

ISSUE #101

American Music

The Blasters/Dave Alvin newsletter

Celebrating 32 Years 1994 — 2026

JULY 2026

The Blasters Reunite as a Trio

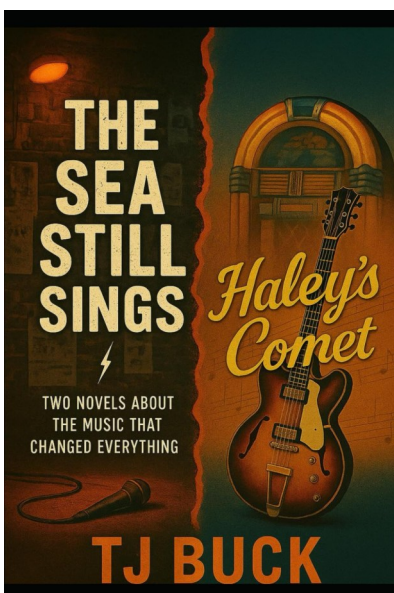


Photo: Tom Underhill

In This Issue: The Blasters Trio, Dave and JDG's Almost Acoustic Tour, Rick Shea Smoke Tree Road, Big Joe Turner

LATEST NEWS: Sweet Relief, the organization that provides financial assistance to musicians dealing with health issues, posted the following update on Phil Alvin in March. "We want to take the time to thank Phil Alvin's generous supporters and provide an update on his status. Phil's health continues to improve and it has been over a year since his last hospital stay. While Phil is able to recover from home, his medical needs require 24-hour care and support. All donations to the Phil Alvin Fund go towards his vital living and medical expenses that are needed to manage his daily life." To make a donation to help Phil, visit www.sweetrelief.org/philalvinfund.

II III Dave Alvin has been leaking some information at his shows that he is recording an all-original Dave Alvin solo album. He says: "All the songs are very personal and about different people in my life. If I were allowed to talk about the album title, it would make sense. I've never written like this before. Somebody who heard the album said, there is a lot of love here." **II III** Dave Alvin has recorded a duet with singer/songwriter Gray DeLisle. The song could be included on her next album. Dave: "I was touched that she asked me to sing a song with her. I tried to do my best Merle Haggard." **II III** John Bazz did an interview with It's Psychedelic Baby magazine. He discussed topics related to the Blasters. To read the interview, go to psychedelicbabymag.com **II III** The Knitters will be part of Outlaw Cruise 11 on March 5-10, 2027. The round-trip cruise sets sail from Miami and includes stops in Key West, Fla., and Ocho Rios, Jamaica. Other artists on the cruise include Lucinda Williams, Steve Earle, and Rosie Flores. For a complete list of artists, visit outlawcruise.com. **II III** The Knitters also will play a concert to benefit the Amuse Autism Foundation on Sept. 19 at the Huntington Beach Sports Complex in Huntington Beach, Calif. More bands will be added to the bill. **II III** HALEY'S COMET by TJ Buck, a novel inspired by the life of rock 'n' roll star Bill Haley, was published in August. The book begins with the lyrics of the song of the same name that was co-written by Tom Russell and Dave. An excerpt from the book can be read at Amazon.com. **II III** The Palomino, a documentary on the legendary Los Angeles music club, screened on April 25 in Nashville and June 17 in Los Angeles. Directed by Adrienne Isom, the movie features interviews with Dave Alvin, James Intveld and Rosie Flores. Other musicians interviewed include Emmylou Harris and Lucinda Williams. For more info goto mulekickproductions.com **II III** -201



The BLASTERS TRIO

**Performs on RECORD STORE DAY
at Fingerprints in Long Beach CA
April 18, 2026**

By Billy Davis

Antone DeSantis of Liberation Hall Records is the project manager in charge of the re-releases of the Blasters catalog. He came up with the idea of having the Blasters do an in-store appearance on Record Store Day to promote the release of Rare Blasts, a compilation of Blasters bonus tracks.

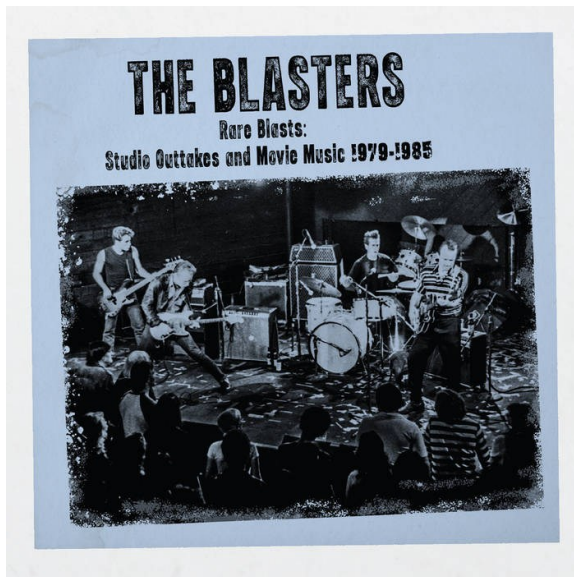
DeSantis: "I contacted John Bazz and proposed he and Bill Bateman do a signing to promote the Rare Blasts release. John Bazz said, 'Let's get Dave in on this.' I said, 'I don't think Dave Alvin would want to do this. He's busy out on tour right now.' John said, 'I will ask him.' John got back to me that same day and shocked me by saying that Dave wanted to do it, but he also wants to perform. I thought he was kidding. I couldn't believe it. This is great. I started coordinating with Dave's manager, Nancy Sefton, and she told me that Dave really wanted to do it in Long Beach."

Bazz: "Dave loves the guys at Fingerprints Record Store. He has done an in-store there before. So, he suggested Fingerprints." DeSantis from Liberation Hall agreed. "I knew of the Fingerprints Record Store there and I had dealt with them when I worked for Rhino Records years ago."

Dave Alvin: "Even though we were from Downey, the Blasters were a Long Beach band. We were all living or hanging out in Long Beach and our girlfriends lived there in the beginning when we started the band. So, this was the right place to



Photo: Dave Alvin



do this – a homecoming in a way.”

Phil Alvin’s health is not up to par with performing, so the three other Blasters – Dave Alvin, Bazz and Bateman -- prepared for the performance.

They had an inspired rehearsal. Alvin: “In rehearsal, we started with the ones I could get away with singing – FLATTOP JOINT, RED ROSE, BORDER RADIO and TROUBLE BOUND. Bateman really wanted to do GO GO GO, but that really needs strong vocals. I really miss playing these songs.”

Dave posted on Facebook the next day about how excited he was about the reunion: “I spent the afternoon Monday laughing, rehearsing, squabbling, reminiscing and then playing, squabbling and laughing some more with these two Blasters [Bazz and Bateman]. What can I say about John Bazz and Bill Bateman (that's printable anyway)? I've known them pretty much all of my life, and have always looked up to them as the cool, older hometown guys that I wanted to be like when I grew up. They taught me a lot of what I know about music, and I'm forever in their debt. Along with my brother Phil, Lee Allen (RIP), Gene Taylor (RIP) and Steve Berlin, we made some damn big, loud and wild noise when we were young. I will always treasure every moment of our out-of-tune guitars, long van drives down dark highways, every drop of spilled beer, every amazing show, every terrible show and, yeah, even our ridiculous fights.”



Bazz remembers at the rehearsal, “We were going to do I’M SHAKIN as an instrumental. Dave planned to play the vocal melody on the guitar. There are a few versions of I’M SHAKIN by Little Willie John. There’s one where they overdubbed drum rolls in every other break on the song.



Photo: Tom Underhill

The Blasters in the early days never did the fancy drum fills. We liked the "clean-breaks" version. We thought the overdub was goofy – a producer probably added that in. At the Blasters Trio rehearsal, Bill Bateman was insisting we do that drum fill version – and it threw everything off. Dave wasn't comfortable with it and an argument happened, or a discussion. The timing on it was weird, but Bill had prepared it. We tried it, it was OK, but it didn't sound like us. I'm not sure why Bill pushed so hard, but he stuck to his guns. David was polite and it was good enough playing it, but it didn't feel right enough to make it into the set."

Dave posted on Facebook in anticipation of the show: "This Saturday evening at the exceptional Fingerprints Record Store in Long Beach, CA., Johnny, Bill and I will do our damndest to make some more big and wild Blaster noise for a Record Store Day celebration. My brother Phil would be there if his health permitted. I know Steve Berlin would be there if his schedule permitted and I'm positive Lee and Gene would be there if fate permitted. We'll be playing a bit loud, so open your windows and you just might hear us."

The day of the show, Fingerprints had a stage riser set up in the store and shifted around some of the record racks to make room for what was expected to be a big crowd in the 8,000-square-foot space.

They already had an in-store signing booked for Dr. Demento, and Dave Grohl's daughter Violet and her band, so the Blasters were scheduled to play at 7



Photo: Tom Underhill

pm. Fingerprints owner Rand Foster is a big fan and supporter of the band and his store is a big part of the community. There was a very long line waiting for the Blasters Trio to play.

Alvin: "The fun part was playing Blasters songs, the three of us. Last time we did it was the Gene Taylor Blues Band [in December 2013], but this time we were doing Blasters songs."

There was one other similar band configuration that Dave could draw some experience from as a Blasters frontman. In December 2011, the Blasters had four Southern California shows booked when Phil was hospitalized with a blood infection. Dave filled in to help out Keith Wyatt, Bazz and Bateman.

Alvin: "We did a short soundcheck and we did six or seven other Blasters songs and that was really fun – ONE BAD STUD, I FELL IN LOVE, ROCK BOPPIN' BABY, REAL ROCK DRIVE, ROCK BOPPIN' BABY and I DON'T WANT TO. Also, a little bit of BARE-FOOT ROCK, but with no vocals. That's actually the way we played them in rehearsals in the old days, as instrumentals, because Phil would come to only some rehearsals or not at all. We learned to do them without the vocal cues. Oh, and we worked up TROUBLE BOUND, but I forgot to include it on the set list."



Photo: Gary Leonard

Photo: Antone DeSantis



Bazz: "I thought we did too much in soundcheck. I was a little taken aback when Dave pulled out those other songs. I had forgotten them, and wasn't prepared, so I faked it. He kept playing these oddball rarities."

The store fit a few hundred people in for the performance. Many old friends of the Blasters were there like Exene Cervenka, Jonny Ray Bartel, photographer Gary Leonard and many long-time fans. Writer Chris Morris, who has co-produced the Blasters' recent releases, announced the band to the stage.

It was a very different experience for Bazz performing this way, rather than playing in the traditional Blasters format, "This was a trio. Very different. You're naked up there as a trio. And also, there is the pressure that this might be the only time we would ever play again. But what I like about a trio is that everyone's role is defined. I could really hear everything Dave played. There was clarity. It wasn't clouded by saxophones and piano and background singers. Of course, when we had that, it was great. But here the bass had its own audio space with no one stepping on anyone else."

