

ISSUE #92

American Music

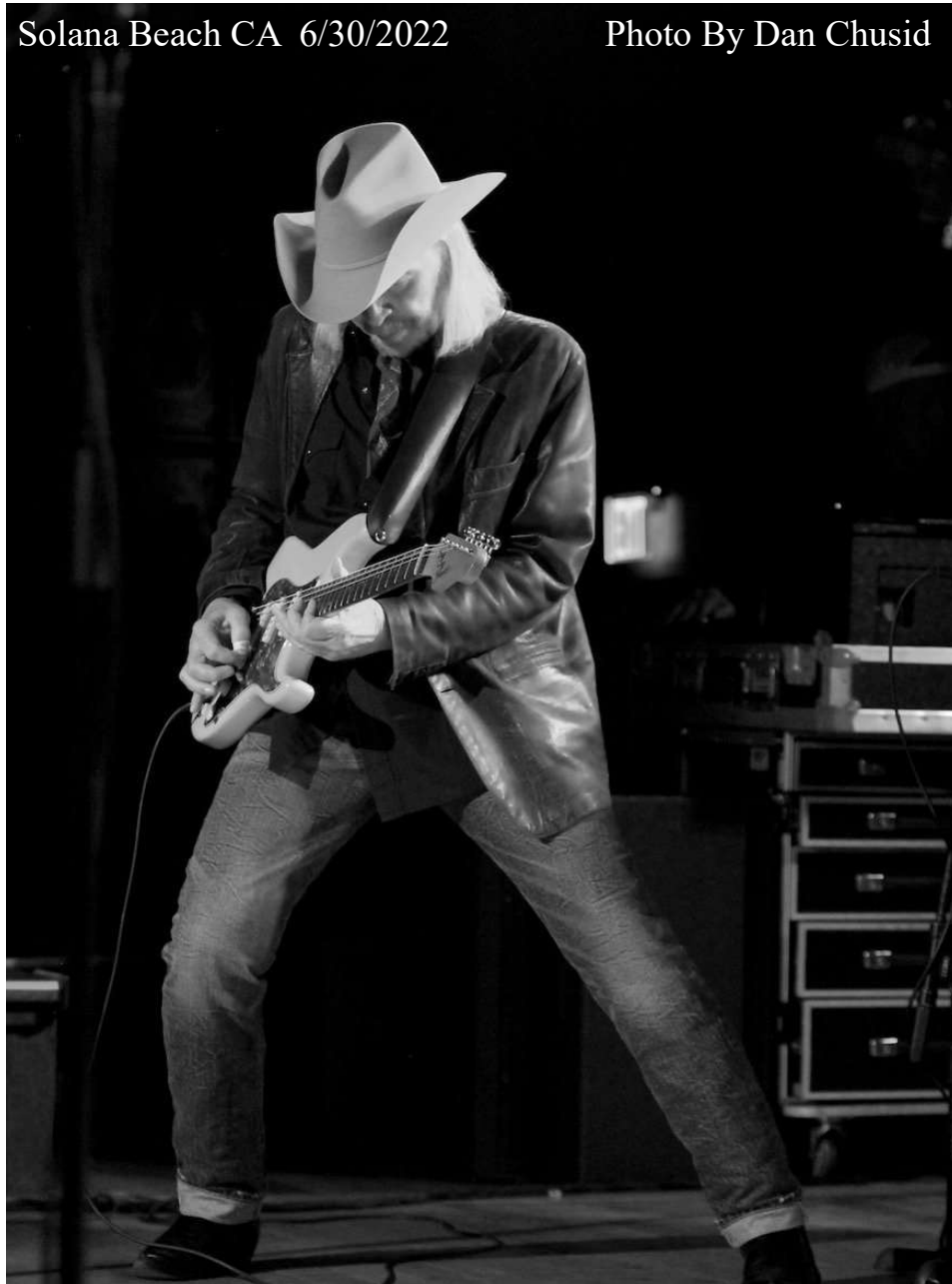
The Blasters/Dave Alvin newsletter

JULY 2022

The Return of Dave Alvin

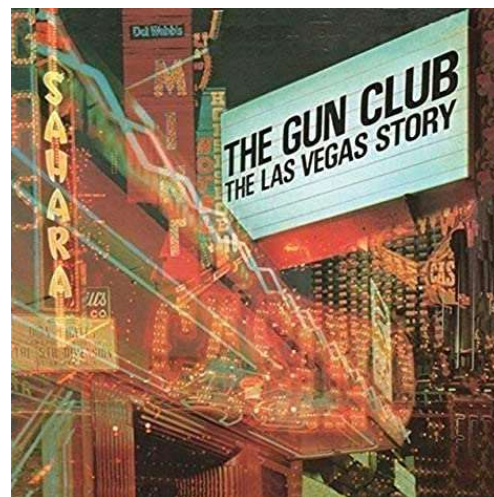
Solana Beach CA 6/30/2022

Photo By Dan Chusid

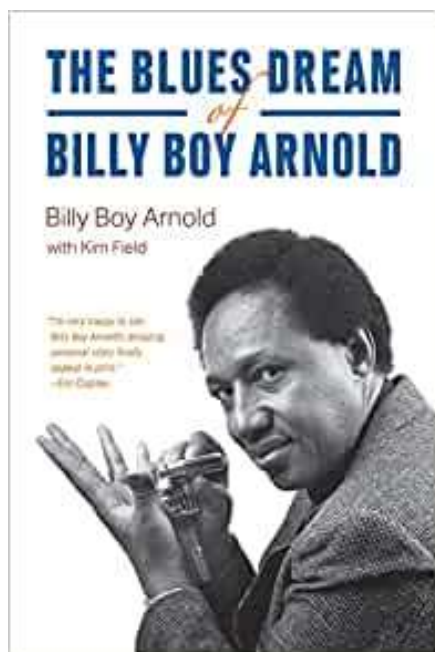


In This Issue: The Dave Alvin 2022 Interview, The Americana Railroad CD, and Remembering Bruce Bromberg.

