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American Music

The Blasters/Dave Alvin newsletter

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Dave Alvin & Phil Alvin: The Common Ground Interview

Latest news: Dave Alvin was featured in an interview in the August issue of Uncut magazine (Eric Clapton is on the cover). Uncut ran a two-part series on Bob Dylan. Dave was interviewed for a sidebar about his session work with Dylan in 1986. It's the most detailed explanation of his work with Dylan. Dave describes playing guitar with Dylan on a wide variety of songs, including YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE, from the 1945 Broadway musical Carousel. None of the songs have been released. -- Dave Alvin is one of the musicians interviewed in Billy Mize and the Bakersfield Sound, a documentary on the longtime country musician from California. Mize's songs have been recorded by Waylon Jennings, Jerry Lee Lewis, Barbara Mandrell and Dean Martin. Dave recorded Mize's WHO WILL BUY THE WINE as a digital single for Yep Roc and also has performed the song in concert. Other musicians interviewed include Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson and Ray Price. At 59, Mize suffered a stroke and lost the ability to speak and play guitar. Now 85, Mize regained the ability to sing after a long rehabilitation. (billymizemovie.com) -- Dave Alvin is interviewed in Rich Hall's California Stars, a documentary on what it means to succeed in The Golden State. Hall, a comedian and author, wrote the script for the film, which was directed by Chris Cottam. The 90-minute movie made its debut on BBC television in July. -- Don Heffington, who has drummed on several Dave Alvin albums including Common Ground, has released Gloryland, a solo album that is described as 'avant garde' or 'avant-Americana.' On the CD Baby Web site, it says "Don Heffington steps out from behind the drums to sing 10 original songs in an unconventional and somewhat abstract recording which you will either love or hate." For more information on Gloryland, visit cdbaby.com/cd/donheffington2. -- Dave Alvin performs LINK OF CHAIN, the title track to Link of Chain: A Songwriters' Tribute to Chris Smither on Signature Sounds records due out September 30th. Dave's recording kicks off the 15-song CD backed by Danny Ott (electric guitar), Don Heffington (drums) and Dave Carpenter (bass). Other artists include Loudon Wainwright III, Mary Gauthier, Bonnie Raitt and Peter Case. -- Guilty Ones' drummer Lisa Pankratz posted a humorous anecdote on her Facebook page: "How to make a drummer feel a little "dummer"... Phil Alvin can do a long mic check using only prime numbers. I, on the other hand, can count to 3 or 4 over and again for several minutes at a time." -- Dave Alvin has scheduled a West of the West train trip for April 17-27, 2015. The trip begins and ends in Los Angeles and stops in Austin, Denver, Chicago and Emeryville, Calif. (rootsontherails.com) -- Dave Alvin wrote the introduction for I Apologize in Advance for the Awful Things I'm Gonna Do, a collection of haiku by Danny Bland, who serves as his road manager. (((Latest News Continues Page 2)))

In This Issue: Dave & Phil Alvin On Common Ground, Keith Wyatt on The Blasters Midwest tour, and Mike Watt.

((Latest News continued)) Published by Sub Pop, it's available through the Sub-Pop Mega Mart and Amazon. The 120-page, full-color paperback edition features photography by Greg Dulli (leader of The Afghan Whigs and The Twilight Singers) and calligraphy by Exene Cervenka (of the band X). In his introduction, Dave writes: "[Danny's] deeply personal haiku are funny, serious, painful, and fearless. At times shocking, then abruptly, surprisingly tender, his poems constantly question accepted beliefs and attitudes, both society's and his own. Like the classic blues singers, Danny is able to use a limited form to express the limitless." Danny's previous book was the novel In Case We Die, published in 2013 by Fantagraphics Books. -- Tulare Dust, the 1995 HighTone records tribute to Merle Haggard will see a re-released. Rumor has it being accompanied by bonus live songs from a live show the artists did at the Fillmore in San Francisco in on April 15, 1995. -- Dave Alvin: "I've been a fan of guitarist/singer/songwriter Annie McCue for many years so I'm very honored and happy about singing with her on a damn fine song for her upcoming album Blue Sky Thinkin'. She wrote the song with John Hadley and the brilliant David Olney. You can't go wrong with such talent." - ~~AM~~



Photo by Beth Herzhaft

It's been 30 years since Dave Alvin and Phil Alvin recorded a studio album. The last one was The Blasters Hardline album on Slash Records in 1984. Their reputation as 'battling brothers' may have been exaggerated over the years, but it always gave the press something to write about - which is good for band publicity. As their musical bond stretched in different directions over the years, the bond of family was always there. The brothers saw many friends and family pass in recent years and it brought them to the realization that family is most important and that time is short. Phil and Dave really enjoy each other's company now, which has taken them back to explore their childhood musical roots together. Blues singer and guitar player Big Bill Broonzy was always a favorite of the Alvins, and that is where they find their Common Ground.

American Music: How did this project start?

Dave: I really wanted to record songs with Phil. I didn't want to write a bunch, because it would take forever. I didn't want to do a Blasters record, because there would be a lot of pressure in that regard. I said: "Let's record some stuff," because we both liked Big Bill Broonzy.

Phil: I got a call from David who said I would help him out of a jam if I could do an EP with him for Yep Roc records who wanted something to release for record store day. He said it would be Big Bill Broonzy songs, so I said 'sure.'