From the audience's perspective, Dave was on the left of the stage, Bateman in the center and Bazz on the right. John normally stood on the left side of Bill's drums throughout the history of the Blasters and commented about the trio performance, "It didn't make much difference. Most bass players should really be on the side of the stage to lock in with the drummer's high-hat, but I've never done that. I learned to play on the wrong side of the stage with the Blasters."

The Blasters Trio opened with RED ROSE followed by FLAT TOP JOINT. The instrumental WALKIN' WITH MR. LEE was next with Dave imitating the saxophone parts with his guitar.

You could see the energy that the Blasters put out, still to this

day, playing these songs. "I didn't want to talk between songs," Alvin remembers, "but I had to, because we all needed a rest. Playing Blasters songs, you use different muscles than you do at other gigs. It's true for all of us. You're expending a lot of energy to play that way."

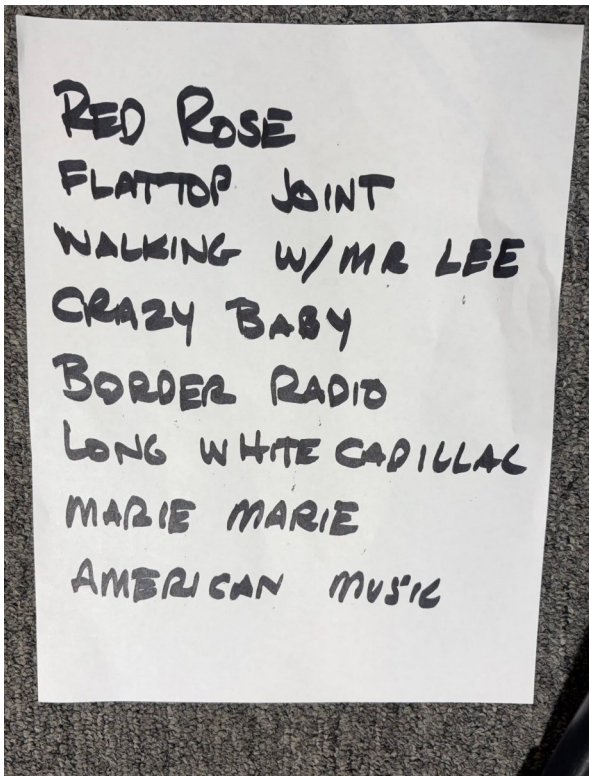
They next played a rockin' version of CRAZY BABY that got the crowd going, but completely instrumental. Bazz: "CRAZY BABY was always a song that defined the Blasters in the early years. It's one of our most powerful songs and it was a joy to play again. It's one of those songs when we play it, it goes to 11."

BORDER RADIO is a song Dave Alvin has done many versions of over the years in his solo or acoustic sets. For this show he wanted to keep it traditional Blasters. Instrumentally, the arrangement was exact, but he sang it in a deeper tone than Phil would. Dave: "I used to be able to imitate Phil singing high like that, but, then my voice would be completely shot [laughs]."

LONG WHITE CADILLAC was an interesting one. Alvin played a surf-like melody line on guitar that imitated the vocal melody. "I worked that up in advance," he remembers, "If we would have done at least one other gig, I would have gotten it completely right [laughs]. I fucked up a few things on every song [laughs]. I came up with the idea originally thinking, 'So what would LONG WHITE CADILLAC sound like as a surf instrumental?' The Blasters version groove has always been a surf vibe."

John: "Dave always had an affinity for surf music and loved playing '60s instrumental songs. He's good at it." Dave continues: "I almost did a speech before it about an early '60s surf band called the Pyramids. They had a hit instrumental record called PENETRATION. I wanted to say, 'This is the Blasters tribute to the Pyramids.'"

MARIE MARIE, AMERICAN MUSIC, and SO LONG BABY GOOD-BYE finished the show. These weren't the traditional short versions from the Blasters' days past, but extended, with Dave soloing at the ends. That made the audience happy.



A photograph of a piece of white paper with handwritten text in black ink. The text is a list of songs, including "RED ROSE", "FLATTOP JOINT", "WALKING W/MR LEE", "CRAZY BABY", "BORDER RADIO", "LONG WHITE CADILLAC", "MARIE MARIE", and "AMERICAN MUSIC". The handwriting is casual and slightly slanted.

RED ROSE
FLATTOP JOINT
WALKING W/MR LEE
CRAZY BABY
BORDER RADIO
LONG WHITE CADILLAC
MARIE MARIE
AMERICAN MUSIC

Bazz: "I was ready and expecting Dave to extend songs. I thought we were gonna do MARIE extending into SO LONG BABY GOODBYE, like Dave does sometimes in his solo shows. But instead we stopped and made it the final song."

Antone DeSantis of Liberation Hall Records recalls, "Seeing the Blasters Trio was phenomenal. I love seeing Bateman and Bazz playing together. They are really one of the greatest rhythm sections, and Dave is always amazing. It was the perfect power trio. The show ranks very high for me personally. It was a personal thrill to be able to put together this event with a band I have always loved. I couldn't have been happier. I was up close in front of Dave watching the show and I said to myself: 'This thing is smokin!!' No one wanted it to end." Chris Morris added, "They have not played together since the Gene Taylor Blues Band tour. This was very much a 'class reunion' vibe. It was a love fest for the Blasters."

Fingerprints cleared the store to start a line outside for the signing session. The Rare Blasts album sold out, as well as every piece of Blasters merch in the store – and they had stocked a lot. The store made copies of the set list in order to have more things for fans to get the Blasters to sign." Alvin, Bazz and Bateman signed autographs for two hours.

"The signing was great," Bazz recalls fondly, "Everyone had a little kind comment about when they first saw the Blasters or bought their first record. It's nice to hear that. We have a similar history with our fans, so it's nice to share that."

In the days after the show, all involved agreed that they had so much fun, they hope they'll have an opportunity to do it again. Bazz: "It was wonderful, other than the fact Phil wasn't there. We may have lost a few steps over the years, but we can still play with



Photo: Antone DeSantis

vibrance. It was very rewarding to be with the boys in the trio with an appreciative audience on an important day of the year in music. Fingerprints is much loved by the community and Southern California, which added to the vibe. I hope it happens again. I'd take this show on the road, if it's possible."



Photo: Gary Leonard

Dave Alvin posted a few days later on Facebook: "When I was in the Blasters, I wrote the set lists, but I haven't written a set list for a Blasters show in a long damn time. It may be a dubious skill, but perhaps it hasn't left me after all these years. I concocted this list for the Three Blaster Downey Dudes reunion/dance party on Saturday evening at Long Beach's Fingerprints Record Store and all-round cultural oasis. I can't speak for anyone else, but I had a great, deeply emotional time playing these tunes with Johnny Bazz and Bill Bateman, the same way we would have played them 40 years ago."

"The next day I visited my brother Phil and told him about the show (Phil is, sadly, still too weak to perform live). I explained to him that we played CRAZY BABY and LONG WHITE CADILLAC as instrumentals, because I didn't feel I could do his powerful vocals any justice. "You played them as instrumentals, huh? Well, that was a smart move," he said -- then he paused a moment before laughing uncontrollably for a solid minute."

"DAMN! I just realized that I left off TROUBLE BOUND, one of my favorite Blaster songs. Maybe I'm not as good at this writing-a-Blasters-set-list-thing as I used to be. Guess we may have to play another reunion show someday, just so I can rectify this oversight." —~~Am~~

Search YouTube to see videos of some of the songs performed.

Dave Alvin and Jimmie Dale Gilmore **Almost Acoustic** by Billy Davis

From April 25 to May 9, 2026, Dave Alvin and Jimmie Dale Gilmore did what would be titled an acoustic tour of the East Coast, because they played just two guitars and had no backing band. It was advertised as “Almost Acoustic,” because Dave would be playing electric. They’ve done shows as an acoustic duo before. In fact, that was how they first played together in October 2017 and forged their nine-year collaboration.

This review is based on seeing the show at the Iron Horse in Northampton, Mass., and referencing audio from the show in Portsmouth, N.H.

Over the years, Dave always comes up with a different format to present his music, whether it was the Guilty Men, the Guilty Women, the Guilty Ones, the Flesh Eaters, the Third Mind, or the many duos he’s formed. This one had the feel of an acoustic show, but with Dave’s electric taking center stage. Dave has such a great tone on



his electric guitar and it’s nice to occasionally give him the space, without a backing band for us to hear him clearly.

The opening act was Lenny Kaye, a 79-year old guitarist notable for his work with the Patty Smith Group and his garage-rock retrospective anthology, Nuggets, for Rhino Records. Lenny just signed to Yep Roc Records and has an album coming out this summer. Lenny’s personality is very likeable. He told funny stories and stood on the stage with his electric guitar, performing as a singer-songwriter. One particu-

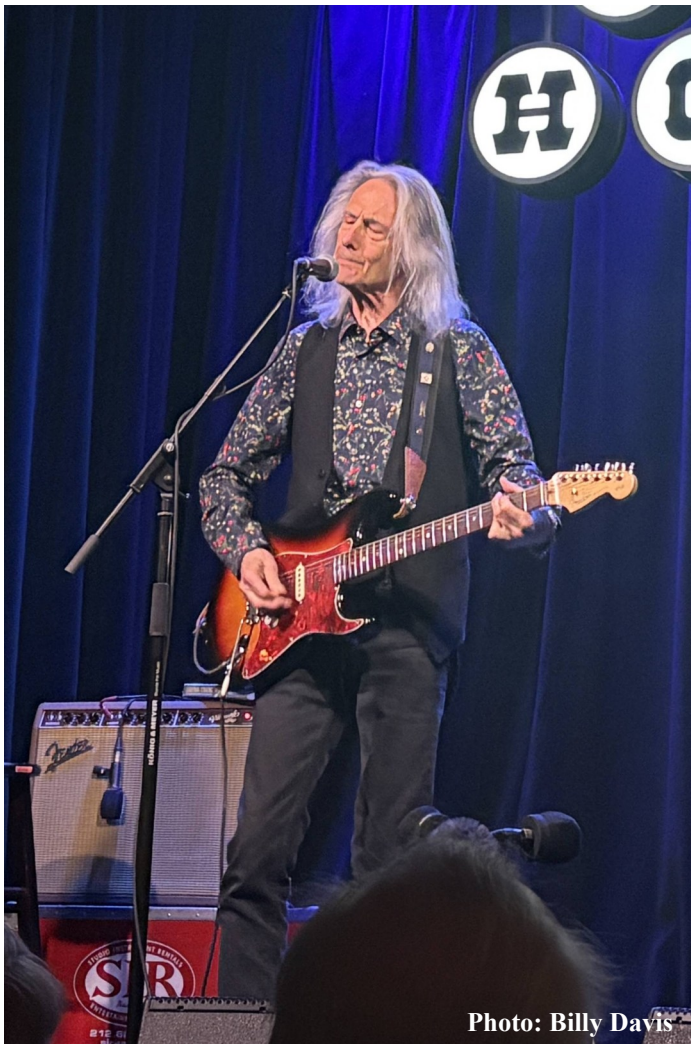


Dave said on Facebook: "Jimmie's wife Janet Gilmore took the photo of Jimmie Dale, Lenny Kaye and me backstage at The Bull Run in Shirley, Massachusetts. It's been incredible having the multi-faceted, multi-talented Mr. Kaye on this tour with us. Like Jimmie Dale, Lenny is a constant source of inspiration and road wise chuckles. Lenny joins us for the last third of our show, and it's a real musical kick as we become a true guitar army of glorious noise. My name for this unique power trio is "The Flatland Nugget Blasters" while Lenny has dubbed us "The Old Testament." Either works for me."

lar song that connected with the audience was called THE THINGS WE LEAVE BEHIND, about having collections, and what will happen to them when the collector passes on. He presented this in a humorous way and the audience got a kick out of it.