Latest News: Dave Alvin contributes liner notes to a reissue of The Gun Club's The Las Vegas Story (Blixa Sounds). It's available as a super deluxe two-CD/DVD and double-vinyl set, containing a digitally remastered version of the original 11-track album produced by Jeff Eyrich. Dave also plays lead guitar on ETERNALLY IS HERE and THE STRANGER IN OUR TOWN on the original album, which was released in 1984. || ||| On April 3, Los Lobos won the Grammy Award for Best Americana Album for Native Sons, its tribute to Los Angeles-based bands and songwriters. The album includes a version of FLAT TOP JOINT, written by Dave Alvin for the Blasters first album. || ||| Poor Little Critter on the Road, the first album by the Knitters, was reissued on vinyl in



March by Fat Possum Records. || ||| The 'Third Mind' band update by Dave Alvin: "Victor and I have been sending tracks to each other that we might cover. And just the other day, I had a long conversation with Jesse Sykes about a duet song we'd like to do. Michael Jerome the bassist has a studio that I'll be recording at soon. If it all works out, we will do another Third Mind record. The next one will be the same kind of bluesy folk rock psychedelica." || ||| September will see the release of Dave Alvin's book New Highway: Selected Lyrics, Poems, Prose, Essays, Eulogies and Blues. Dave: "It will have lyrics to a few songs that have never been released. One from Black Jack David which was recorded and might see the light of day in a future re-release of BJD. Also Interviews and liner notes I wrote for other people's records. Poems and writings from the past year, as well as older stuff like for the L.A. times and even writings from facebook." || ||| The Blasters appearance on the Soundstage TV show from 1982 with Willie Dixon and Carl Perkins has been released digitally on Amazon in Japan. || ||| Blues slide guitar master Kelly Joe Phelps has passed away at the age of 62. He appeared on the American Music radar when he toured in 1996-97 with Dave Alvin. There are some excellent concerts available with Dave and Kelly Joe on the Internet Audio Archive. There's one from Freight & Salvage in Berkeley, CA, in June 1996 that has Dave doing a rare, if not one-of-a-kind performance, of YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE with Kelly Joe playing guitar. There is also a Tin Angel show in Philadelphia from Feb. 28, 1997 in which



Kelly joins Dave on guitar for several songs, including a rare acoustic version of AMERICAN MUSIC. || ||| Dave Alvin is taking part in a musical cruise from Los Angeles to Mexico Called Outlaw Country West on Nov. 3-8, 2022. Other artists on the cruise include Los Lobos, X, Lucinda Williams, Rosie Flores, and James Intveld. More artists will be added. Check out OutlawCountryWest.com || ||| The Blues Dream of Billy Boy Arnold, a memoir by the Chicago bluesman co-written with Kim Field, was published in November by the University of Chicago Press. Arnold's musical career has spanned 70 years and the Blasters cited Arnold as one of their musical influences. The Blasters recorded Arnold's I WISH YOU WOULD on their American Music album released in 1980 and included a live version on Trouble Bound in 2002. Arnold was a guest on the 2004 Blasters Going Home DVD and CD, performing WANDERING EYE on CD and I AIN'T GOT YOU on DVD. A two-CD version of Going Home released in Great Britain included Arnold's performance of I AIN'T GOT YOU. || ||| — Am

Blasters Report from Keith Wyatt

We have been rehearsing weekly and played a good show on 7/1 at the Bourbon Room in Hollywood. It was a good turnout and the fans were very enthusiastic. We played for a little over an hour and Phil was fatigued but still standing at the end. We're taking things slow. Next up is a show in Santa Barbara at the Lobero Theater on August 6 with Dave Alvin joining us. We'll get together a couple of weeks beforehand to rehearse a set.

In other news I've recorded ten original instrumental tracks with John Bazz and Bill Batemen for use in my Truefire online guitar instructional videos. The songs aren't Blaster songs, but some are Blaster adjacent.

THE DAVE ALVIN 2022 INTERVIEW

BY BILLY DAVIS

Throughout the 2020-2021 pandemic, as we were all trying to adapt to a new way of living, Dave Alvin was going through a major health crisis. He kept it a secret from all but his closest friends and family. We didn't notice because everyone was in lockdown. Dave Alvin later joked that if he had to choose when to have cancer, that was the time, when no one could go on tour anyway.

Dave Alvin only recently admitted that he was diagnosed with cancer in January of 2020. We were all shocked because Dave Alvin was always busy recording, going on tour, traveling the world, doing interviews, and not resting for a second. He was the Energizer Bunny. How could this happen?

In April 2022 he revealed in an interview with Rolling Stone that he had undergone successful treatment for stage four colorectal cancer in an article titled 'I Should Have Died': Dave Alvin, Seminal California Country-Punk Guitarist, Talks Private Cancer Battle.' In those two years he was diagnosed with three separate cancers, was hospitalized for several surgeries, underwent months of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. He is now cancer free and willing to talk about it. His first full performance post-cancer was at McCabe's in Santa Monica on May 8, 2022.

Dave Alvin: The King of Downey

Live at McCabe's Santa Monica, CA - May 8, 2022

story by Billy Davis

photos by Rex Hamilton

Dave Alvin has played McCabe's many times over the years and always in different and unique formats. He usually brings in different musicians to play with him and his set list features rare songs or new versions of songs. Guitarist Rick Holmstrom and his band backed up Dave and also did their own set. Rick's band features former Guilty Men - Gregory Boaz on bass and Steve Mugalian on drums. Dave Alvin came out on stage with his new look – long blond hair – as he sat on a chair to sing and play guitar after an all-instrumental set by Rick Holmstrom. McCabe's shows are usually acoustic in nature. Dave was playing his electric, so it was unusual to see play sitting down, but at this point the fans assumed his health was keeping him seated.

