easily kept. There was one bonus track that wasn't very good, and it had Lee Allen on it. I wanted a song like it, but I never finished it. Usually, when I make albums, I write only the amount of songs I need. —~~am~~

Larry Sloven: HighTone Records Owner

Larry Sloven and Bruce Bromberg were the founders of HighTone Records, which specialized in American roots music from 1983 to 2008. In an email interview with Tom Wilk, Larry discussed BLUE BLVD and how Dave Alvin came to sign with HighTone and his impact on the label.



American Music: In your opinion, how important was Dave signing with HighTone? Do you recall when talks began with Dave and when he signed a contract?

Larry Sloven: I don't remember any of the contract negotiations or the time frame except that I am left with the impression that there were no major problems in reaching a deal with Dave. I would probably remember if there were any difficulties. I do remember some of the lead-up to signing Dave to HighTone, however. Before we started HighTone, if you had asked me what artists I idolized, there would have been four for sure that I would list: Merle Haggard, Joe Ely, Gary Stewart and The Blasters. And after seven years of HighTone's existence, we had already made records with two of the four. Though we never made one with Merle, Dave did bring us the brilliant Tulare Dust Merle tribute. My partner, Bruce Bromberg, was a hardcore blues and country purist, and he wasn't very familiar with the Blasters, but when we found out that Dave was looking for a deal (and I cannot remember how we found out, but my guess would be through Dan Bourgeois of Bug

Music Publishing), I insisted that we pursue the possibility.

I remember two events prior to HighTone signing Dave. One was having lunch with Dave and his then-manager, Shelly Heber, at a '50s themed diner on Lincoln Blvd in Venice. And the other was going together with Bruce to see Dave perform a guest spot (not with his own band) at the Belly Up in Solana Beach near San Diego. Both times, Dave was clearly nervous to be talking with us—a guy who I truly thought was one of the greats, and I was intimidated by him. I think on Dave's part, aside from not being completely comfortable talking business, he felt the same way about Bruce, producer of a Lightnin' Hopkins album, as I felt about Dave. I think a big part of Dave's motivation in signing with HighTone was his respect for Bruce's work as a producer of blues records that Dave loved.

As for how important it was to HighTone to sign Dave, he was our mainstay artist for longer than anyone. Important in terms of record sales, prestige for the label, attracting other artists, etc.

AM: Do you recall if you, Bruce Bromberg and Dave had much discussion on the type of music Dave wanted to make and what he hoped to do on Blue BLVD? Did you hear any demos of the songs before they were recorded?

LS: I don't recall much about the making of Blue Blvd. I sort of feel like it was already in pre-production when we signed Dave, but I'm not sure. I was not involved in the production or A&R (Artist and Repertoire) of this or any of Dave's records. We always thought, as an independent label, that it was best to choose artists whose vision we

respected and let them do what they do—maybe not the major label method of looking for hits, but we always felt that our role was to be a conduit for good artists and their music.

AM: Did you attend any of the recording sessions for Blue BLVD? If so, what are your memories?

LS: No, I was, based in the Bay Area, running the business end of HighTone. I don't believe I ever attended sessions for any of Dave's records.

AM: Looking back, what are your thoughts on the album?

LS: I would say that song-wise, it may be the best of

Dave's HighTone albums of new songs. I love DRY RIVER, BLUE BLVD, HALEY'S COMET, WANDA AND DUANE, and in particular, WHY DID SHE STAY WITH HIM.

AM: Did Blue BLVD and Dave's signing to the label help other acts become HighTone artists?

LS: Unquestionably. As a direct result of Dave's being at HighTone, we made records with Chris Gaffney, the Skeletons, Christy McWilson, and Tom Russell. And Dave produced Big Sandy and Sonny Burgess for us as well. At one point I thought of Dave as our unofficial head of A&R.

AM: What have you been doing since HighTone ceased operations?

LS: In 2008, Bruce and I sold the HighTone masters, including all of Dave's HighTone recordings, to Shout Factory! The decline of the recording industry really affected us, and I couldn't figure out how to make it work anymore. Since then, Shout Factory! has had the same experience and they have shifted over to DVD and online video distribution. Consequently, they sold the HighTone masters earlier this year to Concord Music Group, which also owns Rounder Records and is buying up many independent record label catalogs. So that's where Dave's HighTone recordings are now.