Dave Alvin and Jimmie Dale started their set with a song from their last album, Texicali, called WERE STILL HERE,

which they talk about as biographical -- their story of being in the music business a long time. Dave prefaced the next song with a realization that 47 years ago, he and Jimmie Dale, unbeknownst to each other, were frequent visitors at the Ash Grove blues club in Los Angeles. They both saw Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee perform their next song, BETTY AND DUPREE.



For the song TONIGHT I THINK I'M GONNA GO DOWNTOWN, Jimmie said that "All my gigs for the rest of my life are going to be dedicated to the memory of Joe Ely. For those of you who don't know, he was my partner in the Flatlanders and kept my songwriting career going by recording the definitive versions of my songs." This song showed some beautiful acoustic guitar playing by Jimmie Dale and very complementary accenting guitar playing by Dave. This song was a great example of their very nicely blended guitar work.

Dave Alvin did his signature song KING OF CALIFORNIA, which I must say took me back 32 years to when Dave first recorded it in this very stripped-down form. And Dave sounded in fine voice with Jimmie Dale adding background vocals on the choruses.

A song from their first album, Downey To Lubbock, was next, called SILVER LAKE, written by Steve Young. Dave and Jimmie Dale traded off for five lengthy minutes, explaining that Steve had told both of them at different times that he wrote it exclusively for each of them.

Dave has been mentioning in interviews that he is in the yearlong process of writing and recording a brand new solo Dave Alvin original album. He's been keeping the details under wraps, but on this tour he debuted one of the songs, TOM AND I, which is about his and Tom Russell's many collaborative songwriting sessions in which they had a goal of writing "The Big One."

After the tour, Dave elaborated, "I don't know if Tom knows this song exists, but he will. Tom and I would always say, 'Alright! We're gonna write the big one.' There are a few jokes in the song -- Tom tended to put a few "Yeah, Yeahs" in a song whether it needed it or not. So, I put a 'Yeah, Yeah' in here as a tribute to Tom [laughs]. Tom and I wrote a lot of good songs, but we drifted apart over the

years. There was talk in the 1990s of doing a Dave and Tom album on HighTone.” Dave’s last line of the song seems to be “a reach out,” when he sings: “I think Tom and I could give it one last try.”

An interesting choice for a cover song was Sam Cooke’s BRING IT ON HOME TO ME with Dave and Jimmie Dale trading off vocals on the classic. “We’ve both done that song since we started playing together,” Dave remembers. “We both love Sam Cooke and Lou Rawls. Jimmie Dale pulled it out one night and it became a regular in our set.” Dave played some very R&B guitar, with Jimmie Dale, interestingly enough, playing a steady bass line on his acoustic guitar to drive the song along. Dave: “The thing people don’t know about Jimmie is that when he moved out to California in the late ‘60s, he was a bass player. Some songs you really hear that he plays like that.”

Following was BRAVER NEWER WORLD from Jimmie Dale’s 1996 Elektra album. Dave said he had good reason to bring it back to life: “I hated the production on the original -- it tried to be too cute and artsy. The produc-

tion got in the way of the song, I think it’s a beautiful song, so we do it this way and I love it.” Dave Alvin always does a great job of “Alvinizing” other people’s songs. Next, they played Dave’s JOHNNY ACE IS DEAD with Dave letting loose with some blazing solos, and then the Downey To Lubbock duet BILLY THE KID AND GERONIMO. Dave called it “an old folk song from New Mexico that I wrote.”

BORDERLAND was the next song as Jimmie told a long story about the song he wrote for his wife: “It’s a love song to my wife, Janet, and it’s a non-love song to Texas politicians.”

Next, Dave Alvin did a very sedate version of DRY RIVER. I say “sedate” because Dave Alvin fans have become very used to the song being the big show closer in his electric shows with the whole band talking solos to a rous-



Photo: Billy Davis

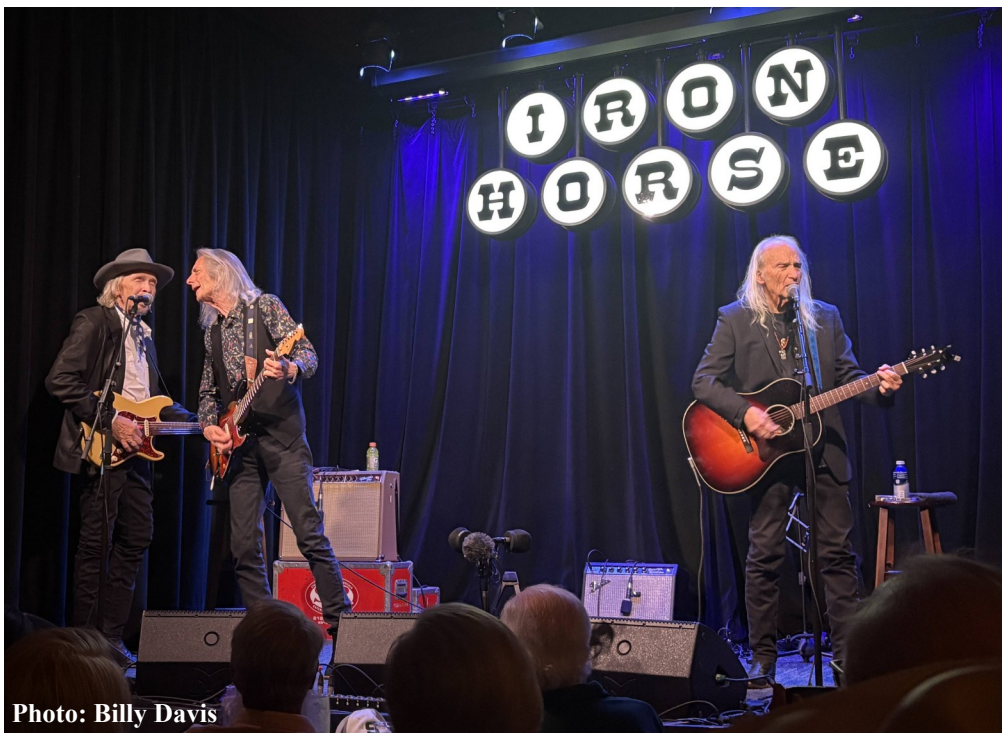


Photo: Billy Davis

ing finish. It was nice to see the song brought back to its soft roots.

Offstage, Lenny Kaye, Dave and Jimmie Dale Gilmore really hit it off. Which made it fun for Lenny to fit in with the band to jam onstage. Dave announced, "The next song we'd like to do, we can't bear the burden alone. So, I'd like to bring out the great Lenny Kaye." Lenny came out and plugged in his electric guitar. Lenny stood beside Jimmie Dale, both with their long white hair, and Jimmie Dale told the audience, "On the first day of the tour when all three of us got together, Dave admitted he now came in second in the Jimmie Dale Look-a-like contest." That brought laughter from the crowd. Later, Dave backed that up, recalling that a number of times throughout the tour when fans approached Lenny for an autograph thinking he was Jimmie Dale.

They all chuckled, but Dave brought it back to a more serious tone saying that the next song was originally sung by Jesse Colin Young and that Dave could not think of anyone else that could capture the beauty of this song other than Jimmie Dale Gilmore. They did GET TOGETHER.

FOURTH OF JULY was next and Lenny stayed onstage through this and the encores. Often, Lenny didn't seem to know where the changes were happening, so Dave would give him a cue. But more important, they were having a ball jamming together. Jimmie Dale told the audience that he only met Lenny two weeks before and "now we've become very close friends."

They only had a few songs to go, as Jimmie Dale interrupted, "I'd like to do one more very important Joe Ely song. Important because I wrote it [laughs], but Joe did it. Thanks, Joe." They did DALLAS. Dave sang the middle interlude verse before his solo.

One other song was MIDNIGHT TRAIN, from JDG's 1991 After Awhile album on Elektra Records. Dave said they placed the song in the encore because, "I like this one for Lenny and I to

stretch out on.” And then they finished with MARIE MARIE.

Dave started off with a jam on guitar before launching into MARIE MARIE’s main riff. Lenny took the first solo. I noticed Lenny was having so much fun, he was smiling at JDG while he was supposed to start his solo. Dave did a tug at Lenny’s sleeve to get his attention and Lenny smiled and jumped into his solo. JDG took a harmonica solo and the other two got the audience clapping along.

With Dave’s memorable outro solo, the show appeared to be over. Dave didn’t want to stop and continued a few slow blues licks unaccompanied. Suddenly and surprisingly to the audience, he started the song DOWNEY TO LUBBOCK. Jimmie and Lenny fell right in. That closing song, very much like a theme song for the duo, left the crowd satisfied.

Dave Alvin told American Music: “Lenny Kaye is a guy I’ve never met before, but after I met him, I said I’ve known you for 60 years

[laughs]. We’re like old pals. Having him come up with us was a kick every night. He and Jimmie Dale are similar