Dave's first comment to the audience was: "Well, this is my first gig in two and half years. There will be mistakes - but I guarantee they will be new mistakes." That brought a laugh from the audience. He opened with FLAT TOP JOINT, one of the first songs he wrote for the Blasters and a song that Los Lobos covered on their recent Grammy Award-winning Native Sons album. Dave Alvin changed the last verse of the song to fit the times. He sang: "Now the folks down there are friendly, they'll give you anything that you ask. Yeah, it's a rockin' good time folks, just as long as you wear a mask. . ."

Dave had some fun banter with his former band mates between songs as they recalled fun touring memories from the Dave Alvin and the Guilty Men days. Dave pulled out a rare one called MOTHER EARTH originally recorded by bluesman Memphis Slim that Dave recorded on his King Of California album. The version tonight was more electric guitar-based than the King version and at a slower tempo, like Memphis Slim's original hit. It was an interesting and very different version from the acoustic finger-picking version on King of California.

The set covered the wide range of projects Dave has done over the years like SOUTHERN FLOOD BLUES from the Big Bill





Broonzy tribute album, CALIFORNIA BLOODLINES from West of the West, and set staples like the nine-minute OUT OF CONTROL jam, and JOHNNY ACE IS DEAD.

For the last song, Dave did DRY RIVER with a new introduction for the song. As he gently finger-picked the melody of the song, he set it up with this narration: “It all starts musically in the San Gabriel mountains. When it rains here, they get snow. Then it trickles down the grand canyons and comes down to where the pine trees are. All that melting snow starts to form a river. It starts picking up strength and speed, It passes the bears and the mountain lions and it goes down into the foothills past the Oaks and the Manzanitas. Then it comes to the really dangerous part - down in the flatlands where we are. . .” Dave beautifully set the mood as he starts signing the familiar lyrics to the song – “I was born by a river. . .”

Dave returned for an encore with a song he called the ‘Louie Louie’ of folk music, a song he has loved since he was a kid. The song called SHENANDOAH from his Public Domain album is a great song that Dave rarely does. He explained the title doesn’t refer to the valley in Virginia but instead a Native American chief. MARIE MARIE of course finished the show. The rousing version proved that Dave Alvin was back. He said “This was fun. Let’s do more of these!”

THE DAVE ALVIN 2022 INTERVIEW

PART 1 [JUNE 2022]

AM: How did it feel coming back and doing the McCabe's show?

Dave: I did that McCabe's show to see where I was at physically. Can I even do a show? I thought it was real good. It was great to play with Boaz and Mugalian and do a whole show together. I thought some things were good and other things on guitar I have to work on.

AM: You were seated for the whole performance.

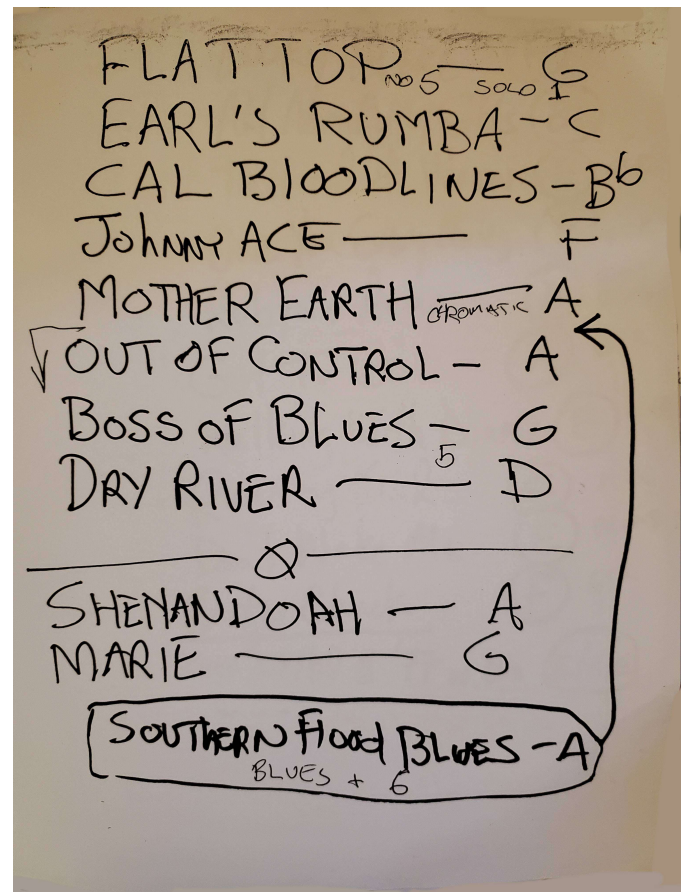
Dave: One of the side effects of the chemo is the neuropathy in my hands, but it's also worse in my feet. They say it will go away in a few years. At McCabe's I normally sit down and play anyway because it can be cramped on the little stage, but mainly I thought I didn't want to take a chance on my feet. Also, I had been practicing sitting down, so I was used to that. When my feet are up and active, they're better. When I stood up to try to walk it was hard [laughs]. I tried to do it coolly. At the Los Lobos show I was wearing cowboy boots, but the next day my feet hurt like hell.

AM: How did you come about the decision to tell the world about your cancer in the Rolling Stone article?

Dave: When I got the okay from the doctor that I was cancer-free, I was ready to tell the public. It's been a burden to keep it a secret. Especially when people started asking why I wasn't playing gigs after the pandemic lock down ended. Plus, I wanted to go through it privately. When I was going through chemo and radiation, it would have been too much on me to talk about. When Rolling Stone was interested, it was the right time.