Since the sale of HighTone, I have been doing some music business consulting, primarily helping artists who own their own masters place them in TV shows for sync licensing. I have been working primarily, but not exclusively, with regional Mexican artists (El Regimen Sinaloense, Banda Troyana) and have placed their music in English language TV shows such as The Bridge, Ray Donovan, Red Band Society, Shameless and East Los High. I also spent a couple years managing a regional Mexican songwriter/artist named Arturo Leyva who has written hits for a couple of very prominent regional Mexican artists.

There's one more thing I'd like to mention: Dave and I have known each other for 26 years now, but we recently discovered that the first rock and roll live show that we each attended was the same one: Herman's Hermits at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena in



Dave, Bruce Bromberg, Big Sandy, Larry Sloven, and Chris Gaffney

1965 (or maybe 1966). I was 15 so Dave must have been 10. He told me his sister brought him along because she was babysitting him. Notable acts on that package show were future HighTone artist Little Willie G (as singer of Thee Midniters), Lovin' Spoonful, The Turtles, Bobby Fuller Four, and local R&B singer Round Robin, who performed his current single, KICK THAT LITTLE FOOT SALLY ANN, written by future HighTone artist P.F. Sloan. —~~AM~~

Bruce Bromberg: HighTone Records Owner and Producer

Liner notes from Dave Alvin: Best of the HighTone Years CD in 2008

I remember the first time I ever heard of Dave Alvin and The Blasters. Things were not going well. My girlfriend, now wife, had received a scholarship to spend a year England and was about to leave. My teenage son was doing his best to give me grey hair (he succeeded). Meanwhile, the record company I was working for, had bit the dust, still owing me salary and expense money (to this day, I've never gotten paid for the first Robert Cray album I produced for them). Checks were bouncing and I was not a happy camper.

So one night I was lying in bed listening to the radio, right around the time John Lennon was killed, to college station KXLU. They were interviewing Dave and his brother Phil, the band's vocalist. I hadn't heard of The Blasters but, amazingly, they were young guys who liked the same old blues, rockabilly, R&B and country music that I did (and still do). To be honest, while I was happy that someone shared my taste in music, I didn't think much more about Dave until I was invited to be on a blues songwriting panel at USC a few years later. My fellow panelists were R&B greats Johnny Otis and Floyd Dixon, both of whom I knew, and Dave Alvin, whom I didn't know but who seemed to know what he was talking about.

Fast-forward to 1988. Larry Sloven and I had started HighTone Records and were having some success by then with Robert Cray. I was producing an album (with Wyman Reese) by new country-rock group The Lonesome Strangers, and they wanted Dave to play guitar on a song. Dave was familiar with the albums I produced for bluesmen Lightnin' Hopkins and Johnny Shines back in the '60s, so I guess he thought I knew what I was doing. We spoke during the session about his first solo album (Romeo's Escape) that he recorded for an English label, which had been picked up by Epic Records for release in the U.S. Epic was a major label, and I thought that this was a good thing for Dave, but he didn't. He complained that they were either trying to force him to be a straight Nashville kind of act or to imitate whatever pop music was hot on the Top 40 back then. He said he'd rather be on HighTone. Larry had always been a big Blasters fan, and he said, "Let's sign him." Two years later in 1990, we did.

I co-produced Dave's first two HighTone albums, Blue BLVD and Museum of Heart with Chris Silagyi and got to know Dave pretty well. It turned out that Dave was a friend of heroes of mine like the king of the blues shouters, Big Joe Turner, and New Orleans saxophone legend Lee Allen (a real treat for me was having Lee play on those



two records before he passed away). Dave and I became good friends – he even invited me to write songs with him, and believe me, that was an honor. I think Dave is up there with John Prine, Butch Hancock, Tom Russell, Steve Earle and Bruce Springsteen. So it was a little ironic, though that when Dave finally won a Grammy Award in 2001, it wasn't for album of his own songs, but for his recordings of traditional songs, contained on his CD Public Domain.