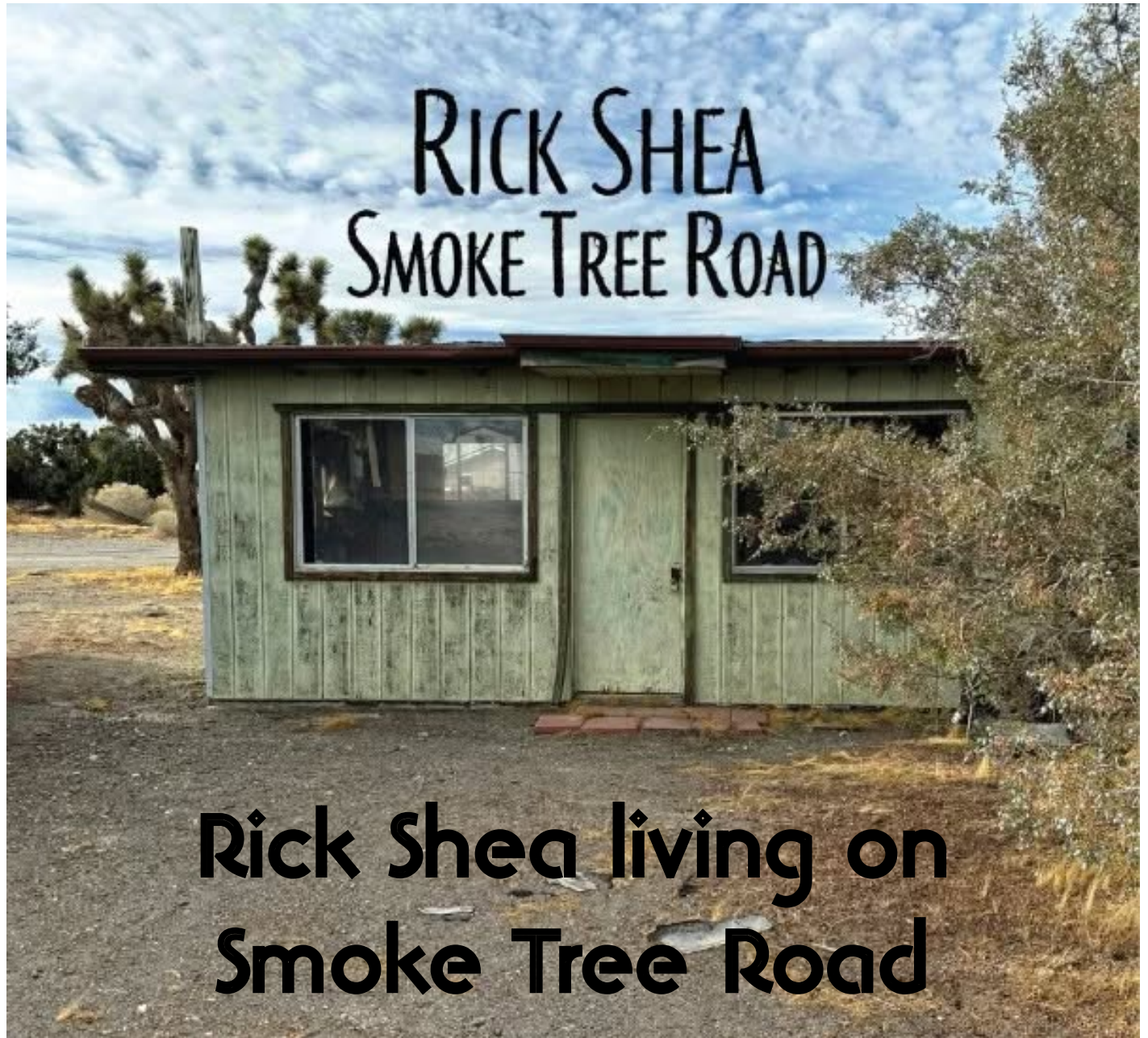
Dave Alvin on Facebook June 7: “I Did something today that I've wanted to do since I was 16 and finally made the pilgrimage to Jack Kerouac's grave in Lowell, Massachusetts. I whispered a prayer that I learned back in Catholic school for this wild, wandering, driven, troubled, Catholic Buddhist poet of the road. His words and visions influenced so many (if not all) of us poets/songwriters/musicians/etc who chose a life of seeking enlightenment on the highways, or just trying to follow an alternative path than what is considered normal. My traveling companions and I discussed how Mr. Kerouac's works could inspire and mean so much to folks from all across the USofA (and the world) like Jimmie Dale Gilmore from Texas, Lenny Kaye from New Jersey or me from California. He wasn't the biggest influence on my life and how I live it, but he was a pretty damn big one at one time—so it felt good to thank him in person. His final years were terribly sad, bitter, ugly and lonely, but I'll always remember him as his young self and his hopeful, sweet words from 'October In The Railroad Earth', "I look up at blue sky of perfect lost purity and feel the warp of wood of old America beneath me" Thank you for everything, Mr. Kerouac.”



guys; they both have tapped into this eternal youth thing. In this business it's a fight against bitterness. No one wants to be the bitter guy. Lenny is not and that's inspirational."

Dave summed up the tour by saying,

"I like the mixture of Texas, California and New York [laughs]. The whole tour was really special and I'm looking forward to us doing it again on the West Coast." —Am



Rick Shea's 13th solo album is called Smoke Tree Road and was released Feb. 20, 2026 on Tres Pescadores Records

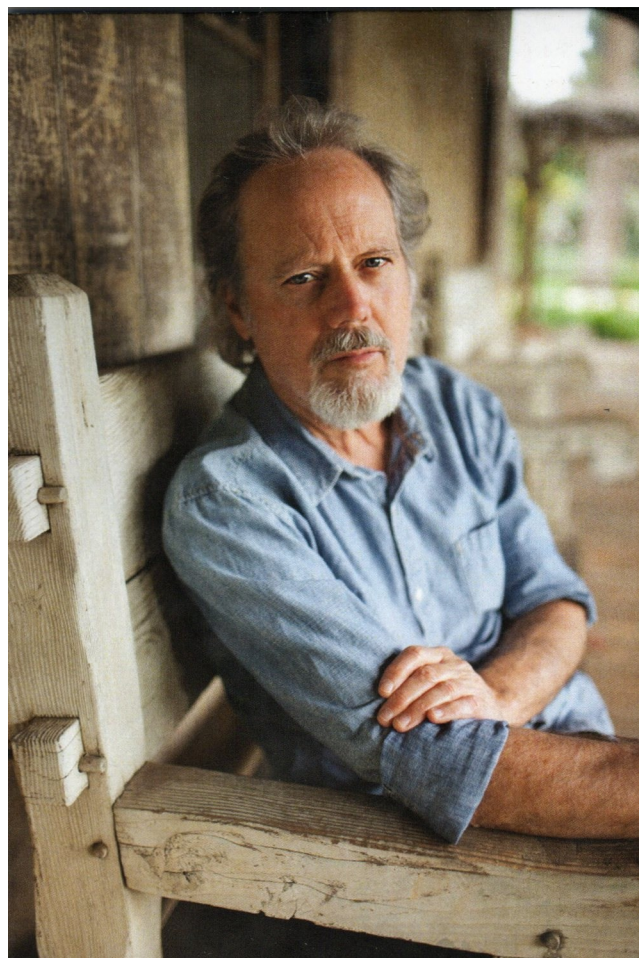
AM: Was there a theme to the album?

Rick Shea: Not until later did a theme come up. Recording took up most of last year and the writing from the previous year. The title Smoke Tree Road comes from a place up in the desert where my kids live. Smoke Tree Road is where this old cabin is that you see on the cover of the CD. Me and my family have been spending a lot of time there and this place has been a big part of our life. My two boys and their wives moved up here and a second grandchild was born. I didn't record any of the songs here, but the songs were being carried around with me up here going through my head for days on end. The photo inside the CD is the backside of the San Gabriel Mountains with Mount Baldy. I was walking my dog Katy down the street and took those photos and they were perfect for the artwork.

AM: I see in the credits many studios were used in the making of the album. So you probably recorded each musician remotely?

RS: It wasn't as remote as my last CD, Love and Desperation, which was recorded during the pandemic. For this one, I was in the studio with drummer Shawn Nourse for some songs. I would record my guitar, vocal and a click track and he would play to that. But the first song, A WEEK IN WINNEMUCCA, was tracked with both of us live. I used a lot of the musicians who have been playing with me at my gigs. Some we played live in the studio, then I took the tracks home and finished it off with vocals, etc. It was a combination of those two approaches.

Paul duGre' mixed and mastered the record and did a great job. We've worked together a lot and he knows me well. He deserves a lot of credit.



***A WEEK IN WINNEMUCCA* (Rick Shea BMI)**

RS: That's a true story about a gig I played in northern Nevada quite a few years ago. It was a casino gig that lasted a week. I knew all the musicians that were going there. Shawn Jones was the main artist. They didn't ask us to play anything particular. During the day we explored the area -- little towns. I headed up there after playing a show for "Sleepy" John Sandidge in Santa Cruz, and other than my truck blowing a gasket on the way home in the middle of the night in the middle of Nevada it was a good experience. That's Tony Gilkyson who played the acoustic guitar solo.

AM: Your vocal sound is a harmony you do with yourself. It works really well.

RS: Thank you. I'm really glad you hear it that way. I love hearing that doubling done by a voice like the way Harry Nilsson did it. He's an amazing singer. Jesse Winches-

ter did it, as well as Heather Myles. It's wonderful when it works. Also, there is the practicality of it -- to get it done myself and know what I want to hear.

Rick Shea - Acoustic Guitar, Vocals & Background Vocals, Tony Gilkyson - Acoustic Guitar, Chad Watson – Bass, Shawn Nourse - Drums

GUARDIAN ANGEL (Rick Shea BMI)

RS: That was me thinking back to when my wife, Susie, and I first got together – we were pretty young and wild. We moved in together in an old cabin in Crestline after I had been bouncing around from place to place. She had a big settling influence on me to take care of things like health insurance and such – and then we started a family together. She's my guardian angel.

Eleanor Whitmore is a wonderful fiddle player. She and her husband have a band called the Mastersons. They used to be in Austin playing with Steve Earle for a long time and now they are here. I originally wanted a steel guitar on here and I tried playing it myself, but I'm really rusty and haven't played in a long time. I was thinking of other steel guitar players like Marty Rifkin or Doug Livingston. When I went to her studio with other songs for her to play on, I came up with the idea of her on this song. It came out great

Rick Shea - Acoustic & Electric Guitar, Vocals & Background Vocals, Eleanor Whitmore – Fiddle, Chad Watson – Bass, Shawn Nourse - Drums

AN IRISHMAN'S A LABORER AT HEART (Rick Shea BMI)

RS: I'm pretty much Irish. My dad's family is directly fully Irish; my mother is a mix with Scottish and some others. When I've been to Ireland and around my family, I've observed certain characteristics and humor that I thought was very Irish. The song just fell into place like it was there waiting for me. That doesn't happen very often. Of course, I was thinking of my father but also of myself and my two boys, both hard workers. But most of us are, Irish or not, we all work, it gives us meaning and keeps us centered.

Rick Shea - Acoustic Guitar, Vocals & Background Vocals, Tony Gilkyson - Acoustic Guitar, Chad Watson – Bass, Shawn Nourse - Drums

GEORGIA BRIDE (Rick Shea BMI)

RS: The title was just a phrase I liked. The song started with a guitar lick and that phrase came to mind and "Wichita Prince" fit with it. I tried to stay with language that was used in True Grit, the Charles Portis book and Coen Brothers film. The language is sort of archaic and biblical. I'm not sure if they really talked that way in that time, but it seems really indicative of that period. That language definitely inspired me in the writing.

AM: This one seems to have a lot of instrumentation. How did that come about?

RS: It was complicated. I started with a click track, my guitar and vocal, and went into Kevin Jarvis's studio. We started with Dale on drums and Jeff on bass. I felt like

it was a Memphis or New Orleans groove and I thought about what Dr. John or Allen Toussaint would do. In my mind I heard a big horn sound followed by the B3. We tried but it wasn't working out. Danny McGough had played a Wurlitzer on it early on. Paul duGre' put those together and it worked! The song really evolved kind of on its own.