AM: It's true. The fans were wondering why is Dave Alvin not playing gigs?

Dave: When the lockdown happened, I was still saying to myself "I wanna play gigs!!" Then I realized, "Oh that's right - I'm deathly ill [laughs]." But then when Phil and the Blasters and Los Lobos started up playing, I started getting jealous. The side effects of the chemo were so intense that it made it difficult to play the guitar. It caused neuropathy in my hands, so for six months I was unable to play guitar. It felt like the guitar strings were razor blades and my fingers weren't moving right. It was scary - especially not being able to play KING OF CALIFOR-



NIA, which is so ingrained in me. That was a gut punch to me. Who am I? I thought I was done. I eventually had to reteach myself to play my own songs.

AM: How are you now after your first gig?

Dave: My hands are semi-normal. The day of the McCabe's gig, I woke up with fuzzy hands. It's like the tingle of your hand falling asleep but it's a painful version of that - and there's nothing you can do. I had to play through it and watch my hands on the neck of the guitar. It's psychologically brutal to go through, because I've been playing guitar naturally all my life.

AM: The Rolling Stone article explained the timeline of your two years.

Dave: Yes. In 2020 I was having the chemo and radiation that killed the prostate cancer. Then the first major surgery was colorectal in April 2021, which metastasized onto my liver. In June 2021, they said I was cancer-free, but then it returned in July as a tumor on my liver and they thought in my lungs. They did chemo for the lungs, which later they figured out I actually didn't have. That was an "oops" moment. They told me that I had about a year to live, so I was playing that Los Lobos gig [Costa Mesa Amphitheater 8/1/21] with Phil thinking that was my last gig ever. So, for that gig I practiced and practiced but all I could think was that this is the last gig I'll ever play. When Phil and I played FLATTOP JOINT it was very moving to me. Fortunately, I didn't have the cancer that they thought I did - but the chemo exacerbated my hands again, so I had to relearn the guitar again.

AM: During all this time, were you doing anything musically or creatively at home whether inspired or not by your condition?

Dave: The last thing I did before all of this happened was producing Carolyn Wonderland's album. She's great and we talk all the time. In fact we're planning on another album in January 2023. After that, when I was diagnosed and not being able to play the guitar, I didn't write any songs. But writing, yes. I worked on the book of essays that's due out this September [after being delayed by the publisher due to a paper shortage]. The next book will be my memoirs. Writing the memoirs has been weird. I don't think the publisher wants a real tell-all kind of book, and that's fine by me. But at this time, it's hard for me emotionally to recall these stories. It's like going to a ghost town. When I'm playing gigs, I can feel Gaffney who is always there with me. Bobby Lloyd is there, Lee Allen is there, Gene Taylor is there. I feel everybody around me. And it helps to bash on the guitar to let it all out [laughs]. But I'm not



L - R. Steve Mugalian, Rick Holmstrom, Dave, and Gregory Boaz

playing gigs - so those ghosts appear to me in a not-so-positive way. I get really bummed when I'm writing. I start questioning why is Buddy Blue dead, why is Country Dick dead, Amy Farris and so on. So many of my friends - I can't understand it. If I'm playing gigs, then I'm okay with it. So, it hasn't been easy to write about them. I get really sad.

AM: Gene Taylor was lost during the pandemic, but strangely not from COVID. Will there be some Gene stories in your book?

Dave: Oh yeah. There are too many Gene stories. He had a really hard life and lots of tragedies that made him the way he was. He could be Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I thought he blossomed in recent years on social media. It's an absolute tragedy losing him. We always thought in the '70s that at any minute Gene could go, because he was such a wild man. He could get very violent. In my book, I'll tell the story about the time he almost killed me. Its hilarious [laughs].



Gene loved me like a little brother. One night in Sacramento, me and Bateman had an argument on stage and Phil thought he wasn't keeping time and I thought he wasn't working hard enough. Bill was trying to make both of us happy and it didn't work out. In the dressing room I was trying to hype up Bill, Gene came over and threw me on the couch strangling me. No one wanted to get involved. The guys in the band Rank and File were there, the late Tony Kinman leaned in the room as this was going on. He had a bunch of people behind him and said "Ah! Now isn't the best time meet Dave." Luckily Phil said: "Gene, get the fuck off of David." [laughs] And he did!

How can you balance out the stories in a memoir? It's difficult. I could write a book on every guy. Then there are guys who never got their due, like Downey musicians Gary Masi and Mike Roach. They never had solo bands to get recognition, but surely, they should be represented. The publisher, of course, wants the stories of Bob Dylan, what was it like on Slash/Warner Bros. Records and CBS Records. I will talk about meeting Dylan, recording with him, and hearing how much of a Blasters fan he was. And of course the tour where the Guilty Men and I opened for him including the Madison Square Garden show. I'll tell a few great stories from the era.

AM: How are things for you now going forward?

Dave: My attitude post-cancer is that even the shitty days are great. I'm not supposed to be

here talking to you right now. If I could play gigs, it would all be better - that's how I balance my life. With these upcoming gigs in June and July [2022 with Jimmie Dale and the Guilty Ones], every note whether right or wrong will be amazing to me. It's just great being able to play these songs again. The last show we all played together was in Chicago at Fitzgerald's in January 2020 just before I went in the hospital. We played almost three hours because it was Bill Fitzgerald's farewell for selling the club. We did 30 DOLLAR ROOM and MUSEUM OF HEART. So, this tour is gonna be fun. Everyday, just look at those flowers. Damn! It's all gravy and frosting.

THE DAVE ALVIN 2022 INTERVIEW

PART 2 [JULY 2022]

AM: You just came back from a California tour of ten shows. How was it?