We had some fun away from the studio too. I'll never forget the trip Dave and I took to Mississippi, Arkansas and Memphis looking for old blues singers' graves. Or the time Mix Magazine hired Dave to interview Buck Owens in Bakersfield, and he brought me along. We got a free dinner and show and then spent a couple of hours talking music with Buck (who was a fine gentleman). Now Buck is gone, as well as some of the musicians who played on Dave's HighTone albums like Lee Allen, Donald Lindley, Steve Van Gelder, Michael Rose and, perhaps Dave's closest friend, Chris Gaffney. But life (and music) goes on, as they say, so play this album and hear a master at work.

-- Bruce Bromberg, July 2008

Chris Silagyi: BLUE BLVD Producer

Chris Silagyi has had a long and varied career as a musician with several bands, including 20/20, which crossed paths with the Blasters in the 1980s. Chris also has worked as a producer for a number of acts, including serving as a co-producer of Blue BLVD. He discussed his career and working with Dave Alvin in an email interview with Tom Wilk.

American Music: Were you familiar with the music of the Blasters in the 1980s? I know you were a member of 20/20, and wondered if you ever played on a bill with them or jammed with any members of the band.

Chris Silagyi: I believe I first heard about the Blasters through a friend, Art Fein. I don't remember if I saw them before or after getting the record, AMERICAN MUSIC, but it was right around that time. I was in another L.A. band, 20/20, at the time and our first CBS album had come out in the fall of '79. We got the Blasters to open for us at the Whisky a Go Go sometime in 1980. I remember meeting Phil Alvin before their sound check. He said it was their first time playing Hollywood and was happy to play the same club as Otis Redding. 20/20 were big fans of the Blasters. We even covered MARIE MARIE for a while in our live set. Our manager, Shelly Heber, became the Blasters manager.

AM: Do you recall when you first met Dave and how you came to co-produce Blue BLVD with Dave and Bruce Bromberg?

CS: I had spoken to Dave Alvin a few



times through the years. We had run into one another at clubs around town. I remember chatting at a Top Jimmy & the Rhythm Pigs gig at the O.N. Club. I recall this because I also met (bassist) Duck Dunn that night. I saw Dave and Phil back up Big Joe Turner at the Club Lingerie. What an incredible night! A legendary show. I also bumped into the Blasters in London in '85 when I was there producing the Redskins.

Skip ahead to 1990 or so. I was asked to help Dave record some demos. Since Dave had just started singing, I think they felt he could use some help with vocal performance. We recorded four songs at Paramount in Hollywood. Dave didn't have a label at the time, and the demo was shopped around town. This was when I heard my favorite A&R guy's excuse for passing: "We can't put this out. It's too good." (Actually, the four demos made it to the finished album.) Eventually HighTone was interested, and I was asked to co-produce the full album.

AM: How did the sessions for the album go? Do you recall if Dave gave you any specific instructions in regard to how he wanted the album to sound, such as being different from ROMEO'S ESCAPE? Do any songs stand out in your mind after 25 years?

CS: I just listened to the entire album for the first time in many years. The core band on Blue BLVD was really exceptional. The late Donald Lindley was skilled, instinctive, smart, and a pleasure to work with. A very sweet man. Don Falzone on acoustic and electric bass operates at a much higher level of musicianship than nearly anybody. Rick Solem is a very strong player. Greg Leisz is one of my favorite guitarists of all time and a great human.

The role of producer changes by the project. Dave didn't need much help in arranging or finding musicians. I chose and booked studios and engineers and kept track of the process along with adding some guitar and percussion. There wasn't a huge budget so we recorded basic tracks at Paramount and overdubs and vocals at another place. Mixing was done at yet another studio.

My take on producing records is, foremost, empowering musicians to do their best work, like it's their last record. I also try to give each song special treatment with regard to sounds and atmosphere. So I'm often changing snare drums and tuning, different amps and guitars. Not changing the featured artist so much, but readjusting the sounds around them and keeping everything organic. I try to imagine where the performance is coming from with regard to time, location and emotional content. It's like a frustrated film director working as a record producer.