AM: How did you pick the songs and prepare them?

Phil: When it was gonna be just an EP, it was easy to pick songs because either I was singing them for years or they were our favorite Big Bill songs. The first Big Bill album we had called Big Bill Blues, had TRUCKIN' LITTLE WOMAN, FEEL SO GOOD, JUST A DREAM and ALL BY MYSELF on it.

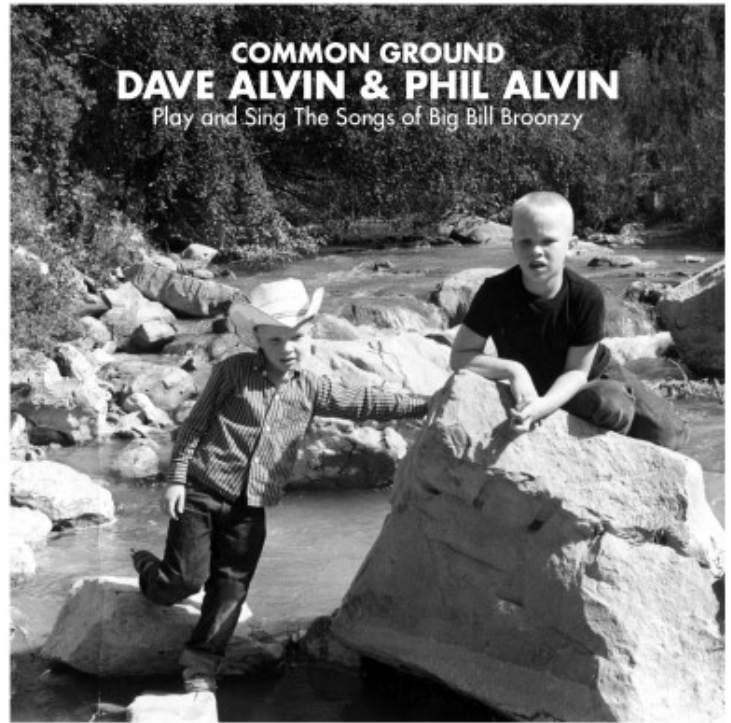
Dave: We did it all over the phone. We had a lot of discussion because some are exactly like the originals and some aren't even close. I called him and played him the ideas and he agreed; then the next day we cut it. The thing about most of these songs that Phil sings, he's been singing them since he was about 12 years old. It's not like they are new songs that you have to feel your way around.

So we recorded 5 songs for an EP with the rhythm section of Bob Glaub and Don Hefington. They turned out so good in those first sessions that Yep Roc said: "Let's make it a full album."

Phil: David called and told me Yep Roc wants to do a whole album and we would have to tour behind it, so I said, "Okay."

AM: Now that the album is out for 3 months, how are things going?

Phil: The album took off and it was number 1 on the blues charts for a few weeks. Now I'm suddenly on the road all the time with David and also with the Blasters. Lots of people are coming out to the shows. That would have happened anyway just because it's Dave and Phil back together again, but most of the shows have been sold out and the press seems to like the album. The last time I did this many interviews was when we put out the first Blasters record. People really like to see me and David together under any conditions. The album was done very fast, but was fun to do. It was a whirlwind that I was swept up in and I'm still being swept up in it. Between this and the Blasters, it's been a lot of work. But I like playing with David, and The Guilty Ones band are very good.



The Songs

ALL BY MYSELF

Phil: That's a classic Big Bill Broonzy song, though a lot of people know it by Fats Domino. It wasn't a big hit but most of the stuff Fats did got a lot of airplay. And I don't

think they gave Big Bill enough credit for writing it. We did it in the style of an earlier Big Bill song from the 30's called LONG TALL WOMAN which is a solo guitar extravaganza by Big Bill. It's one of his great stylistic numbers. Gene Taylor originally taught me the turn-around to that song way before the Blasters started. I used to be able to play LONG TALL WOMAN by myself pretty dang good - but not anymore. So David and I are doubling parts on that.

Dave: That was the first song we did. I put the lyrics of ALL BY MYSELF with the music of LONG TALL WOMAN cause the original is more of a piano piece - the first song really should be a Dave and Phil guitar song. I thought it was funny to switch off verses because we say "I can do it all by myself," but it's obviously not (laughs). I thought it was a funny way of dealing with the Alvin brothers feud. I use my 1934 National Steel guitar on most of the record, when an acoustic is required, so when Phil is playing the Martin acoustic - it sounds like two different guitars

I FEEL SO GOOD

Phil: I used to sing that on occasion with Gene Taylor. David says onstage, I've been singing it since I heard it. It's a favorite, but not one that I did very much. I had a good 78 of that. I think it was one of the first 78s I found after knowing who Big Bill was. The original doesn't have electric guitar; it has piano, acoustic guitar, drums and bass in the bluebird style that Big Bill was associated with. Anytime



Big Bill Broonzy

you get David and me playing and there's an electric guitar, it's gonna sound like a Blasters song - so it does. Big Bill affords liberal interpretations of his songs.

Dave: Gene Taylor is playing piano. It's one we added when we decided to do a full album. So at the second set of sessions, we had Brad & Lisa (from the Guilty Ones) play.