Dave: It was Great!!! [laughs] to put it mildly. We touched on all the bases. We did three days of rehearsal, and it all came back. Santa Cruz was the first gig and it was good, but by the end we were a machine. We used to have two different endings of the show with MARIE MARIE leading into other songs. I couldn't remember what it was at rehearsals. But by the second show I was remembering - so things come back to you as you go. We were really 'on' by the Kate Wolf festival.

At the first show, I had a chair just in case. I tried it for 10 seconds and said: "I don't like this." Overall, my performance was good, but I couldn't do the big leg splits. Traveling city to city was easy - I fell right back into that. We did a lot of sightseeing that I wanted to do. I'm ready for the next tour! On the schedule we're doing the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in San Francisco and then the Outlaw Country West cruise to Mexico in November. There will probably be a week of shows after the cruise. I'm proceeding as if I am me again. I'm close, but not right there yet.

6/21 Santa Cruz CA at Moe's Alley
6/22 Sacramento CA at Harlow's
6/22-23 Laytonville CA at Kate Wolf Fest
6/25 Menlo Park CA at Guild Theater
6/26 Nicasio CA at Rancho Nicasio
6/28 San Francisco CA at The Chapel
6/30 Solana Beach CA at Belly Up
7/1 Pioneertown CA at Pappy & Harriet's
7/2 W. Hollywood CA at The Troubadour

"After the last two and a half years, I am very excited and happy to be going out on the road again. Please join me, Jimmie Dale and all of our musical tribe, as we celebrate with some loud and glorious, guitar bashing and life affirming noise." – Dave Alvin

AM: What are you doing after those shows?

Dave: We'll take it one step at a time. As soon as I announced these gigs, we started to get plenty of offers. We'll see how much I can handle. I have a great band, so that makes it easier. I would say that serious touring would be in 2023 as long as COVID is under control.

AM: How about future recordings?

Dave: We're planning another 'Third Mind' record. And I will be cutting some things with Jimmie Dale, not for a complete album though. But I really want to do a Dave Alvin record. I have a few things already. But it all depends on my health. What has made it harder to record is that Craig Parker Adams lost his Winslow Court studio, where I've been making all of my records for the last 15 years. It was a gut punch. I'm looking for a new studio now. I love Stuart Sullivan's studio, where I made the Carolyn Wonderland album, but it's in Austin, TX. I like recording near home in a comfortable environment. Michael Jerome from 'The Third Mind' has a studio nearby, so I'll be auditioning it soon to see if it's got the vibe. In July I'll be cutting a track in that studio with Gregory Boaz, Steve Mugalian, and Rick Holmstrom for a tribute album. I'm sure Rick and I are going to cut loose on guitars.

AM: Blues slide guitar player Kelly Joe Phelps just passed away at 62 years of age. You two toured in 96-97 as a duo. What do you remember about him?

Dave: We've not crossed paths in many years, but I heard occasionally from people in Portland OR what he was up to. We were paired together because we had the same booking agency, Mongrel. Kelly Joe Phelps was a virtuoso and was used to playing solo. Chris Smither is like that – a one man show, and not used to being



Dave Alvin live at the Troubadour in W. Hollywood. 7/2/2022

Dave Alvin posting on facebook: "My wild, old road pal Ramblin' Jack Elliot came to watch Friday evening's acoustic song swap by Jimmie Dale Gilmore, the amazing Laurie Lewis and me at the final Kate Wolf Festival.

It was a hot afternoon so Jack skipped wearing a shirt. I guess when you're a iconic folk music legend you can do such things and always look cool. It's a good thing I'm not an iconic folk music legend

because I don't think it's a look I could ever successfully pull off.

Jack said he would've come to our electric, rockin' full band show on the main stage at the fest the night before but he said my band and I play a bit too loud for his delicate ears. Well, whether you like your folk music loud or quiet, you'll get a bit of both at tonight's (Saturday) show at The Guild Theater in Menlo Park. The Guild is a new venue that I haven't played at yet but I hear nothing but good things about it. I sincerely hope to see some of you there. Maybe bring earplugs, though, if your ears are as delicate as Jack's. Oh, and you should maybe wear a shirt as well."



in a band format. Kelly Joe was a thinking man's musician. I liked the expansiveness of his playing - songs became jams and that was challenging. We talked a lot about song structure and the architecture of songs. He had a jazz background, so his style was a little more free-form, which made it unique in a blues format. He was a complicated guy and we had long conversations on different subjects and we didn't always agree. My favorite gig with him was at Skipper's Smokehouse in Tampa, FL during a hurricane. We went to play at the local radio station as the hurricane was starting. Then that evening we did the outdoor gig as the wind was blowing heavy and no one in the audience seemed to be worried [laughs].

AM: Will there be any special promo for the book release in September?

Dave: That's up to the publisher. Well probably do some interviews and podcasts. When the memoir comes out, maybe I'll do a book tour and readings.

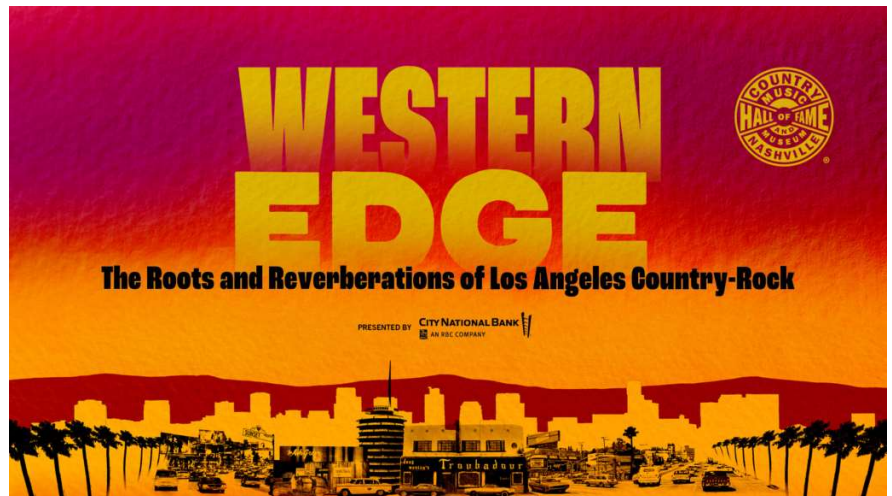
AM: We're so glad to have you back.