I had not met Bruce Bromberg previously. He's an old-school record man and I really enjoyed hearing his tales and takes on music and the business. Bruce had seen it all through the years but still had the records he bought as a kid. Sound-wise I believe Dave wanted a modern-sounding record that would get played on mainstream rock radio. That was very important at the time. Blue BLVD did get listed in Rolling Stone's 1991 albums of the year. I consider Dave's songs 'American Literature.' He has a great gift. They seem so simple, but every word is chosen with great care and meticulously constructed. His songs touch people all over the world, and I am sure they will continue to do so.

I am most pleased with how ANDERSONVILLE came out. It's like an old black & white movie. A journey. The atmosphere is dense. DRY RIVER is strikingly beautiful. Leisz played this amazing Weissenborn acoustic lap steel slide guitar and if I remember correctly, the record was a real-time live take of Dave and Greg. PLASTIC ROSE is great, too. Pedal steel, tenor sax and upright bass. When Lee Allen, who played on all those Little Richard and Fats Domino records, passed away, it was listed in his top 10

recorded solos. I love Dave's guitar at the end of RICH MAN'S TOWN.

Blue BLVD is a solid album and an excellent batch of songs. The title track sounds a bit dated with those huge drums and reverb. We also did a version with Katy Moffatt doing the second voice on the chorus. What a great singer, but I guess the Orbison treatment won out in the end.

AM: I saw from your entry on the All Music Guide site that you had produced two albums for The Untouchables in 1984 and 1985. Did that help prepare you for working with Dave on Blue BLVD? Were you trying to do more production after your work with the Untouchables?

CS: I was very fortunate to have worked with a wide variety of bands and styles. Reggae. Metal. Dance. Comedy. One of the things that led me to production is you get to work with a whole different set of musicians on each project as opposed to working in a band with the same guys for years. I'm not a great band guy, but I love making records.

The Untouchables at the time hadn't had a lot of experience in the studio. Dave had been making records for 10 years by Blue BLVD. He and the other musicians knew what they were doing and when something wasn't right. But of course, the Untouchables had a top 20 hit in the UK with FREE YOURSELF. It was great living in London and hearing the record on the radio in the shops and offices.

Regarding trying to do more production, I possess no entrepreneurial skills or promotional sense whatsoever. I have been offered or invited virtually every project I've ever done.

AM: How is producing an album with two other people (Bruce and Dave)? Is it a matter of compromise on reaching a decision regarding the presentation of the music or did Dave have the final call?

CS: I don't remember friction in having multiple producers on Blue BLVD. Our individual roles were clearly delineated. Dave was obviously in charge of his music. I saved Dave from having to do all the stuff that would take his focus from the music. It was his first record for HighTone and Bruce, as company co-owner, took more of an executive producer role but kept a very supportive relationship with Dave. I was always present when anything went to tape as well as in the mixing and mastering afterward.

Making records is a very collaborative process unless you happen to record a solo album in your '65 Rambler (a reference to Ben Vaughn's album of the same name.) Engineers are also very important in getting the music to tape and keeping things moving along. I don't know how some people both produce and engineer projects. This was a Dave Alvin album, so he obviously had the final word.

AM: Can you tell me about your background? Are you from California and did you grow up with playing music?

CS: I grew up in New Jersey, Atlanta, and Santa Barbara. My parents were classical musicians, so I've been playing music since I was a little kid. I also began recording music at an early age. Dr. Demento played one of my homegrown songs on his shows for a while.

I played guitar, sang and played keys with 20/20. We made a very popular album in '79 and toured the country. The records are still in print. I began producing records full time in '82 in Los Angeles and London. This included music for TV and film, as well as arranging vocals and horns, programming synths and midi. Dave and I produced the Elvis music for the film HONEYMOON IN VEGAS in the early '90s. I changed careers after working with Dave to producing Interactive Media, as it was called in '93. I spent the

next 15 years or so working in Online, Network, Games, Software, Web series, Film, Animation, and Training.

I've gotten drawn back to music in the past six years. I moved back to LA last year and play guitar in three bands currently.

I did a residency downtown in May with Canadian alt-country band, Three O'Clock Train. I just happened to run into Bill Bateman there. I hadn't seen him in decades and it was great chatting.

I've played with the Ex Teens, a loud, quirky pop band, since 2010 and presently have half an album recorded and some live dates coming up.