HOW YOU WANT IT DONE

Phil: Hollywood Fats and I used to listen to HOW YOU WANT IT DONE and marvel at Big Bill's flat picking. I used to attempt to play that one on electric guitar. Nobody really plays it right. It's a very hard song to play. That was one of the few things in this project that David and I had an argument about. When we started these sessions, he was really playing a bluegrass version of this. I think he did a version as a bonus track for an album (Black Jack David, 1998 HighTone Records) that was a sort-of bluegrass version of it.

The performance by Big Bill on the original is just phenomenal - that he's singing and playing it on a single guitar. It's a style of guitar playing originated by a guy named Louie Lasky. Although Louie Lasky had recorded that guitar style behind some classic female blues singers starting in the early 1920's, he really didn't make any records in his name before Big Bill recorded HOW YOU WANT IT DONE in 1932. Lasky made records under his name in 1935 using a 12-string guitar and he's phenomenal. You should hear that. Louie's version of HOW YOU WANT IT DONE was called HOW YOU

WANT YOUR ROLLIN' DONE. Even though he recorded his version after Big Bill, Big Bill probably heard Louie play it live somewhere. Big Bill gave credit to Louis Lasky as one of the guys who influenced him. In fact, we put in a line from Louie Lasky's version, the line: "I can get religion baby and walk the sacred way." For Big Bill stylistically on guitar, it comes out of nowhere - especially if you're not familiar with Louie Lasky. I heard the Louie Lasky records later than Big Bill, but you can hear that Big Bill is playing Lasky's style.

A few years ago I was at Mike Keifer's house. He's a musicologist who has one of the greatest record collections. He played for me a 1924 recording of a female singer named Anna Lee Chisholm singing COOL KIND DADDY BLUES with Louie Lasky playing that kind of double-picking guitar. So that was back in 1924.

Dave: That's the only song we had a disagreement on. Whenever we played that song as kids, we played it (to not get too technical) in the E position on the guitar. Then a few years ago with the dawn of YouTube, the Pete Seeger films of the late 40s (from the DVD: A Musical Journey: The Films of Pete, Toshi and Dan Seeger) popped up with Big Bill playing that song for about a minute, but he stops and starts laughing because it's so hard to play. So when I saw that film, he was playing in a G position and I said: "Oh, I get it now. That's how he does it." When Phil and I started working on this song, Phil said it was in the E position. I said: "It's in the G position and I have film of it (laughs)." So I showed it to him. So it was really a discussion of one note that I was leaving out. Phil was saying you have to play the F#, that's the whole trick. So we didn't record it the day of that big discussion, but I went home and listened to it. I came back the next day and said: "Yup. You're right. Ya gotta play the F#." We cut it with me and Don (on drums) playing, but then we overdubbed Brad playing the upright bass. The version on the Record Store Day EP doesn't have the bass on it - because we had to get the songs out in time for an April EP release. I played my Martin DC Aura on this.

SOUTHERN FLOOD BLUES

Dave: I was going for a Dave Alvin-style song because Phil is, all in all, a better singer in the classic sense of Big Bill Broonzy. So when I was picking songs for myself, I



thought: "What songs can I make into Dave Alvin songs?" So I did a combination of Big Bill and Magic Sam on this one.

Phil: I didn't have a lot to do with that one. It's really a Dave Alvin song and very different from the original. I played the harmonica on it but there wasn't much room to do anything in there. That's one complaint I have that there is really no need for harmonica - the lick keeps going on over and over again. But for it to be a Dave and Phil song, I have to do something on it.

BIG BILL BLUES

Phil: That's a song that I have always sung since I first heard the Big Bill Blues record. I always loved the chord progression and Big Bill's voice in that song. It was the first Big Bill song I really liked. I met Gene Taylor a couple of years afterwards and he could mimic the piano - that was heaven to me. We may have even done it a few times in a Blaster show, just me and Gene playing. I think the original piano player was Joshua Altheimer who was on a lot of Big Bill songs. There was also Blind John Davis and Memphis Slim sometimes on piano. It's a standard bluebird blues. I liked the guitar part - that was one of the earliest Big Bill guitar parts I learned.

Dave: On some songs Big Bill's bass lines that he plays with his thumb are very important, so to teach the songs to the other musicians, I would play just Broonzy's thumb bass parts to the bass players and drummers.

KEY TO THE HIGHWAY

Dave: It's been a guitar jam song for blues bands for years, but we didn't want to do it that way. We did the version with Jazz Gillam and a combination of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. We used to see those guys play when we were kids, and Phil got harmonica lessons from Sonny Terry - so this was a nod to them. The song is too common for blues fans - kind of the LOUIE LOUIE of the blues - but on the other hand it's a great song and I'm really happy with the way we did it. It has a swing to it. Phil plays his Gibson L4 guitar.

Phil: That's the most famous Big Bill song of all. There was some question as to whether we should put that on the album since it's Big Bill's best known song - but we decided it had to be. I mimic the harmonica from a version by a Jazz Gillum, who has kind of a strange style. It's got more harmonica in it than is necessary - like 5 choruses of harmonica - which is always too much. I love harmonica, but I like it sparingly.