Dave: Thanks. The rest of the year I want to record and hopefully work on a new Dave Alvin record. —**AM**

Nashville TN - The Country Music Hall of Fame Recognizes California Country and Roots Rock in a New Exhibit

The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum debuts a new exhibit called Western Edge: The Roots and Reverberations of Los Angeles Country-Rock. The opening will be on September 30, 2022 with a weekend of live concerts at the Troubadour in Los Angeles and the museum's Ford Theater in Nashville.

The exhibit will run for the next three years in the Nashville museum's 5,000-square-foot gallery, displaying instruments, stage outfits, handwritten song lyrics, over 40 hours of filmed interviews, photographs, and performance clips, of California artists. The release of a book coinciding with the exhibit will have essays and comments by Californians such as Dave Alvin and a main contribution



written by L.A. Times music journalist Randy Lewis.

Western Edge will examine the close-knit communities of Los Angeles-based singers, songwriters and musicians who, from the 1960s to the 1980s, embraced country music and created and shaped the musical fusion known as “country-rock.”- bands featured are The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, Linda Ronstadt, Michael Nesmith, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Poco, the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Eagles, Rick Nelson, Emmy Lou Harris, and the roots-rock movement of the The Blasters, Los Lobos, Rosie Flores, and Lone Justice.

Dave Alvin told American Music: “It’s neat! [laughs] – for a few reasons. First, because California is represented in the building in Nashville, Tennessee. I spent time in Nashville about 30 years ago working as a songwriter and California wasn’t respected very much. So, it’s great now to have that recognition and respect happening. Secondly, It’s great that they want to document the Blasters history. They interviewed me for 3 and a half hours in January before my surgery and I gave the Blasters side of the story. It’s a really big deal. AND my Mustang guitar is in the Country Hall of Fame Museum for the next three years! It means a lot to me.” —~~AM~~



VARIOUS CITIES - JUNE 22: This 1964 Fender Mustang was the first electric guitar owned by Dave Alvin. It was Alvin’s primary guitar on stage with the Blasters and the Knitters. On display at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum’s announcement of the major new exhibition *Western Edge: The Roots and Reverberations of Los Angeles Country-Rock* at The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum on June 22, 2022 in Nashville, TN. The exhibition will open on September 30, 2022. (Photo by Brett Carlsen/Getty Images for Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum)

Dave Alvin Gets on Board for a Railroad Concept Album

by Tom Wilk

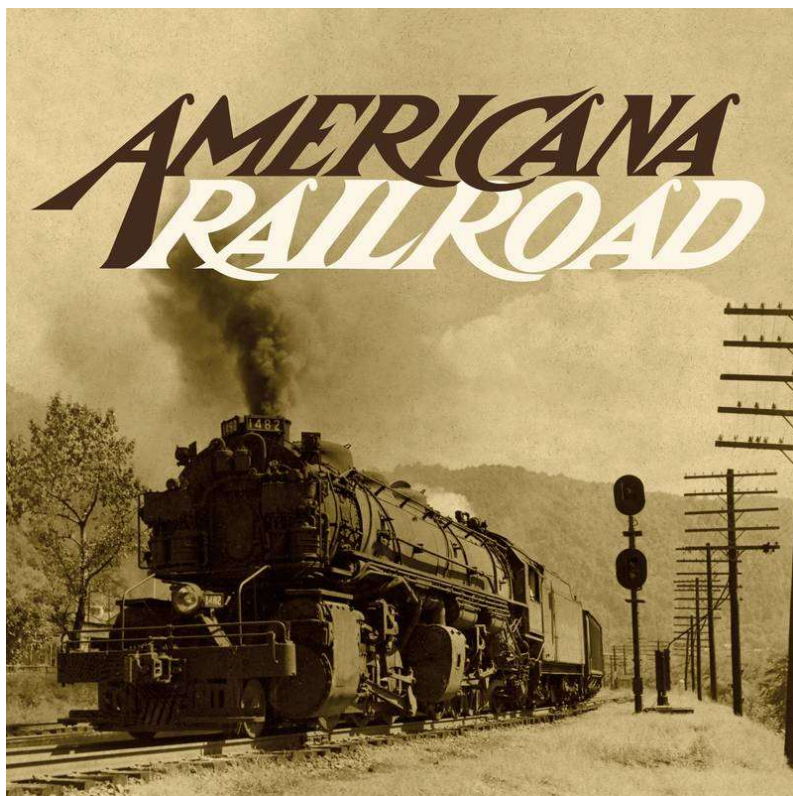
From JUBILEE TRAIN on the Blasters' Non-Fiction album to ENGINE 143 on his Grammy-winning Public Domain CD, Dave Alvin has drawn artistic inspiration from railroads and train imagery.

He continues that tradition with SOUTHWEST CHIEF, his contribution to Americana Railroad (Renew/BMG), a collection of 18 classic, traditional, and contemporary songs celebrating the history of trains that was put together by Carla Olson and Saul Davis.