Rick Shea - Electric Guitar, Vocals & Background Vocals, Jeff Turmes - Bass guitar & Tenor Saxophone, Dale Daniel – Drums, Danny McGough - Wurlitzer Piano, Skip Edwards - Hammond B3



MIDNIGHT SHIFT (Jimmie Ainsworth, Earl Lee)

RS: I've been playing bars for a long time but these places are not always the best for quieter acoustic songs and having a decent repertoire of barroom songs can be a good idea. This is one I really like. I first heard the Joe Ely version. I thought Buddy Holly wrote it but that was incorrect. This also features the guys who've played most of these sort of gigs with me the last few years, Tony Gilkyson on guitar, Jeff Turmes on bass and Dale Daniel on drums, great guys, good friends and really excellent musicians.

*Rick Shea - Acoustic Guitar & Electric Guitar, Vocals, Tony Gilkyson - Electric Guitar
Jeff Turmes – Bass, Dale Daniel - Drums*

MARIA (Jennie Moyeda, Rick Shea BMI)

RS: It is written by Jennie Moyeda, who is my wife's mom. She called me "mijo" and sang to me in Spanish. She often helped me add Spanish verses on songs I was writing. She said she wrote MARIA about a favorite cousin of mine on my wife's side named Maria. She talked often about a Mexican film star from the '30s to the '50s named Maria Felix, who was beautiful and wonderful singer. She was a dynamic personality who lived an interesting life. So, I expect she was an influence. I've had that song for 20 years.

I loved my mother-in-law. She was wonderful to me. She always showed me songs she wrote, even though she didn't play any instruments. She was very musical and a very smart person in many ways. This was one that I recorded on a little tape recorder. I worked out the chord changes, which are a little complicated because it changes key with the melody when it goes to a dominant 7th. I then had her come back over and recorded her singing and me playing it. That was 20 years ago. She always asked if I would record it on one of my records. I said I eventually would but sadly she was gone by the time I started working with it.

My mother-in-law was on one of my records. On my CD Shelter Valley Blues on the song SWEET LITTLE POCHA at the end, she talks. I asked her to say things like "sweet little darlin" and things. When I took her to the studio and got the mic in front of her, it was really good. She did one take and I asked her if she wanted to do it again and she said, "No." [laughs] The one take was good.

I've always wanted to do something with MARIA but I know very little Spanish. I had to learn it. Christina Ortega did a transcription and translation. Celia Chavez helped also.

AM: Tell me about Celia Chavez.

RS: She's a great singer in a combo with her husband, Simon Penny. The band is called Penny Chaves. They're great together. I've known Simon from songwriter shows. Celia Chavez is a wonderful singer who has toured with major artists – a real pro.

When I worked out the arrangement with a click singing my part, I saw it as a duet. I wasn't sure who to do the duet part. My wife suggested Celia - a great suggestion. Then I took that to Eleanor and she played a perfect Spanish-style fiddle – harmony parts to my guitar parts. Tony came to my place to play the guitarrón - the big Spanish bass. It's a big guitar you see in the mariachi bands. It has no frets and very heavy-gauge nylon strings – in the old days they'd use gut strings. Tony has mastered that instrument. Then Cougar played percussion. I really like the way it came out.

Rick Shea - Nylon String Guitar & Vocals, Celia Chavez – Vocals, Eleanor Whitmore – Fiddle, Tony Zamora – Guitarrón, Cougar Estrada - Cajon & Maracas, Christina Ortega - Transcription and Translation

EL DIABLO MANDA (Rick Shea BMI)

RS: I wrote that after watching this craziness on the news -- Gestapo guys in military gear grabbing people out of their houses and now someone has been shot. I'm horri-

fied by it and thought what it's like from the victim's point of view. That same week that we were releasing the video for the song, is when the incident in Minnesota where Renee Good was shot down in her car. The video had even more meaning and I had to acknowledge my sympathy in a disclaimer with the video release. This is all madness.

The accordion player, Roberto, is from Tony's band Tremoloco. David Hidalgo agreed to play the accordion, but he was so busy with Lobos and couldn't fit it in the schedule. David is going to try do something with me in the future.

Rick Shea - Nylon String Guitar & Vocals, Tony Zamora – Bass, Cougar Estrada - Drums & Percussion, Celia Chavez - Background Vocals, Roberto Rodriguez III - Accordion

LONG BLACK VEIL (Danny Dill, Marijohn Wilkin BMI)

RS: It's a song I play electric with the band that has been in my repertoire for years. I loved this song the first time I heard Lefty Frizzell sing it when I was a kid, the story, his voice. It always goes over well. I just never got around to recording it.

Rick Shea - Acoustic Guitar & Electric Guitar, Vocals & Background Vocals, Tony Gilkyson - Electric Guitar, Jeff Turmes - Bass & Baritone Saxophone, Dale Daniel - Drums

DELIA (Rick Shea BMI)

AM: When I saw your title, I wondered if this is this the Delia from the famous folk murder ballad. After hearing the lyrics, I thought it could be from the point of view from Delia's previous lover who she rejected.

RS: I like that interpretation a lot, but I didn't intend it that way. I'm drawn to older-sounding names, especially those that have fallen out of use, and when I hit on Delia, it all fell into place. The story isn't mine, but I think a lot of us have been lost to someone we were close to, someone we loved and could no longer reach. It's a sad tale.

Rick Shea - Acoustic Guitar, Banjo, High Strung Guitar, Vocals & Background Vocals, Eleanor Whitmore - Fiddle & Bass Fiddle, Cougar Estrada – Cajon, James Cruce – Shaker, Celia Chavez - Background Vocals

ONE MORE NIGHT (Rick Shea, Wyman Reese BMI)

AM: This was originally recorded on your first album, The Buffalo Show in 1993, I see that piano player Wyman Reese cowrote it with you. On the original version there is very little piano and on this one no piano. What part did Wyman have in writing the song?

RS: Well, on ONE MORE NIGHT on The Buffalo Show that's not Wyman on piano, It's Gary Mandell. Wyman cowrote six songs on that album and it was really a 50/50 collaboration between us. Wyman is a wonderful guitar player. When I first met him it was his only instrument, so he wrote those songs on guitar. The way he became known as a piano player was, I think when he was in Chris Gaffney's band and they didn't always need another guitar player. So he took up the piano and he stuck with it. He got really

good and he's one of my favorite piano players.

For this song I had picked out the melody on a nylon-string guitar and I asked Wyman to figure out the chords that go with it. He came back with it, the bridge and some lyrics.

When I started recording for this album, I didn't have as many songs and I thought this one would be good with David Jackson on bass and James Cruce on drums. I've done lots of session work with David. I've gotten to know him pretty well.



Rick Shea - Electric Guitar & Vocals, David Jackson – Bass, James Cruce - Drums

TRAILRIDER (Rick Shea, Wyman Reese BMI)

RS: When my two boys were young, I spent a lot of time with them and I had this nylon-string guitar. I made up a riff that I'd play for my son Jesse and chase him around the room. I always liked it, so Wyman added to it. We played it first on the KPFFK's "Folkscene" Radio show with Brantley Kearns on fiddle. I thought of Doug Livingston to play on this recording, so I sent it to him. He liked it so much he did three versions of it. It fit him perfectly.

Rick Shea - Acoustic & Electric Guitars, Shawn Nourse – Drums, David Jackson – Bass, Doug Livingston - Pedal Steel

JUNIPER TREE (Rick Shea)

RS: This is me singing to Nora, our granddaughter. She was 6 months old. I took her outside in the beautiful desert in the morning where there's a few juniper trees. I'd sing to her. I tried recording at the property, but the quality wasn't good enough so I recreated it in the studio. So, I thought I'd include it as a hidden track.

Rick Shea – Vocals, Birds, Dogs and Kids - Internet

AM: Congratulations on a great album.

RS: Thanks. The album is getting a lot of airplay and making the charts. Reviews have been really good. I'm playing gigs, playing my own songs. Tony Gilkyson and I swap songs and accompany each other. I'm really happy doing this. —~~AM~~

Get the new CD Smoke Tree Road at RickShea.com or TresPescadores.com

When Big Joe Turner Ruled:

***Feel So Fine** is a definitive biography and discography of legendary blues and early rock-and-roll shouter "Big" Joe Turner. Written by Derek Collier and published by Hardinge Simpole in 2023, the 452-page book offers a deep dive into the singer's life, including a full discography, personal letters, and rare photos. Phil and Dave Alvin often mention that Big Joe was an early mentor.*

Review by Gary Stern

Big Joe Turner was a long-established star in the jazz and blues worlds when, in February of 1954, he recorded SHAKE, RATTLE AND ROLL for Atlantic Records. The rollicking release, featuring Turner's husky shout, was marketed as early rock 'n' roll, earning him a new, younger, racially mixed audience.

But only four months later, Bill Haley and His Comets, a white band with the support of white radio, recorded their own version – energetic, for sure, with toned-down lyrics. Their release went to No. 7 on the pop charts and sold over 1 million records.

Turner shrugged off the lost income and pop stature, according to the first complete biography of Turner, Big Joe Turner: Feel So Fine, by Derek Collier.

Turner not only toured extensively with Haley, but they became friends. "He's a nice fellow," Turner said. "I don't care, it don't make no difference to me. 'Nough money out there for all of us."

Collier's 2023 book is an exhaustive account of Turner's long musical life – his earliest gigs and back-breaking touring, his recording sessions on major and tiny labels, his popular peaks and valleys. Turner died in 1985 at 74.





The Blasters and Big Joe

Turner was, of course, an idol and mentor to Phil and Dave Alvin during the early years of the Blasters. The brothers pop up several times in the book, as does Lee Allen, who had a long musical association with Turner. Dave Alvin wrote about his and Phil's friendship with Turner in the song **BOSS OF THE BLUES** and about Haley's eventual demise in **HALEY'S COMET**, co-written with Tom Russell.

Coller, an Englishman, has written

about jazz for decades, and was in his mid-90s when the Turner book was published. Coller wrote that he took on the project as a tribute to "one of the great voices in jazz and blues."

He collected much of his material the old-fashioned way – from combing through hundreds of newspaper and magazine clippings and interviews that Turner and his associates gave over the decades. The book is filled with Turner's publicity photos and ads for his performances.

From Kansas City bars to Carnegie Hall

Coller describes how a wild cabaret and live music scene in Kansas City allowed a teenage Turner to tend bar and, before long, start singing from behind the bar. Turner would draw on a mustache with eyeliner pencil to get into some clubs. Turner didn't attend much school and, according to Coller's research, may have been only semi-literate.

The biggest names in jazz, like Duke Ellington and Count Basie, regularly came through KC and fell for Turner's voice. Coller quotes Basie as saying, "Big Joe was the singing bartender. He would sing his numbers right behind the bar while he was mixing drinks. He'd be hollering the blues and dipping that good taste."

By the time Turner was 19, he and pianist Pete Johnson were playing every joint in KC and sitting in with the best musicians in the nation, like sax legend Ben Webster. Coller: "When Big Joe burst into song, the entire neighborhood knew it. On some occasions, Turner would dispense with the amplifying system and, stepping into the street, 'begin calling his children home.' "

The legendary jazz producer and writer John Hammond heard Turner in KC and

invited him and Johnson to NYC in 1938 to play the Apollo Theater. Later in '38, Turner and Johnson performed at Carnegie Hall as part of Hammond's famed "From Spirituals to Swing" concert, which celebrated Black music, primarily jazz.