TOMORROW

Phil: That's a strange Big Bill song because it's a sort-of swing number. It was the flip side of HEY HEY, which was another classic minor hit for Big Bill in 1951. This shows Big Bill's diversity - he could sing in so many different styles and play jazz. David thinks that it's sort of an answer to Lonnie Johnson's TOMORROW NIGHT. It had a catchy melody line that I used to sing all the time without any guitar. When we were picking songs, we thought it was a way of showing the breadth of Big Bill's stuff.

Dave: He cut that in the late 40s. We had it on a Mercury Records 45. As a swing song, it's the most un-Big Bill sounding song. All over the record there are all these little nods to various guitar players like Lonnie Johnson, Johnny Guitar Watson, and Paul Burlison. On this song, Gene is sounding like a young Count Basie. On my guitar solo I play a Lee Allen song in there. There's a quote from a Lee song called ROCKIN AT COSIMOS where



I play his lick on the guitar in this solo.

JUST A DREAM

Phil: That's another immediate favorite from the Big Bill Blues album. Years ago when I saw the Johnny Otis show with Eddie Vinson, he sang that song. I talked to Eddie afterwards and learned he was a Big Bill fan and he had met Big Bill and was really taken with him. That was the first song I ever played on a stage as a sit-in member. I sat in at a later Johnny Otis show and played harmonica on JUST A DREAM with Eddie Vinson. We became good friends, so doing that song again holds a special place for me.

Dave: Phil was very shy about playing his harmonica on this. One of the good things about this record is to get him to come out of his harmonica shell.

Photo by Beth Herzhaft



YOU'VE CHANGED

Dave: I took the guitar part from another Big Bill song called HEY HEY. That one had two saxophones, piano, bass, and drums. It was a jump blues but I didn't want to have all the other instruments on this record. I wanted the focus to be on me and Phil. I wanted it to sound like if John Lee Hooker recorded at Sun Records with Billy Lee Riley's band. It was a way of personalizing the song and I added the chorus. I give Phil all the fa-

mous songs on this album (laughs).

Phil: That's another Dave Alvin-style song that I didn't have much to do with. The melody is played to Big Bill's HEY HEY - a Big Bill Hit in the 50s. It was the flip-side of TOMORROW.

THE STUFF THEY CALL MONEY

Phil: That was a Big Bill and Washboard Sam song. They played together a lot. Washboard Sam is a good vocalist. I never heard that song before. David found it and turned it from a Hokum song to a Jimmy Reed kind of a thing.

Dave: Musically it's entirely different than the one Big Bill did with Washboard Sam which was real fast, and kind-of ragtime. I didn't want to cut it that way because we already had a few like that. I liked the lyrics, so I thought let's do it like Jimmy Reed. I knew it would be a good song because Phil plays that kind of harmonica great. I also wanted one we could swap verses on. On my guitar solo, I'm summoning the ghost of Johnny Guitar Watson.

TRUCKIN' LITTLE WOMAN

Dave: When we cut that, Gene wasn't there, so I did the boogie-woogie left hand on the guitar and there you have a Blasters song. That one goes over real well live.

Phil: When we found that Big Bill Blues album, that was right around the time R. Crumb had the 'Keep On Truckin' slogan thing out - which had nothing to do with this

song. The song was off color where he says: "Truckin' mother fa-ya," which for us young kids was very meaningful to us as just post-pubescent. It has a great boogie-woogie beat to it - another song that Gene and I used to play a lot.

SATURDAY NIGHT RUB

Phil: That's a fantastic ragtime song that Big Bill and Henry Thompson on second guitar did. It's such a smooth rolling song. It's a classic rag, but the actual guitar bass line parts are really difficult to play. We really played the top lines on that and the bass and drums pick up the bass parts. This one really showed how well Bill played in the early days, and it followed through into his early 30s recordings with Georgia Tom Dorsey and the Hokum Boys. At the time of this song in about 1930, Big Bill had just mastered the guitar. He started out as a fiddle player.

Dave: That was one of the hardest things to record. We've played it for 4 months on the road, so we've got it now. It was the last thing we recorded. In the studio for most of the songs, Phil played my Martin DC Aura which is what I use in live acoustic shows.

The Artwork

Phil: On the album cover that's the Kern River about 1961. I remember we would go out there once a year, go fishing at Lake Isabella and at the Kern River. We would hike along the river and stay at a lodge.

Dave: We would take vacations there. My father was a good photographer. He photographed us for the Blasters Rollin Rock album too. The rest of the photos were taken by the Los Angeles River. There is about an 8 mile stretch by my house that looks like that. They are gradually restoring the river back to the wild, where it's not cemented up. So it's like the DRY RIVER song is coming true. They're doing it with the San Gabriel River, too.—~~AM~~