Credited to Dave and singer/songwriter Bill Morrissey, SOUTHWEST CHIEF is named for the Amtrak train that runs between Chicago and Los Angeles. It captures the sense of freedom and adventure that comes with railroad travel that Dave has experienced on his Roots on the Rails trips. "Southwest Chief/Let your whistle blow/Wherever you're headin'/I want to go," Dave sings on a mid-tempo track that would be at home on his Blackjack David album. Dave elaborated later and said: "Bill and I were trying to write a song together many years ago and he had hummed this melody. That's about it. The words are all mine."

In a later verse of the song, he offers a reflection on Morrissey, who died at 59 in July 2011, and the transitory nature of life. "I'm remembering my dear friend Bill Morrissey/We were going to write a song, but it never came to be," he sings. "Make it a blues, he said/Sweet, tough, and sincere/'Cause they only come around once/And then we disappear."

Olson, who produced SOUTHWEST CHIEF, reflected on working with Dave. "Dave and I always planned to work together on a song or project, but came up empty until the Americana Railroad album. Taking up my offer to record a train song, Dave showed up at the studio with an original, he was still writing words to on a single piece of notebook paper." Olson



told Glide magazine. “Dave reminds us all how fleeting life is as he laments the passing of a friend with whom a song they promised to write together never came to be,” she added.

As a performer, Olson and Stephen McCarthy start and finish Americana Railroad with a pair of songs. HERE COMES THE TRAIN AGAIN, a McCarthy-penned song, is a vibrant opener while I REMEMBER THE RAILROAD revisits the Gene Clark original from his 1973 Roadmaster album.

Other songs on the album feature contributions from occasional collaborators with Dave. James Intveld sings a soulful version of MYSTERY TRAIN, one of Elvis Presley’s singles on Sun Records. James also plays lead guitar on a rockabilly rendition of the same song by Rocky Burnette. Peter Case’s exuberant version of the traditional THIS TRAIN has echoes of Woody Guthrie.

As trains travel across a wide variety of landscapes, the performances on Americana Railroad span the musical spectrum. Gary Myrick injects a surf-rock feel to TRAIN KEPT’ A-ROLLIN while John Fogerty turns Steve Goodman’s CITY OF NEW ORLEANS into a family affair with the help of two sons and his youngest daughter on guitar, bass, and vocals. Paul Birch evokes the spirit of Jimmie Rodgers on WAITIN’ FOR A TRAIN with Fats Kaplin on Dobro and Deborah Poppink brings out the gospel fervor of Curtis Mayfield’s PEOPLE GET READY. —Am

Bruce Bromberg: A Life in Music

By Tom Wilk

As a songwriter, producer, and record company owner, Bruce Bromberg shaped the sound of a wide range of artists, including Lightnin’ Hopkins, Robert Cray, and Dave Alvin.

Bromberg, who died at 80 on Dec. 27, 2021, made his biggest impact with HighTone Records, the California-based label he co-founded with Larry Sloven in 1983, which the two men ran until 2008. Sloven provided financing for the label with \$25,000 he inherited from his grandfather.

Although associated with the blues, HighTone’s roster of artists spanned the spectrum of American music with new and archival releases by Cray, Dave Alvin, Phil Alvin, The Blasters, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Katy Moffatt, Rosie Flores, Joe Louis Walker, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Chris Smither, Chris Gaffney and Tom Russell among others.



Dave Alvin, Bruce Bromberg, and Larry Sloven

“I don't think we ever thought of it as anything other than singer-songwriters,” Bromberg recalled of his intentions for HighTone in a 2008 interview with Goldmine magazine. “We started as a blues label, which is what I did before HighTone,” he noted.

In addition to Lightnin’ Hopkins, Bromberg produced albums for Driftin’ Slim, Phillip Walker, Lonesome Sundown, Tony Mathews, and Ted Hawkins on a variety of labels. “My taste was country and blues. We became involved with many singer-songwriters, Bromberg said. “I was closer to the blues people than the folksingers, with exception of the Austin acts, many of whom I worked with ... I was way into Joe Ely; he produced his own albums and the first Gilmore for us. I worked with the harder country people such as Heather Myles, Dale Watson, Ted Roddy, Lonesome Strangers, and Dallas Wayne.”

In an email interview, Sloven credited Bromberg’s personality and musical curiosity with HighTone’s success. “Bruce was known to almost everyone who met him as a supportive and friendly person. There have been so many comments since his passing from artists we worked with together on how Bruce was so encouraging to them. In part it was just the way he was in general,” Sloven recalled.

“In other part, it was that he so much loved good music of many different styles. In addition to his work as a producer and songwriter, he had an extraordinary record collection. He had the highest level collection of blues 78s. He also had an immense collection of LPs and 45s which included deep archives of country, blues, jazz, reggae, gospel and cajun music. He spent a lot of time listening to those records and it gave him a great foundation as a producer and songwriter,” Sloven added.

HighTone got off to a strong start with its initial release, the Robert Cray Band’s album Bad Influence featuring the song PHONE BOOTH. Produced by Bromberg and Dennis Walker, the album received airplay on Album-Oriented Radio, blues stations, and college radio. “After quite a few years producing records, it was very exciting to have one get a lot attention and actually sell,” Bromberg told writer Lee Hildebrand for the liner notes of American Music: The HighTone Records Story, a box set released in 2006.

HighTone built on that foundation in 1986 with Cray’s Strong Persuader album, produced again by Bromberg and Walker. The LP sold more than a million copies and reached No. 13 on Billboard’s Top 200 albums. SMOKING GUN, a single co-written by Bromberg under the alias David Amy, reached No. 22 on the singles charts.

Sloven offered an analysis of Bromberg’s production skills. “One of Bruce’s strongest points as a producer, in my opinion, was that he acted as a conduit for the artists he worked with to achieve their best, not to mold them in his own image,” he noted. “It was interesting to me to observe him working in the studio, gently guiding artists, not confronting or badgering. He avoided confrontation and that worked to his advantage in getting results.”