I also play with the Furys, an L.A. band that has been around since the '70s, playing the same venues as 20/20. I recorded a single with them last year and arranged a string section. Currently, I am rehearsing a Bakersfield-type band to play gigs around Southern California. —~~am~~

Don Falzone: BLUE BLVD Bass player

Bassist Don Falzone helped to anchor the rhythm section on Blue BLVD along with drummer Donald Lindley. Later, he also played bass on Dave Alvin's Museum Of Heart and the King Of California CDs before relocating to New York. Since then he has worked with artists across the musical spectrum, including cabaret star Ute Lemper and Madeline Peyroux. In addition, Falzone has released a series of solo albums.

In an email interview with Tom Wilk, he discussed his memories of working in the studio and on stage with Dave.

American Music: Do you recall when you met Dave and how you came to play on the sessions for Blue BLVD?

Don Falzone: The first time I remember meeting Dave was at the King King Club in Los Angeles. The King King was the hang for blues and jump swing back then, and the owners were two brothers who loved and cared about music. I used to play down there a lot with bands like King Cotton and the Swamp Coolers and Smokey Hormel and the Rhythm Kings. I remember Dave sitting in one night. I think we hit it off right from the get-go. It was obvious that he could play some guitar and he dug what I was doing. He asked me at some point after that if I was interested in being in his band. We played a bunch of gigs together before we recorded Blue BLVD.

AM: How did the sessions for the album go? Do you recall if Dave gave you any specific instructions in regard to your playing?

DF: As far as I remember, the sessions went very well. Everybody dug being around each other. Dave is a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy. No ego tripping. He's a great songwriter but he's also a great musician, and he knows where he came from. There are songwriters who sing and play a little guitar, you know, but Dave is a player, too. He was one of us, and it was a band. I don't remember getting much instruction from him what on what to play.

AM: Do the recordings of any songs stand out in your mind? In the CD booklet, you are credited with playing electric and stand-up bass. Do you recall on which songs you played stand-up bass?

DF: There's a lot of great songs on Blue BLVD. HALEY'S COMET and WANDA AND



DUANE really rocked. GOSPEL NIGHT was always one of my favorite songs of Dave's. But for me, PLASTIC ROSE was the one I was most excited about. There's such a vibe on that tune, and the lyrics – but also to be on a recording with the one and only Lee Allen. I played upright on that tune, the only one on the album I did so.

AM: What was it like to work with drummer Donald Lindley?

DF: Playing with Donald "The Clock" Lindley was great. It was a perfect situation for him, I think. He really could lay it down.

AM: Had you done much session work before Blue BLVD?

DF: I grew up in a musical house. I also lived at Geordie Hormel's house for a while. He owned the Village Recorder where Museum of Heart was recorded. He had a full recording studio in his house, and I had many opportunities to record there. I had done a record for Victoria Williams called Swing The Statue and a record called Upright for pianist Phil Aaberg for the Windham Hill Label. I also had recorded at A&M and Capitol for a couple of movie dates. I had done some recording

prior to meeting Dave, but I was by no means a "studio cat."

AM: Have you worked with Dave on any other projects?

DF: Dave and I worked together on a few projects outside of his albums. We toured together with singer Syd Straw who had released a great album called Surprise. And we did a little movie soundtrack stuff for David Lynch (Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me and Tom Waits.)

AM: Have you ever played live with Dave?

DF: I toured with Dave in Norway, Sweden, and England and in the states. Don't ask me what clubs because I couldn't tell you that the morning after the gig, much less 25 years later.

AM: What have you done since Blue BLVD?

DF: Twenty-five years later, I'm here in New York. I've been here for the last 22 years and have pursued my lifelong love of jazz music while primarily playing the acoustic bass. I still do some work with songwriters. I did a wonderful project for producer Hal Willner in 2006 called I'm Your Man featuring Rufus Wainwright, Nick Cave, Lou Reed, and Laurie Anderson and others. I've recorded three CDs. The latest is Waltz For Claudia, a trio record with pianist and harmonica virtuoso Howard Levy from Bela Fleck and the Flecktones. I also play regularly with the great pianist Alan Broadbent, who was with Charlie Haden's Quartet West for 20 years.