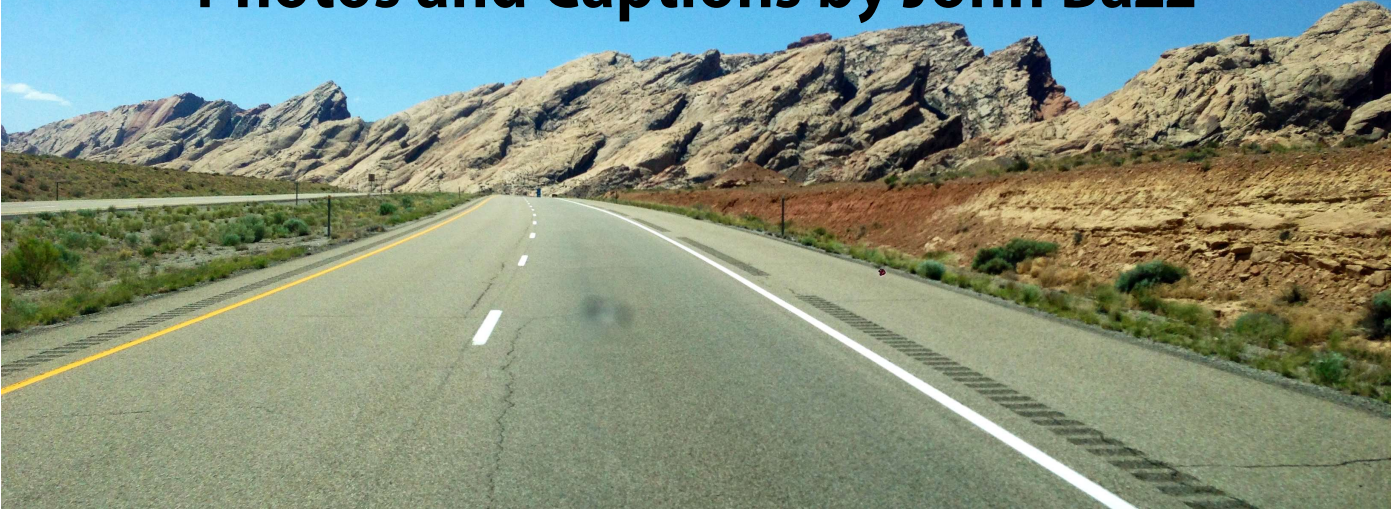


Photo by Beth Herzhaft

The Blasters On Tour

Midwest, May, 2014 by Keith Wyatt

Photos and Captions by John Bazz



The Blasters' year began in late January with successful runs through Texas and Southern California but as Phil became more occupied by doing shows with his brother Dave in support of Common Ground, an album of Big Bill Broonzy songs, the next opportunity for a Blasters tour didn't come until May, with the itinerary covering the Midwest from Salt Lake City to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Given various scheduling conflicts, there was no time to rehearse in advance of the tour, but after this many years, the arrangements are so familiar that rehearsing is more of a luxury than a requirement. In any case, the hardest part of playing a Blaster show after a long layoff is not remembering parts, but regaining the strength and energy that are needed to make it all the way to the end, and rehearsals just can't duplicate the intensity of being on stage in front of an audience.

A couple of days before the first show, we loaded the gear into Phil's van. Bill and our roadie Jaime set out on the drive to SLC while the rest of us (Phil, Johnny and me) waited to fly in on the day of the show. The first venue was Burt's Tiki Lounge, a small but vibe-heavy bar that shows signs of hard use. Being a Sunday in a religious town, SLC was extremely quiet with most stores and restaurants closed and the streets nearly deserted, but by show time an enthusiastic crowd had assembled and they quickly helped us get back on our feet.

The next day was spent making the long (500+) mile drive from SLC to Denver. May is still late winter in the Rockies, so we had a close eye on the weather. Fortunately, Interstate 80 across southern Wyoming was clear and dry, and the endless miles of snow fences along the highway held just the melting remnants of drifts (a few days later, another blizzard closed the same road). We arrived in Denver in good shape and checked into the hotel on Colfax Avenue. The area has changed considerably since our last visit



Outdoor Store, Laramie, CO

there several years ago; Colfax, which runs through the heart of downtown, still attracts its share of tweakers and panhandlers but also features an increasing number of bars, coffeehouses and restaurants, with nearby Trader Joe's and Whole Foods signaling an upscale demographic shift. Like LA, Denver first emerged as a major city in the early 1900s, but unlike LA's unfortunate tradition of tearing down older structures, Denver still has many brick and stone buildings from that era, often nicely restored, that lend the downtown neighborhoods a feeling of solidity and tradition.

The Denver shows were at the Lion's Lair, a small but long-established and locally legendary venue that features national names like John Doe and Jonathan Richman among the regular schedule of indie artists. Despite being on Tuesday and Wednesday, both shows were packed and many who attended the first night returned for the second. Coming on the heels of our SLC warm-up show, the band was focused and the crowd response was strong. In the past we have played larger venues in Denver such as the Bluebird and Gothic theaters, but the intimate size and classic bar vibe of the Lion's Lair seemed to concentrate the crowd's energy, and the shows were rewarding on every level.



World Famous Lion's Lair



Lion's Lair side door

years ago. Rock Island is what booking agents call a "routing gig," meaning the town isn't big enough to be a destination in its own right but is just right to fill an empty date enroute between larger cities. If there was ever a contest to identify the heart of the Heartland, Rock Island/Davenport would be in the running; it's surrounded by miles of farmland with the mighty Mississippi running through the center and neighborhoods that looked unchanged since the '30s. In LA, you drive ten minutes and you're barely out of your own neighborhood; in Rock Island, ten minutes takes you clear out of town. The people we met were extremely friendly without the ironic, blasé attitude that is so typical in LA; there are plenty of problems facing that part of the country too, but a shortage of graciousness is not one of them.