Also in late 1938 and '39, Turner started recording for the Vocalion label, putting down classic tracks like CHERRY RED. He was soon

cranking out singles for Vocalion and Decca, including sessions with piano great Art Tatum that produced CORRINA, CORRINA.

In 1945, Esquire magazine's Jazz Book named Turner its "best male vocalist" and Turner briefly ran his own club, Joe Turner's Blue Room, on Central Avenue in LA "Central Avenue in Los Angeles came to be the equivalent of Twelfth Street in Kansas City or 52nd Street in New York," Collier wrote.

Turner loved California and would return often, making LA his home base in the late '60s and putting him in position to mentor the Alvin boys.

He would often do two-or three-week stands at jazz clubs in Detroit, Chicago, NYC and New Orleans – regularly playing the Big Easy's Dew Drop Inn – before making his way back to the West Coast. The Pittsburgh Courier wrote of his coast-to-coast treks, referring to him in 1946 as the "world's greatest blues shouter," an already common moniker that would stick.

'A voice nobody can match'

Collier deftly reconstructs Turner's mercurial life: where and when he performed, the many recording sessions, his several marriages, lifelong problems with his weight and drinking, regular money problems, and having to deal with the inescapable racism of his day. Turner often played separate sets for white and black audiences.

But Turner is portrayed as an even-keeled man with simple needs and hard-earned wisdom, who was content if he had his next gig lined up and his audience appreciated his magisterial voice.



Phil, Dave, John Bazz, Big Joe and others at Rick's Blues bar 1976

Turner remained in great demand during the 1950s, playing with everyone from Basie to Ray Charles. The latter is quoted as saying: “That man had so much weeping in his voice. If it was just you and him in a room, he could sing the blues at you till you’d break down and cry.” Ahmet Ertegun, the legendary head of Atlantic Records, signed Turner, who soon recorded many of his signature songs, including THE CHILL IS ON, AFTER MY LAUGHTER CAME TEARS, and CHAINS OF LOVE. “He has a voice nobody can match,” Ertegun said.

Then came rock ‘n’ roll. Turner began appearing at rock reviews led by disc jockey Alan Freed (often featuring Fats Domino, Bo Diddley, Clyde McPhatter, LaVern Baker and Ruth Brown). Of the rock ‘n’ roll boom, Turner said, “It wasn’t but a different name for the same music I’ve been singing my whole life.”

In 1956, he took part in a much-publicized national tour with Haley and others, including Bo Diddley and the Drifters. Some shows in the South were picketed by those who said the tour was promoting racial integration.

Coller writes that Atlantic treated its Black artists better than other labels, but that Turner did not see the royalties he should have. Most of Turner’s singles sold between 50,000 and 200,000 copies, according to a 1963 letter by Nesuhi Ertegun of Atlantic Records, Ahmet’s brother.

On the sudden popularity of white rock stars, Turner said: “I made all those things before Haley and the others, but suddenly all the cats started jumping up, and I kinda got knocked down in the traffic.”

Winding down and making LA his base

Turner stayed busy during the 1960s, doing a British tour in ‘65 with top jazz



Photo: Gary Leonard

Big Joe and the Blasters at the Alvin's home

musicians like Ben Webster and a ‘66 tour with blues greats like Otis Rush and Junior Wells. But Turner’s commercial popularity had peaked.

On the West Coast, he started what would be a three-decade association with Johnny Otis, the bandleader and radio host. By the late ‘60s, Turner became a regular at the Ash

Grove in LA, often performing with the Johnny Otis Show, Pee Wee Crayton's band or James Harman's band. This was around the time when the young Alvin brothers became close to Turner.

He continued to tour widely, but was struggling in many ways. His weight would climb from the high 200s to the low 300s, too much for his 6-foot-1 frame. He talked in interviews about drinking too much. He developed arthritis in his legs and diabetes and began to use a cane, then crutches. Turner continued recording albums, many on the small Pablo label, but by the early '70s, he had little money coming in from his records or the songs he had written. Johnny Otis, in an interview, lamented the financial state of Turner and other greats from his era: "They're national treasures, but the way they've been treated is a national disgrace."



Photo: Gary Leonard

Fans with Big Joe and Phil

In 1974, Turner celebrated his 50th year in show business at the Oldies But Goodies club in Hollywood. A fine 1978 film, The Last of the Blue Devils, available on YouTube, captured Turner at a 1974 reunion of Kansas City musicians.

Through the late '70s and early '80s, Turner took longer breaks from the road. When he did

perform, it was in a chair. He often looked frail and ashen before taking the stage, but when the music started his voice could evoke the past. When he performed for several weeks in 1982 at Tramps in NYC, doing two shows a night, one critic wrote: "Joe Turner is singing with as much power and majesty as he ever has."

Turner kept performing and recording until shortly before his death on Nov, 24, 1985. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987 as part of its second class, all legends of American music.

Coller's book concludes with an incredibly detailed discography, which includes all available information about the musicians who played at each session. In telling Turner's story, Coller outlined an integral period for jazz, blues and early rock 'n' roll.

Biography notes Big Joe Turner's impact on Dave and Phil Alvin

A complete biography of Big Joe Turner should reference his musical and personal impact on Phil and Dave Alvin, and Derek Collier's book hits the mark.

When Collier gets to 1971, more than halfway into the book and Turner's long career, he notes that the Alvins were to become "keen advocates of Turner's music during the last decade or so of his life, offering him encouragement and learning from him." He points to the back cover of the Alvins' 2015 Lost Time album, which features a photo of a boyish Dave and a confident-looking Phil with Turner and others outside Rick's Blues Bar in Venice.

Collier quotes Dave as saying that when they met Turner, he was at the end of his prime. "He taught my brother a lot about singing and there were certain, almost Zen-like qualities to things he would say, advice he would give, rules I live by to this day."

Come 1982, Collier writes, Turner was playing the Club Lingerie in Hollywood backed by the Lee Allen Orchestra – with Phil on harmonica, Bill Bateman on drums, Gene Taylor on piano, Larry Taylor on bass and Steve Berlin on baritone sax.

Turner first recorded with Allen, the Alvins' other musical hero, in 1953, when Allen was in Fats Domino's group, and they would perform together many times through the decades.

Collier later writes about the Lost Time album's inclusion of four Turner classics

– three Turner compositions, CHERRY RED BLUES, WEE BABY BLUES and FEELING HAPPY, plus HIDE AND SEEK. He again quotes Dave, this time from The Blasters/Dave Alvin Newsletter (issue 59), talking about when Phil's band backed up Turner, young Dave acted as his manager,



**The Blasters backing Big Joe at Club Lingerie in Hollywood
September 15, 1983**

and the brothers would drive Turner home after a gig. On one particular night, Turner was “feeling no pain and he said: ‘Let’s drive down Central Avenue.’ It was a ghost town at this point, but Joe pointed out where all the clubs were and where he sang and everybody played. It was one of the great memories of my life.”

These memories would inspire Dave’s song BOSS OF THE BLUES on his sole album with the Guilty Women.

In 1984, Collier notes, Turner played several all-star shows on the West Coast, including one in Los Angeles that also featured Percy Mayfield and John Lee Hooker, with the Alvins and Bateman in the opening band.

In the book’s final pages, when Collier writes of Turner’s death, he notes that the Alvin brothers played at a benefit at the Music Machine in LA to raise money for a grave marker for Turner, his wife, Patricia Turner, and his sister, Katie Bryant.

And the book closes – before its many appendixes and indexes – with Dave’s image-evoking poem about Big Joe from his poetry anthology “Nana, Big Joe and the Fourth of July.” The poem concluded:

**every blues song
every song that ever swung
every Chicago ballad
and New York rhythm and blues shuffle
every Saturday night kiss
every Sunday night tear
everything that was good and right
everything that had love for the world
is in a grave in Gardena.**

—AM

Dave Alvin 2026: “There was talk of a “Big Joe Turner and the Blasters” album back in the 80s. It was going to happen. We had a record deal. I was going to write a few songs for it and play on some. Gene Taylor was going to be on all of it. We were going to cover every aspect of Big Joe Turner’s career from Kansas City jazz to jump blues to rock ‘n’ roll. Someone who will remain nameless scotched the idea, because he wasn’t gonna be the one in charge, [laughs] and that’s all I’ll say. Not doing that album, is my big regret.”

Flashback Excerpt: Big Joe Turner on The Blasters 1982

Goldmine Magazine November 1982

Interview by James Austin

James Austin: Where did you first meet the Blasters and Lee Allen?

Joe Turner: Well, when I met them boys, I used to work in a nightclub, so Dave Alvin and them used to come around all the time and hang out with me, so Phil Alvin picked up on songs that I was singin' and he's got some records that I ain't got. He sings songs that I sang years ago that I done forgot and he got 'em down pat.

James Austin: Do you think you'll ever get together again with the group you appeared with at the Club Lingerie (Lee Allen, tenor sax; Steve Berlin, baritone; Gene Taylor, piano; Phil Alvin, guitar; Ike Williams, trumpet; Larry Taylor, bass)? As far as I was concerned, that was one of the best concerts I've ever seen. It was enjoyable and exciting. You were up there for about an hour and a half performing with the same kind of intensity that you did in past years. I hope you can get together with them again.

Joe Turner: Well, I sure hope so 'cause they really moved me! I enjoyed that band tremendously. I was really excited. I could hardly stay in my seat, they was cookin' so good! I was amazed. I had to turn around and watch them. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. They was goin' to town so good. At first they said that they wanted to have a rehearsal, so the fella that was supposed to pick me up, he thought somebody else was gonna pick me up. So, I was at home waitin' on them all day long. So, we didn't have a rehearsal; they had a rehearsal, but I wasn't there. So, we didn't know how it was gonna go over. So, I told 'em: "Well if they play the blues or rock 'n roll. . . " I know Phil Alvin and them came over and said: "They know all your songs Joe, so you don't have to worry." So, I said: "Well now, the songs Phil's singin', I don't sing no more." So, I was wonderin' how in the devil is this gonna happen? The songs he likes to sing are the songs that I used to do, but I very seldom sing anymore. I forgot 'em. Then somebody mentioned it to me, and it all came back, ya know. So, I said: "Well, Okay, we'll get together. I'll come on to work." When they called me up on the bandstand I said: "Uh oh! Here it is now, no chance in trying to squirm out of it now. It's too late." So, we got up there and on the first number they played, I said "Well now, they sounded good! This ain't gonna be no trouble. If they play that good by themselves, well, they gonna play alright for me."

James Austin: Well, I know for myself and everyone that was there that it was an important event in rhythm and blues. The crowd was immensely appreciative of your style and what you've done for boogie-woogie and R&B. There was a real reverence and appreciation for Joe Turner, a man who has contributed so much to black music. Now, what about today's music? Is there anything about today's mu-

sic that you like?