Thanks to Don Falzone for sharing his memories. To learn more about him and his work, visit www.donfalzone.com

Andersonville: Behind The Music is the History by Tom Wilk

This story appeared in the December 2002 issue of Civil War News. It is based on telephone interviews with Dave Alvin in 1991 and 2002 and e-mail interviews with Civil War researchers.

ANDERSONVILLE is a song close to Dave Alvin's heart. "It's more than a haunting song about the infamous Confederate prisoner of war camp. It also serves as a tribute to Asa Powell, his great-great-great uncle who died in the Georgia prison. Powell was a private with the 122nd Regiment Illinois Infantry and died of diarrhea at Andersonville on Aug. 15, 1864. Alvin first released ANDERSONVILLE on Blue BLVD, his 1991 solo album. He released it as an acoustic number with Richard Thompson on In Their Own Words, Volume 1 (Razor and Tie) in 1994 and recut the song again in an acoustic setting in 2002 for his live CD Out in California.

With its acoustic guitar and fiddle, the Out in California version sounds as if it could have been performed at a 19th-century reunion of Civil War veterans. ANDERSONVILLE, with its stark images, is sung in the voice of a doomed soldier.

The second verse captures his hopelessness and desolation. "My uniform had faded and there's no boots upon my feet / I'm pulling worms out of the mud cause there's nothing left to eat / And the Rebs can't even feed their own so there's no way they can fill / The bellies of the Yankees starving in Andersonville."

The chorus of the song adopts a fatalistic tone: "Some men are born to preach God's word / And some men are born to kill / I guess that I was only born/To die in Andersonville." The seeds of the song were planted in a childhood gift that Alvin received in the mid-1960s. "I was given a box with two photos - a tintype and glass photo of my great-great-uncle," he recalled in a 2002 interview. Alvin used one of the photos in his Public Domain CD. Also in the box, a gift from his Aunt Margaret, were some small carvings that Powell made while in the Army.

After launching his solo career, Alvin decided that Powell's life and death could be the subject of a song. He began work on ANDERSONVILLE in 1990. "I sketched it out and it originally had eight verses," said Alvin, who then trimmed to it four verses and a chorus and dedicated it to Powell on the Blue BLVD. CD.

From the start, Alvin said he knew the song was something special. "The first time I played it was for a woman I know. Her reaction was, 'Can I go commit suicide now?'" he recalled in a 1991 interview. Today, ANDERSONVILLE is a song that connects with his audience. "I got a lot of requests for it; it's one of my more requested songs. Alvin is reluctant to perform the song if the setting and mood are not right. "I don't want to do it live, if people are talking."



Asa Powell

Take it Or Leave it by Tom Wilk

Dave Alvin has a long history of songwriting collaboration, starting with his brother, Phil, on SHE AIN'T GOT THE BEAT on the Blasters' American Music album in 1980. Since then, he has continued collaborating onto his solo albums and recordings with many other artists, including Amy Farris and Christy McWilson.

One collaboration with an air of mystery is TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT, a song Dave co-wrote with the duo Foster and Lloyd between the releases of Romeo's Escape and Blue BLVD. Copyrighted in 1989, the song remains unrecorded after more than a quarter of century.

Radney Foster has enjoyed a productive solo career with 10 solo albums. His most recent album, Everything I Should Have Said, is available at www.radneyfoster.com. Bill Lloyd is now a successful solo artist whose latest album is Lloyder-ing, featuring his versions of some of his favorite songs by the Beatles (ACROSS THE UNIVERSE), the Bobby Fuller Four (LET HER DANCE), and Harry Nilsson (THE LOTTERY SONG). Lloyder-ing is available at CD Baby or www.billlloyd.net.

Lloyd discussed his musical career and memories of TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT in a pair of email messages earlier this year. "Radney and I had a brief run as a duo between 1986 through 1990. During that time we had three albums on RCA and an "Essentials" package after the fact. We charted nine singles on the country charts with our first single (CRAZY OVER YOU) going to #1 on Radio and Records and Cashbox and Top 5 in Billboard," Lloyd recalls. "Dave was in Nashville, and I think he was represented by Bug Music (a publishing company that manages song copywrites for artist) at the time," he says. "I eventually signed with Bug myself, and I always thought they had an amazingly cool roster of writers," adds Lloyd, who has co-written songs with fellow Bug writers Marshall Crenshaw, Steve Wynn and Jimmie Dale Gilmore.