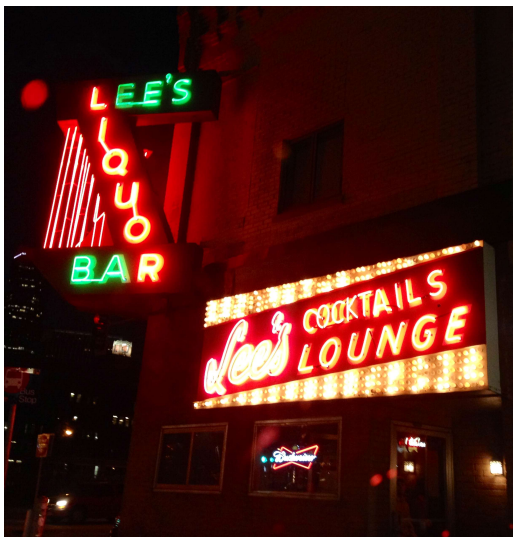
Sunday took us back down the river to St. Louis. We got into

Thursday was another travel day, with an even longer (600+ miles) drive straight across the plains from Denver to Kansas City, but despite reports of tornados in all directions, the weather cooperated again. The venue in KC was Knucklehead's, a unique indoor/outdoor club located literally feet from an active rail yard with freight trains rumbling past day and night. With the weather on hold, it was a perfect evening to spend outdoors and the turnout was strong. KC is the historic home of many legendary musicians including Pete Johnson and Count Basie as well as Phil's mentor, Big Joe Turner, so that night we encored with a very fast Big Joe medley. Coming at the end of a long set it took every remaining iota of energy to get through it, but the crowd gave it all right back.

Our next destination was Rock Island, Illinois, just across the Mississippi river from Davenport, Iowa. The venue, Rock Island Brewing, has been around for long enough that fans reminisced about seeing Muddy Waters perform there many



Milwaukee, WI



other hefty drive up to Milwaukee, but with two days off we could afford a more leisurely pace. In a matter of hours, the weather went from muggy Midwest heat to lake-effect chill and after arriving in Milwaukee, extreme weather alarms started going off as violent pockets of rain, hail, and wind moved through. Fortunately, no major harm was done and with conditions stabilizing we spent the next afternoon buying new tires for the van; it's not the most relaxing or enjoyable way to spend a day off, but the last thing any band can afford is to risk missing a show by blowing off preventive maintenance.

Wednesday night we played at the Potawatomi Casino, a new venue just south of downtown Milwaukee that has emerged as one of the best music rooms in the city. It is well-equipped and very professional, with a classic casino showroom layout almost identical to the Nugget in Reno, but we did miss some of the informality and local vibe of our usual Milwaukee venue, Shank Hall. However, there's also a lot to be said for high-end audio, lighting, and



Lee's Liquor Lounge, Minneapolis, MN

town by mid-afternoon and went straight to a local radio station for a live performance/interview that was enjoyable but also mercifully brief since fatigue was already starting to set in after a couple of thousand miles of driving. St. Louis has been hard-hit by economic change and still seems to be caught between its industrial past and an uncertain future, but as in many similar cities people are converting some of the older, visually appealing and centrally-located neighborhoods into arts districts, including the one where the club, Off Broadway, is located. The combination of Mother's Day and Sunday night seemed to dampen the turnout (many old-school Blaster fans are now on the receiving end of Mother's Day, after all), but those who were there didn't hold back.

Monday meant another



Doghouse Javier (Matos) in Minneapolis

comfortable seating, and the turnout and response were both very good.

On Thursday we headed for Minneapolis to play at another venerable local institution, Lee's Liquor Lounge. Before the show, I met up with a friend from Musicians Institute in LA who is now the Dean at McNally-Smith, a contemporary music college in St. Paul. He took me out to see his spacious house south of town situated on a big plot of land surrounded by trees and adjacent to a lake – the postcard “land of a thousand lakes” image of Minnesota. However, he also pointed out how high the snow drifts had been just a few weeks earlier. Beauty comes at a price.

When we arrived at Lee's for the



I-90, Chicago, IL

well-established but more rock-oriented downtown club. The change in location probably deterred some of the regulars, but one of the goals on this tour was to branch out into different venues to reach new audiences, and the mix of ages and styles in the crowd seemed to reflect that.

Among the many attractions of Chicago is the food, and the next day we came across Bobak's, the "Home of Sausageology" near our hotel (they take cured meats very seriously in the upper Midwest). It is a Polish superstore – even the sodas and magazines at the checkout stand are flown in from Poland – and among a cornucopia of meats, sausages, and prepared foods you can get two Chicago hotdogs (pick your style of frank) for \$3.00. Pink's in LA also serves a good dog, but that's hard to beat.

That day's drive was thankfully just a few miles up to Evanston on Chicago's affluent North Shore. Normally two shows in such close proximity compete for the same audience and are therefore considered taboo, but in Chicago there seems to be little crossover between the suburban and downtown crowds. The venue, Space, includes an upscale pizza restaurant, a sit-down music venue holding a couple hundred people, and a recording studio/small performance space, all very comfortably equipped and with an extremely helpful staff. One of the club's managers is well-known Chicago blues guitarist Dave Specter. He played us tracks from his new solo record on Delmark featuring strong vocals from Otis Clay, including a standout version of the Falcons/Wilson Pickett classic I FOUND A LOVE, a favorite of Phil's that the Blasters have also experimented with on occasion. Dave is working hard to keep the Chicago blues scene alive – an ironic statement if there ever was one – and his apparent success with Space is a hopeful sign.