Joe Turner: Well, I like it all. Music is part of me and I enjoy music period. But that long hair stuff. . . I don't understand it so good. I don't know what's happenin'. Some of it they play, is so far out that you don't know what the devil they doin'. You never know what they playin', and when they get through, you don't know what the song was.

James Austin: I want to thank you for all the music you provided us with in the past and are going to provide us with in the future.

Joe Turner: Well, Thank you very much. I appreciate that and I hope to see you again.

Fans And Friends Turn Out In L.A. To Honor Big Joe Turner

by David Adelson

LOS ANGELES — "I love singing. That's my whole life," said 72-year-old Big Joe Turner. "I had my ups and downs, good times and bad times like everyone else but I have devoted my whole life to singing."

Call him "Boss Of The Blues," "The World's Greatest Blues Shouter" or a founding father of rock & roll, each title he unquestionably deserves. After six and one half decades of performing, composing, recording ("Roll em Pete," "Shake, Rattle & Roll," "Flip, Flop & Fly," "Corrina, Corrina" and many others), Joe Turner was honored by his friends and fans in a moving tribute at Los Angeles' Music Machine. An incredibly diverse selection of musicians showed up to honor a man they deem a living legend.

Joe Turner may not be a wealthy man (though many claim he deserves to be), but the capacity crowd that showed up at the Music Machine on a Sunday evening let him know that if love and respect count for anything, he'd be in a much higher tax bracket today.

Among the performers to pay honor to Turner were: Bonnie Raitt and her band, Jimmy Witherspoon, Pee Wee Crayton, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, John Doe of X, The Blasters (Phil Alvin, Dave Alvin, Gene Taylor, Bill Bateman), Harmonica Fats, Sam Taylor, Joe Houston, Tony Matthews, Lorraine Williams, Juke Logan and L.A.'s infamous Rhythm Pigs, which served as the house band in an incredible show of stamina.

Turner and his wife Pat were presented with a plaque as well as the night's proceeds which exceeded \$3,000.

The show was the brainchild of Betty and Jack Miller. The two are the moving forces behind The Southern California Blues Society, a non-profit organization that sponsors Blues concerts and was the sponsor of the Turner tribute. They are also close friends of the Turners. "It's an injustice that a man like Joe Turner has not really received his just compensation for all he has contributed to modern music," said Betty Miller. "Joe is a very proud man and so we decided to keep it a secret that we were giving him the night's proceeds. This is only a fraction of what he deserves."

Dave Alvin, lead guitarist for The Blasters, had just completed two sold-out shows at Hollywood's Palace and was understandably tired when he and the band arrived at the tribute. The Blasters are currently one of the hottest bands in the city and they appear on the verge of breaking nationally (the new LP is due out shortly on WB/Slash). "A lot of the



(Photo: Gary Leonard)

MEETING WITH THE BOSS — Phil Alvin (r) of The Blasters talks with Big Joe Turner after the band joined him in a medley of old classics at "A Tribute To Big Joe Turner." The show was sponsored by The Southern California Blues Society at L.A.'s Music Machine.

Blasters attitude comes from Big Joe Turner," said Alvin. "It's how to be a survivor. The guy loves what he does. He loves the music." The Blasters have been close to Turner for years, often paying tribute to him during performances. They have appeared on stage together numerous times.

Alvin touched on a sentiment echoed by many at the show. Despite all the pain that Joe Turner has experienced, pain that is inherent in the lives of black blues artists trying to carve out a living, Joe Turner remained true to his music. It is his life.

"The sad thing is that nobody could do this for Percy Mayfield and others while they were still living," said Alvin. "I think it's important to let them know we care." The guitarist related how Roy Brown ("Good Rockin' At Midnight") once remarked to him how Joe Turner would outlive them all. "Well he out lived Roy as well as Elvis and Bill Haley," said Alvin.

Joe Turner was nominated for a Grammy Award for the fourth time in his career. He has never won. His Pablo recording "Kansas City Here I Come" is a stirring collection that may garner Turner his first statuette. Though he won't come out and say it, close friends of the singer say it is one of his great aspirations to win the award. No comment from Big Joe.

Turner's wife Pat summed it up by saying, "the fans don't know the sacrifices he's had to make. They don't know the pain he's had to deal with. The man is a survivor. I mean he'll go to a show at night hurting so bad, I'll beg him to stay home. He won't. Singing is his life, it's his love."

IN THE STUDIO

Bill BARD 1985

AMERICAN MUSIC: The Blasters / Dave Alvin newsletter

editor/writer: Billy Davis copy editor: Nick Cristiano writer: Tom Wilk

www.BlastersNewsletter.com E-mail List: davistb@aol.com

Facebook.com/The Blasters and Dave Alvin Newsletter

BIG JOE TURNER 1911-1985

Joe Turner's death on November 24, 1985, marked the loss of one of the originators (along with Jimmy Rushing) of blues shouting. Turner's vocal style was a significant influence on countless other blues singers, including Jimmy Witherspoon, Wynonie Harris, and Smiley Lewis, and he wrote many songs that have become blues and rock standards. Almost two decades ago in *Jazz on Record*, Paul Oliver succinctly summarized Turner's music: "Joe Turner can take the most innocuous song and invest it with tremendous significance. He has a big, commanding voice which has served as the inspiration for many singers, from Jimmy Witherspoon downwards, and it is interesting to observe that when rock 'n' roll became popular during the 1950s Joe was able to stage a comeback without any alteration to his basic singing style."

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, on May 18, 1911, Joseph Vernon Turner grew up singing with a local blind singer on street corners and in public parks for tips. After his father's death Joe quit school and began working as a cook/waiter. During the depression era Kansas City became a major center of jazz, boasting many great bands and a 24-hour nightlife. From this world of non-stop hot music emerged such big bands as the Clouds of Joy and Bennie Moten's Orchestra (and, later, Count Basie and Jay McShann). After a regular evening's work, some of spots would feature all-night jams and cutting contests. By the mid '30s Joe was tending bar at the Sunset Club, one of the best clubs in Kansas City. At the Sunset, pianist Pete Johnson would play some thunderous boogie woogie when Joe felt like singing. In *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest* Ross Russell observed, "One of the first public address systems in town was installed behind the bar for Joe Turner's use, although he didn't really need it because he had a voice with the quality and dynamics of a trumpet, enough to fill a club larger than the Sunset. The system was connected to a loudspeaker over the door of the club and facing the important intersection of Twelfth Street with Paseo and Highland. When Big Joe, backed by the two-man rhythm section, burst into song, the entire neighborhood knew it, and people loitering on the streets, trying to make up their minds as to which of several clubs situated there would draw their patronage, were moved over to enter the Sunset. On some occasions, Turner would dispense with the amplifying system and, stepping into the street, begin calling his children home."

The great drummer Jo Jones (who also recently passed away) remembered playing behind Joe at the Sunset. In the Nat Shapiro/Nat Hentoff book *Hear Me Talkin' To You*, Jones recalled, "There was a place close by (across the street in fact) called the Lone Star. Joe Turner would start to sing the blues at the Sunset, and then he'd go across the street and sing the blues at the Lone Star, and we were still playing all this time. Joe would socialize there for a while and stop in front and have breakfast and then he'd come back in to the Sunset, go up to the microphone, and sing some more blues and we'd have been playing all the time."

Similarly, Mary Lou Williams remembered, "Now the Sunset had a bartender named Joe Turner, and while Joe was serving drinks he would suddenly pick up a clue for a blues and sing it where he stood, with Pete playing piano for him. I don't think I'll ever forget the thrill of listening to Big Joe Turner shouting and sending everybody, night after night, while mixing drinks."

While the Sunset Club was his main job, Joe did tour a bit with Andy Kirk and the Clouds of Joy (with whom Mary Lou Williams played piano), Bennie Moten's orchestra and the embryonic Count Basie band. In 1936 he first appeared at the Apollo rather



Pee Wee Crayton and Big Joe Turner, Santa Barbara, Cal., September 25, 1978 (Bill Mead)

unsuccessfully, but a couple of years later his career changed directions when he and Pete Johnson participated in the famous "Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall. Some of his performances were issued on Vanguard's documentation of the concerts, and more recently one track showed up on *Unfinished Boogie*, the last volume in Magpie's Piano Blues series.

After the Carnegie Hall concert, Turner joined Johnson and boogie woogie pianists Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis at Barney Josephson's Cafe Society, one of the first integrated cabarets in New York. He also started a recording career that would continue for almost 50 years, making his initial recordings with Johnson, some using a band that included Hot Lips Page and alto saxophonist Buster Smith. (Some of these have been reissued on a Columbia album, *The Original Boogie Woogie Piano Giants*). Joe continued to record modestly (mainly for Decca) until after World War II (partly because of the Petrillo recording ban), accompanied by various musicians including stride pianist Willie The Lion Smith, and a great band led by the incredible Art Tatum. (Some of these sides have been reissued on a fine MCA budget release, *Early Big Joe*). In late 1944, with Meade Lux Lewis, Joe recorded two soundies, though Joe did not appear on film, merely doing a voice-over for a black comedian (these have been reissued on the Magpie album). Turner by this time had settled on the West Coast and appeared in a Duke Ellington musical, *Jump for Joy*. Ellington had heard Turner with Pete Johnson at the Sunset when the Ellington band was in Kansas City.

In 1945, Joe gained a contract with National Records and at his first session, backed by a band with his old friend Pete Johnson, he made a fine cover of Saunders King's *S.K. Blues*. Joe had several other sessions for National and was backed by a variety of musicians. These were collected a few years back on Savoy (*Have No Fear, Big Joe is Here*). Joe recorded prolifically in the late 40s for a number of small labels. One memorable session teamed him with Wynonie Harris and recently was reissued in its entirety, along with

sides Joe recorded for Aladdin and Imperial, by Pathe-Marconi (*Jumpin' Tonight*). The Imperial sides included Dave Bartholomew's famous studio band and Fats Domino on piano and were quite good. Turner also made some fine sessions with Pete Johnson and members of Jay McShann's band for the Down Beat label which are available on an excellent Arhoolie album, *Jumpin' the Blues*. Jeff Hannusch, in his liner notes to *Jumpin' Tonight*, states that Joe was resident in New Orleans for a period and he was probably also resident awhile in New York.