"We were a little on the outside of most of what was going on in country, but there was a period there where our roots-rock vibe seemed to fit," Lloyd recounts.

"Getting back to the song, I remember a morning meeting with Dave in a studio that went for a few hours stretching into an afternoon and eventually a lunch at a taco place," Lloyd says. "I think we were recording our third album for RCA at the time."

"I also remember the three of us sitting on chairs in the big room of the studio (not sure which one) and trying to make up a song," Lloyd continues: "I remember Dave being impressed with our quick work ethic. I don't know if he spent much time doing the co-write thing, but it was all Radney and I did in those days for better or worse. We were quick, and it only took a couple of hours until we all sang it down and called it a song."

Copyrighted on June 19, 1989, according to www.copyrightencyclopedia.com, TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT now remains a mystery. Lloyd couldn't recall if the song was up-tempo or a ballad.

"Songs can be good one day and OK the next, amazing another day, and unusable on another," Lloyd reflects. "I don't have a digital recording of that song. It's on a cassette somewhere in a box. I don't remember much else about it except that Dave didn't cut the song and neither did we, but we did turn it in to our publishers as we were under contract to do so."

"I wish I knew where the recording of the song was as I would like to hear it again," Lloyd says. "I would have to upend my life for a day to even begin looking for it, but maybe I'll run across it at some point." — **AW**

Keith Wyatt: If You See a Fork in the Road, Take It!



As a teenage guitar player, my only “career plan” was to play in a band, but before too long, I realized that to make a living in music, you need to be versatile, use any and all skills you have, and go where the path leads you. In my case, it eventually led to joining the Blasters, but also to teaching, writing, making videos and running an on-line school. It's not the path I first imagined, but one that I was very fortunate to take.

I started playing guitar when I was 15, and like most guitar players at the time, I learned music through a patchwork of lessons, method books (Mel Bay and Mickey Baker), copying songs from records, and playing in bands with my pals. When I went off to college, I still wasn't set on music as a career, but after graduating with a degree in Humanities (ka-ching!), I realized that it was the only thing I really wanted to do. Floundering around in a few more bands convinced me that it was time for some real music education, so in 1977 I moved to LA to attend the Guitar Institute of Technology (now known as Musicians Institute).

Howard Roberts, who designed the GIT curriculum, was a renowned jazz guitar stylist and A-list LA session player who also had a passion for the science of learning. The result of his R&D was GIT, the first full-time program on all aspects of contemporary guitar playing, plus an equal emphasis on learning how to learn. In one year, it taught me pretty much everything I needed to know about how to play the guitar, how music works, and how to teach both myself and others. GIT was later caricatured by some as a kind of shred factory, but it wasn't like that at all; it was a non-denominational, total-immersion experience in playing the guitar, and

what you did with your newly-acquired skills was up to you. For me, it was right back to playing blues, but with a whole different level of awareness.

When I graduated in 1978, GIT was already growing fast and needed teachers, so I began teaching there part-time while playing around L.A. in different bands. I also started working under Howard's guidance to develop new curriculum, which was a priceless opportunity to learn directly from him about organizing complex ideas and writing clear, concise prose (turns out my Humanities degree came in handy after all). I got my first on-camera experience in an educational TV series on guitar produced by Howard and bassist Ray Brown; unfortunately, it never aired, but publishers started coming around to GIT looking for experienced player/teachers and before too long, I wrote my first book (actually more of a booklet), Hot Lines: Blues, which led to a book/cassette collection called Pro Licks: Blues, and in 1989, my first video, Rockin' the Blues.

Being at MI gave me the chance to play with some of my early idols, including both Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker, and meanwhile I was working regularly around LA with James Intveld, Juke Logan, the Dime Bags and others in the decade before I joined the Blasters in 1996. In the early '90s, the instructional video market took off, and I also started directing videos for other players, which mostly involved making sure the cameras were aimed properly and the teacher was making sense. My most memorable experience from that time was interviewing and performing with Albert Collins, who was one of the most original and powerful guitarists of his generation. Off stage he was warm and casual, but the minute he strapped on his guitar he was absolutely focused, and he played with unrelenting energy and intensity right up to the end of his life. He was a personal and professional role model, and the brief time I spent with him remains one of the highlights of my own life.