A Blasters set is intense by definition – as Phil says, "There are no easy Blaster songs" – and while we have learned over the years to adapt to a wide variety of venues from outdoor festivals to small clubs, properly managing the energy for a close-up, seated audience can be tricky. Fortunately, some rooms are set up so that they make a show feel more like an event and Space is one of them – when we took the stage to an immediate and enthusiastic response from a packed house

show, the place was packed with rock & roll fans of every description from 60-something originals to young hipsters. The long gap since the Blasters last appeared in Minneapolis apparently created pent-up demand and the crowd was going strong from the first note. The room was cool, the band played well, and the audience was great – all around, one of the better nights of the tour.

Friday included a long drive back to Chicago that culminated in an excruciating LA-style bumper-to-bumper crawl from the suburbs all the way downtown. For years, our exclusive Chicago venue has been Fitzgerald's in Berwyn, a renowned American Music mecca, but this time it was Reggie's on State Street, a



Dos Equis bandit, Chicago TV



Bill at Space, Evanston, IL

all concerns were laid to rest. Afterward, Dave (Specter) said: “We put on 300 shows a year and that was in the top three.” Audience appreciation is great, but nothing beats acknowledgement by your peers and the house staff who hear bands every night; when they like you enough to actually say so, it’s something special.

We spent Sunday, our last day off, driving northeast to Grand Rapids, Michigan, another first-time visit to a city off the beaten track. Cruising around town we came across Frank’s, a classic neighborhood Polish meat market that, like Bobak’s, is a reminder of the early waves of European immigration that shaped the culture of the Midwest. A young lady behind the counter proudly described the market’s 80-year history while a steady stream of locals came in to pick up brats and other specialties. With towns all across the country increasingly transforming into endless rows of



Top Jamie finds the way home

identical franchise restaurants and retailers, it’s refreshing to find establishments – usually in older, downtown areas that have seen some ups and downs – that provide a unique sense of place along with people who are proud of where they live, who they are, and what they do.

The Tip Top Lounge, our venue in Grand Rapids, was another one of those places – a small, unremarkable looking neighborhood bar that has hosted other LA-based artists including Big Sandy, Rosie Flores, Los Straitjackets, and Dave Alvin. A Monday night in a small bar in an unfamiliar town can be a lonely place, but we were very happy to find it packed with a diverse mix of people who also proved to be the most enthusiastic crowd of the tour. Some told us that they drove hours and stayed overnight to see the show, a humbling reminder that no matter how tiring the road may be at times, everyone who comes to see us has invested their own time and money and deserves the best we can offer. The Tip Top turned out to be a great finish to a very rewarding tour.

Tuesday morning brought the hard reality of over 2,000 miles of highway back to LA. Phil and I had opted to fly, so Johnny,

Bill and Jaime dropped us off in at

Midway Airport in Chicago and continued west on I-80, swapping driving chores until they arrived back in LA around midnight on Wednesday – a non-stop 36-hour haul. With no time to decompress, Bill jumped into Deke Dickerson’s van early Friday morning for a run to Northern California while Phil also headed north for shows with Dave Alvin preliminary to their lengthy summer tour that will include stops in most of the same cities we just played.

The next Blasters run will commence at the end of August in Atlanta and continue up the East coast as far as Buffalo before turning south to wind up in Washington, D.C., hitting a mix of familiar and new venues. It also gives us a chance to see old friends and – we hope – plenty of new faces. --AM



I-70, Colorado at 3:00 am



I-70 Utah. These mountains were the inspiration for the Disney theme attraction “Cars.”

Poetic inspiration for Mike Watt

by Tom Wilk

"Mike Watt is an immeasurably talented musician/poet, a constant leading figure in the alternative music world and his first band, The Minutemen, were one of the finest combos to ever step on a beer-soaked stage. So, I was deeply honored when his second band, FIREHOSE, cut this song a few years back. I have no idea what it's about and am way too shy to ever ask the incredible Mr. Watt. Nonetheless, I'm still deeply honored." -- Dave Alvin, Facebook post in April 2014, discussing SONG FOR DAVE ALVIN by FIREHOSE

Mike Watt traces the inspiration for SONG FOR DAVE ALVIN to a poetry reading that he and Dave were part of in 1986. "It was called 'Night of the Macho Poets,'" Watt recalls in a telephone interview from his California home in May 2014. Watt, bassist for the bands the Minutemen and FIREHOSE, believes the event was held at the Roxy in Los Angeles and also featured bassist/vocalist John Doe of X and Chris D., lead singer of the Flesh Eaters.

The reading coincided with the publication of Nana, Big Joe and the Fourth of July, Dave's first collection of poetry that was published by Illiterati Press. Dave gave other readings around the same time. A flyer survives for a reading he gave at the Lhasa Club in L.A., a on a bill with Gerald Locklin and Chuck E. Weiss on June 12, 1986.