In a 1993 interview with Mike Boehm of The Los Angeles Times, Dave Alvin spoke of working with Bromberg, who co-produced Blue Blvd and Museum of Heart and co-wrote two songs with Dave on the latter album (THIRTY DOLLAR ROOM and DEVIL’S WIND).

“Bruce has produced everyone from Lightning Hopkins to Robert Cray. He’s done so many blues albums, he could say, ‘I’ve heard that [solo] before; you can do better.’ He was pushing me on Blue Blvd and Museum of Heart to play more guitar, and he kind of got the performances out of me,” Dave recalled. “It’s not just [a matter of] practice and playing gigs. It’s finding your own voice and not being afraid to try things.”

Bromberg and Sloven sold HighTone to Shout! Factory in 2008, ending a 25-year run for the friends and business partners.

In 2016, Bromberg was honored as one of the premier producers of blues and roots music of the past 40 years with induction into the Blues Hall of Fame. —~~AM~~

A Conversation with HighTone Records President Larry Sloven

HighTone Records was a career highlight for label co-founders Bruce Bromberg and Larry Sloven and spotlighted the work of new and established artists. Between 1991 and 2002, HighTone released seven albums by Dave Alvin and two by the Blasters. Larry discussed the record company and its history in an email interview with Tom Wilk.

Q: How did you and Bruce met?

A: Bruce was my close friend since 1975. We met when I was working as a sales rep for Northern California independent distributor, Pacific Record and Tape. We had acquired the distribution of the Tomato Records label, and Bruce was the West Coast sales and promo rep for Tomato (he had previously worked for California Record Distributors and RCA distribution). Bruce also had his own little label, Joliet Records, that we picked up distribution for at the same time.

The first time Bruce came to the Bay Area to visit us, my boss Mike Paikos assigned me to take him around to visit the key Bay Area accounts (Tower Records at Columbus and Bay in San Francisco, Record Factory, some one-stops). When I played a cassette compilation of country and rockabilly tracks I had made as we drove around together, we immediately learned that we loved the same kind of music. And in true Bruce fashion, he insisted that instead of going to see all the targeted accounts, instead we went to collector's store, Jack's Record Cellar, where we spent too much time and bought a bunch of country 45s.

Q: How did HighTone get its name?

A: The label was named HighTone as a result of a discussion between me, Bruce and Bruce's wife Terri on the beach in Santa Monica near the Santa Monica Pier. Neither Bruce nor Terri remembered this in later years, but I did. I believe Terri suggested the name, Bruce was not in favor of it at first, but I was. To me, it suggested music made at a high level, and it also alluded to a somewhat outdated term that I identified with the Hank Williams song, "Move It on Over" (mindin' other people's business seems to be hightone).

Q: How many albums did HighTone put out in its 25-year history?

A: HighTone released approximately 300 albums. Of those, roughly 40 were on our Testament label which we acquired and released both reissues and entire albums of never released material of Delta and Chicago blues. We also issued two series of licensed material from Highwater (Memphis area blues recorded by musicologist David Evans) and Rollin' Rock (Ronnie Weiser's garage rockabilly recordings—our release of the Blasters' American Music album was separate from this reissue series). We had three CDs on HighTone Latino—norteno music, and 14 dancehall reggae compilations on Outa!/HighTone, the work of reggae expert Charlie Morgan. We also had a few releases that we produced that bore the HighTone logo on major labels. including Robert Cray on Mercury/HighTone and Chris Thomas on Sire/Warner/HighTone.

Q: What are your memories of how Dave Alvin became a HighTone artist?

A: The motivation to sign Dave Alvin came from me. I was a fanatic Blasters fan—Bruce was only vaguely aware of them. But Dave was a fan of Bruce's from his production work with Lightnin' Hopkins, Long Gone Miles, etc. But those connections came together to a very long, happy and productive relationship amongst the three of us.

After we had met with Dave and Shelly Heber to discuss signing him, Bruce and I went to see Dave sit in with Dave Gonzalez at a gig at the Belly Up in Solana Beach. It struck me as crazy that Dave expressed nervousness at us being there—here was this guy that I thought was the ultimate rock and roll songwriter and guitarist and he's nervous that we were there. In retrospect, I think it was a combination of Dave's humility and his reverence for Bruce's work. —~~Am~~

Dave Alvin Remembers Bruce Bromberg

I'd seen Bruce's name on blues reissues albums when I was a kid - albums by Elmore James, The Soulsters, and Howlin' Wolf. Then in the 1980s, I saw he was recording Robert Cray. When I finally met him I felt like I knew him all my life. We were really close and it's why I stayed on HighTone so long. I really loved Bruce. We cracked each other up. He would give me advice on my relationships and we'd get together and have a few beers - he was that kind of friend. A week before I won the Grammy, Bruce and I took a trip to Mississippi and Tennessee for a week visiting things like Charley Patton's grave, Sonny Boy Williamson's grave and his old apartment. With our connections, we found out where all these places were. We visited a lot of graves and I left a pick at each one. We saw a great blues show

in Helena, Arkansas.

The last trip I took with Bruce was in 2015, when the Dave and Phil Big Bill Broonzy record was nominated for best traditional blues at the blues awards in Memphis. Bruce was already in the blues Hall of Fame, so we couldn't go without Bruce. But the Alzheimer's made it very difficult. It was hard to see him like that.

He was very soulful and in our darkest times he was the guiding light. When I had my cancer, I couldn't even go out to say goodbye to him, but he was already gone a long time. I realized it when I called him one night in about 2018. He said: "You're a really nice guy, Dave. You should have been on HighTone Records" —~~Am~~

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