Turner also briefly appeared in Count Basie's Big Band. At this time in the early '50s, however, his career was in a down phase when he was performing New York's Apollo Theater. It was at the Apollo that Ahmet Ertegun approached him about recording for Atlantic and Turner's career soon took an upward turn. Beginning with Ertegun's own tune *Chains of Love*, a great blues ballad, Turner made a series of fine and well-known recordings (which probably brought him his greatest commercial success) for Atlantic, including *Sweet Sixteen*, *Shake Rattle and Roll*, *TV Mama* (recorded in Chicago with Elmore James, Little Johnnie Jones and Odie Payne), *Honey Hush* (recorded in New Orleans), *Flip, Flop and Fly*, and *Corrine, Corrina*. Several of his tunes were covered by young white artists such as Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, and Pat Boone. Just as younger shouters like Jimmy Witherspoon and Wynonie Harris were influenced by Joe Turner, so were the young rock 'n' roll singers. Joe also waxed some jazz-oriented recordings for Atlantic, including the fabulous *The Boss of the Blues* which reunited Turner with Pete Johnson, along with long-time Basie rhythm guitarist Freddie Green, trombonist Lawrence Brown and saxophonist Frank Wess. Subtitled "Joe Turner Sings Kansas City Jazz," this album is in my opinion the one indispensable Joe Turner album. Pete Johnson, who would suffer a stroke shortly after this session, was in superb form and his thunderous solo on *Roll 'Em Pete* is still thrilling on repeated listening. Joe is in as good a voice on this record as any by him I have heard—he really tears into the songs and the band is superb with great

Ernie Henry arrangements. This is simply classic stuff. Joe would only record with Pete once more, at a live Carnegie Hall recording to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the "Spirituals to Swing" concert. Shortly thereafter Pete Johnson died in Buffalo, New York. Joe also was a participant in the 1966 American Blues & Folk Festival and recordings of him with Otis Rush on guitar were issued in East Germany and West Germany.

After Atlantic, Joe recorded in 1964 for Coral and then for ABC BluesWay. After producer Bob Thiele started his own Flying Dutchman label and BluesTime subsidiary, he recorded an LP by Joe as well as an entertaining "supersession" album which brought Joe together with T-Bone Walker and Otis Spann. Turner was also a featured performer on the Johnny Otis Show's live recording at the Monterey Jazz Festival. Johnny Otis later produced an excellent album by Joe on the Blues Spectrum label. By this time Los Angeles was once again Joe's home.

In his last decade, Joe did receive some national media attention. His first New York appearance in years, with Lloyd Glenn at Barney Josephson's The Cookery, was publicized in the *New York Times* and Joe performed extensively in New York after that with long engagements at The Cookery, and later at Tramps (often in the company of pianist Ernie Hayes, tenor saxophonist Eddie Chamblee, guitarist Billy Butler and drummer Belton Evans), as well as shorter jobs at the Lone Star Cafe and Fat Tuesday (where he was splendidly backed by Jay McShann). When I was doing a blues show on Buffalo radio station WBFO-FM, we brought Joe in to the Tralfamadore Cafe during a fundraising week in May, 1977. I was lucky to be MC for Joe and Lloyd Glenn, though not everything ran smoothly as we hired some young musicians who could handle any John Coltrane tune but fought a battle with the blues. It wasn't until the last night that the backing started to mesh. Joe wasn't



Big Joe Turner, Tramps Nite Club, New York City September 1981 (Sharyn Felder)

overly happy with the band, but he and Lloyd played some good music nonetheless. He and Lloyd were warmly received and he showed he still had the power of his younger days.

Turner recorded for a number of labels in his last few years, highlighted by a long association with Norman Granz's Pablo company. Many of his later albums featured long instrumental jams between Joe's vocals, and one album (not on Pablo) incongruously included a washboard player and an awful female vocalist which didn't help things too much. Of his latter-day recordings *The Bosses* with Count Basie is a particularly fine album. With the help of Doc Pomus, Joe also recorded some strong performances with the revivalist band Roomful of Blues for the Muse label. Joe had recorded some of Doc Pomus's songs while with Atlantic, and Pomus helped Big Joe collect some overdue royalties and otherwise helped straighten out Joe's business affairs. (See the following article by Doc Pomus.)

Issues 11 and 12 of *Blues & Rhythm* have more extensively examined Joe's recordings and provided a discography of his work through 1964.

Several of Joe's performances were also captured on film. Joe, Jay McShann and Count Basie were the central performers in Bruce Richter's splendid film on Kansas City jazz, *The Last of the Blue Devils*, which featured a splendid version of *Roll 'Em Pete* with McShann playing some outstanding piano. Videos of the old variety show *Showtime at the Apollo* contain clips of Joe miming songs like *Shake Rattle and Roll*. David Meeker's *Jazz in the Movies* (1977 edition) indicates that portions of the Johnny Otis Show's live 1970 Monterey Jazz Festival performance were included in the 1973 film *Monterey Jazz*. Joe also appeared in a 1956 film, *Shake, Rattle, and Rock!*, and there were many others.

Joe was deservedly elected to the Blues Hall of Fame as part of the Handy Awards, and was nominated several times for a Grammy, though he was disappointed that he never won, according to the *New York Times*. I'm sure Joe's death was noted by at least one performer at the 1986 Grammy ceremony, and certainly at least one Joe Turner recording will make the Grammy Hall of Fame, but it is unfortunate that this recognition couldn't have occurred during his lifetime.

In recent years, Joe still sang with power, but he couldn't always negotiate around the tunes as he did in his younger days. This was more noticeable on recordings, but in person, one could easily be transfixed by the man, sitting in a chair (diabetes and other illnesses had long forced him to use a cane or other support) with eyes closed and belting out those same blues he had been singing for over 50 years.

In Buffalo and in New York, where I saw him often, I got to know Joe a little, and I never met any performer of Joe's stature who was so friendly and warm. I know that I am not alone in feeling this—his fans loved the man as well as his music. I know we will never see the likes of Big Joe Turner again, but we do have the memories and recordings of a big man with a big heart and voice, and we should be grateful that we had the chance to listen to his music and see him perform for such a period of time. We will remember Big Joe with much love and fondness and we will continue to listen to his music for years to come.

Because of his serious illnesses, there were extensive hospital bills at his death, and benefits were held in New York as well as Los Angeles for his many friends to show their last respects. Condolences and contributions may be sent to his widow, Pat Turner, 6121 Cimarron, Los Angeles CA 90047.

—Ron Weinstock

Doc Pomus Remembers

Doc Pomus, the veteran New York R&B songwriter and singer, was a long-time friend of Big Joe Turner. Pomus composed or co-authored some of the songs Turner recorded for Atlantic, including Boogie Woogie Country Girl, Still In Love, and Don't You Cry. Doc wrote the following personal reminiscences and impressions of Big Joe Turner in 1981. Rather than re-editing this into an obituary, we thought it appropriate to publish Doc's article as it was written, in tribute to Big Joe.

—Ed.

I've known about Joe Turner since 1941, when I first heard *Piney Brown Blues*. It wasn't until 1947 that I saw him for the first time. It was at the Baby Grand in Harlem and he was overwhelming—larger than life in appearance and ability. The next day I met him at Atlantic Records. We were both there for different appointments and we bumped into each other in the waiting room.* I was almost unable to speak because I was in such awe of the man. Then Herb Abramson and Ahmet Ertegun, the two top officials, introduced us and told him I was a songwriter. Joe asked me to write some songs for him and that started a relationship that has lasted ever since—and I'm proud to say that Joe and Pat, his wife, consider me family and we spend as much time together as our schedules allow and if Joe is on the coast and I'm in New York we're yakking on the phone every few days. You know, as the years go by, the difference in age diminishes and now Joe is 70 and I am 56 and we're the same age.

Joe is shy and non-verbal. If he likes you he calls you "cousin," and if he really likes you—he'll quietly tell you stories about yesterday and today and they're always interesting and colorful and to the point. Joe doesn't read or write too well—but for someone who's never had formalized schooling or a manager he's had an

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amazing career and uncanny instincts about people and life and money.

I remember, in 1978, during his last engagement at The Cookery in New York, a president of a record company approached Joe and reminded him about their experience together. Joe smiled politely and the gentleman moved on. Later that evening Joe told me *that* record company owed him plenty of money. I was furious—but Joe said too many people get sick today worrying about yesterday. He told me stories about women, houses, and cars he left behind—a new city always meant a new day. But one time it backfired.

Joe left New Orleans in 1969 or thereabouts and moved to Los Angeles and left New Orleans and everything that was part of it behind—including his address. Well, Chappell Music Publishing Company, the payer of his royalties for all the songs he had written that he and other artists had recorded, had never been notified of the change of address. Subsequently, all the current royalties were being sent to the New Orleans address. Joe wasn't aware of this and the only way he found out was when yours truly, several years ago, started talking about songs and *Flip, Flop, and Fly* came up. Joe told me he had written *Fly* and many other songs under the pseudonym of "Lou Willie Turner," his late, ex-wife's name. The reason he did this was because he took for granted that he would die first and to avoid any litigation, the songs were written under her name.

I asked Joe if he had received money from the Blues Brothers album. Knowing the album had gone "platinum," I figured Joe was in good shape. He looked at me strangely and said he hadn't received any royalties since he had left

New Orleans. I mentioned "Chappell Music" and asked if he had sent them a forwarding address. He shook his head and I called the Chappell Music accounting department immediately. They had just sent out a check for mucho dinero to New Orleans. They had been doing this for years, and for years the checks had been endorsed and used. Joe knew nothing of this. The Blues Brothers check was held up and eventually Joe proved that "Lou Willie" and "Joe" Turner were one and the same person in terms of writer credits, and Joe got the windfall and the retroactive money is still due. Today he receives all current royalty monies at the L.A. address.

Joe told me how Pete Johnson used to beat him out of royalties and finally Joe got hip and socked it to him. Here is what Pete had been doing: Joe would discuss the material he had written several days before the session with Pete, and then Pete would go to the publisher or record company and present the material and claim that he had co-written it with Joe. Joe got hip to this and figured out a way of circumventing this by not telling Pete anything about the songs until the actual session. This way the publisher and record company could not hear the songs prior to the session and realized that Johnson was also listening to it for the first time and in no way could have co-written the songs.

Joe talks about the differences between today and yesterday and somehow the current "gin mill" reality says it all. Quoting Joe: "Years ago you could go to a bar and if you had to go to the bathroom, you could leave any kind of money on the counter—stay away as long as you wanted—and when you came back—it was still

all there. Today—put your money out there, turn your head away for a minute and it's gone!"

Joe tells a great story about a good luck charm that an ancient African had given him in Kansas City. Ostensibly, if you rubbed the charm, "a huge pit from some unidentifiable fruit," you would have extraordinarily good luck. Joe brought it to New York during his long Cafe Society engagement. People had heard about the "pit" and they were coming from near and far to rub it. Even Walter Winchell, the dean of Broadway columnists, heard about it and wrote it up. Barney Josephson, proprietor of Cafe Society, believed in the charm so much that every evening that he anticipated bad business he would rub and rub the "pit" and if he had a good night he would swear that it was responsible. Finally things started to get out of hand with people constantly looking for Joe and "his magic pit" and people hovering around just to rub the pit. This was going on day and night, and on and on . . . so Joe, one evening, went to the "john," dropped the pit into the bowl, and flushed the toilet. "Goodbye African pit good luck charm!"

Pat, Joe's lovely and devoted wife and companion, is constantly at his side. She is a wonderful and warm combination of a homebody, who in a minute's notice is ready to get out there and hang out all night with Joe, listening to some sounds in some funky or high class nightclub, making small or big talk with the smallest or the biggest people.

—Doc Pomus
September 1981

* Atlantic Records was founded in 1947, although Joe Turner did not record for Atlantic until 1951.



Big Joe Turner and Doc Pomus, Tramps Nite Club, New York City September 1981 (Sharyn Felder)