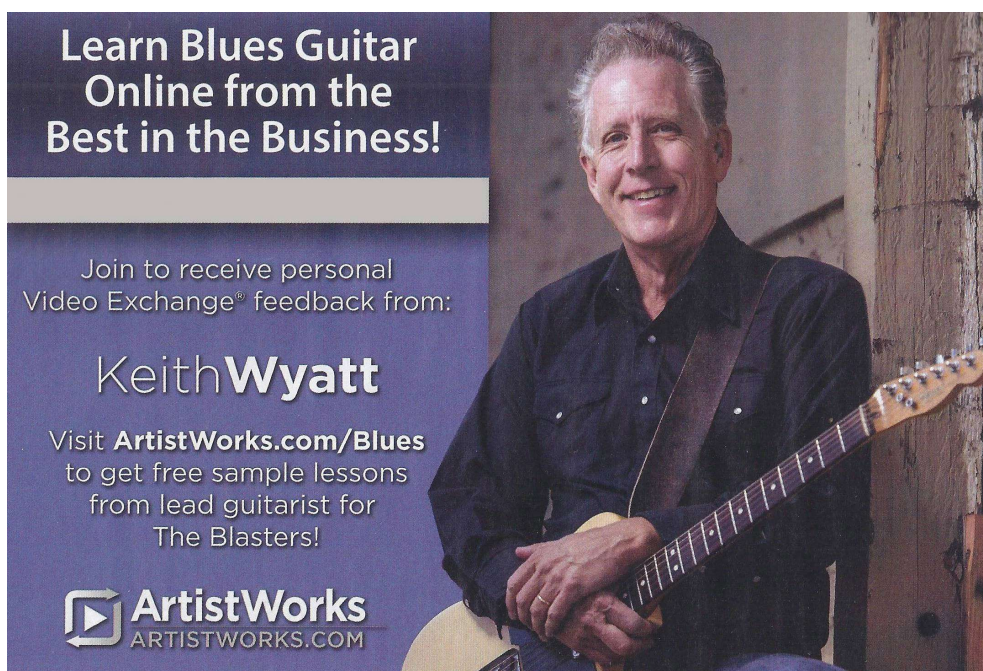
Throughout the '90s I kept writing and teaching instructional videos and eventually did more than a dozen on subjects from blues to rock to beginning guitar. My last full-length video was a beginning guitar DVD for Fender in 2000, just before "file sharing," i.e. piracy, began "disrupting," i.e. destroying, the video industry. For several years after that I wrote a monthly blues guitar column for Guitar World magazine that evolved to include short videos and even smart-phone, app-based mini-lessons. Ironically, old-school books on paper also survived, and MI Press/Hal Leonard published books based on courses that I had co-written for the school (Harmony and Theory and Ear Training) along with Blues Rhythm Guitar and most recently, Blues Guitar Soling.

In 2014, I finally left MI and right around then, by lucky coincidence Paul Gilbert, a former GIT colleague and genuine rock guitar hero, hooked

me up with ArtistWorks, an on-line subscription-based music school. That October, after a couple of months of planning and writing curriculum, I drove up to their studio in Napa, California, and spent a week shooting dozens of lesson videos for my Blues Guitar program, which launched that December.

What sets AW apart from other on-line music lessons is not just the depth and detail of the programs, but much more than any other video or book I have ever done - but also their system of optional, non-real-time video exchanges that allows students and instructors to interact from anywhere in the world with an internet connection. In just over a year and a half since the school opened, I have already done close to 2000 video exchanges (including many from hotel rooms while on tour with the Blasters) and currently have an enrollment of about 650 students.

ArtistWorks represents the kind of synthesis of education and technology that Howard Roberts was already thinking about when he created GIT and barely glimpsed before he passed away in 1992. Back in the mid-70s, I had no clue, let alone a vision, about what I would be doing 40 years later - getting around in a flying car? Maybe, but teaching blues via computer to students all over the world while touring in a rock and roll band? Crazy talk. —~~AM~~




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