At 'Night of the Macho Poets,' Watt found himself impressed with by the imagery and the use of language he brought to the reading. "I was touched by his expression. I just liked his poems and wrote a song for him," Watt says. "I have a lot of respect for Dave."

SONG FOR DAVE ALVIN is included on the 1991 FIREHOUSE album Flyin' the Flannel on Columbia Records. The song is a low-key instrumental which includes two sections of spoken-word recitation. Watt says such songs are a way to pay tribute to artists whose work he admires, such as Michael Stipe.

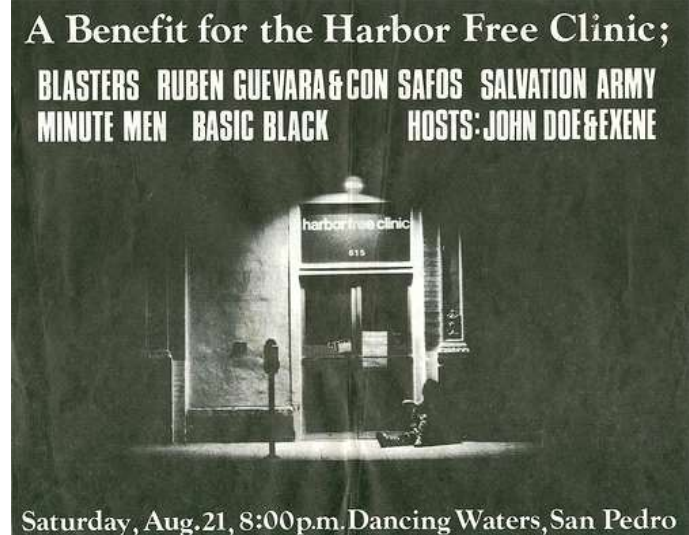
Other songs include: FOR THE SINGER OF R.E.M., IN MEMORY OF ELIZABETH COTTON and UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF MEAT PUPPETS.

Like Dave, Watt has gone beyond music in his art. Mike Watt: On and Off Bass, published in 2012 by Three Rooms Press, is a collection of his photographs, poetry and prose. The New Yorker magazine praises the work, calling it: "an unusual and beautiful photographic memoir."

Watt and Dave have also contributed readings to the same albums of spoken-word and poetry. Their work can be found on Neighborhood Rhythms and English as a Second Language, both on Freeway Records.

Like the Blasters, the Minutemen were based in Southern California and Watt recalls the bands taking part in a benefit for the Harbor Free Clinic in San Pedro in the early 1980s. A poster for the show indicates it was held on Aug. 21, 1982, at a club called the Dancing Waters. John Doe and Exene Cervenka of X served as the hosts for the evening.

Night of the Macho Poets was a tongue-in-cheek title, according to Watt. Another poet who took part in the show was Richard Meltzer, who wrote an introduction for Nana, Big Joe and the Fourth of July. Meltzer discussed the reading in an interview with novelist and musician Rick Moody in an interview published in 2012 on therumpus.net, a Web site devoted to the arts: "The most fun reading I ever had was (with) Dave Alvin from The Blasters who arranged a reading called 'The Night of the Macho Poets.' This was in '86 or '87, and, uh, at the, uh, where what was it . . . ? Some club. And it was Dave Alvin, John Doe, Mike Watt, me, Chris D. from the Flesh Eaters, and Henry Rollins. Henry insisted he had to be the closer, and he was so macho he wore a dress. And it was really a good show. It was a full house and everybody was so concerned at the end: "Did they like us? Did they like us? What do you think?" So everybody's standing around stroking everybody else, so by the time we actually went to greet the audience, they'd cleared the house. So we never got to ask them how they felt. It was actually a great night - unrecorded." — ~~AM~~



FENDER GUITARS CUSTOM SHOP REPLICATES DAVE ALVIN'S MUSTANG GUITAR

The Fender Custom Shop reports on the making of an exact replica copy of Dave Alvin's famous Fender 1965 Mustang. Dave Alvin used the guitar from 1980 – 87. James Harman bought the guitar from a pawn shop and Dave used the guitar all throughout the Original Blasters years of 1980 – 1987.



Dave brought his original guitar into the Fender Custom Guitar shop to have a copy made to auction off at the Phil Alvin January 2013 benefit concert. We took pictures and video of it and took it apart to see how it was put together. We made templates of the parts, and weighed it so we could exactly duplicate it.

His Mustang was so beat up from years and years of playing in clubs. He such an aggressive player, but it's cool that with the Blasters, he got such great guitar sounds. The pickup was worn through and the body was worn down to the wood. That guitar was a student guitar, but back then, Fender never compromised the quality even on lower end guitars, so it was made along the same lines as the other products. It was all the same components as the Stratocaster. The pickup was wound a little differently but everything was the same.

We have all the original templates so we just made a brand new '65 body, neck and we matched the original color. We measured the pickups and we made it look similar. We built it from scratch. I think it was a blond color we have the original color code. We did age it some, but we couldn't put all the grody-rust on the bridge as Dave has – it might not play very well – but we made it close. We did the scratches and dings. String gauges I think were .011 - .052. We didn't wear the frets like his, because he had it refretted a few times. He did have the vintage frets so we put vintage frets on the copy.—~~am~~



Dave with some costume Mustangs being made by the Fender Custom shop for a customer in Japan.