BLUES IN BRITAIN

The No.1 UK print and digital blues magazine

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Still On That Hard Road Highway

Samantha Fish
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Richard Clarke
HeavyDrunk &
Watermelon Slim

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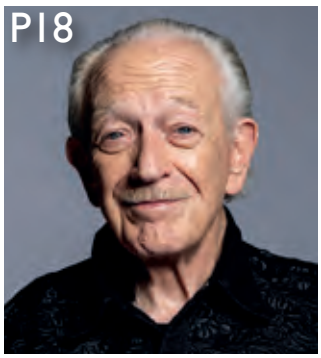
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Welcome

I had the pleasure of chatting to Paul Jones on the phone in early April, as a part of our fond look back at the life and times of Bernie Marsden, whose *Icons* album will be released in May. Paul was heading out to play on a couple of dates in mid-April with Van Morrison and his band at Belfast's Mandela Hall (they'll already have taken place by the time you read this). I was interested in finding out whether, if you're invited to appear as a guest artist, you just turn up and hope for the best (fingers crossed you know the required song or it'll be a 10-minute version of 'Crossroads'), or whether there are rehearsals beforehand, especially in an instance such as this, with an artist as influential as Van.

"Apparently I'm turning up the day before," Paul (who must have done more 'walk-ons' than many a musician) confirmed. "And, yes, there will be rehearsals and the soundcheck on the day. The only trouble is that Van often has the inclination to change his mind on what songs he's going to do, and when in the set." We agreed that we both reckoned that's how it must be with Dylan too, if you're circling in his orbit. Everything you think won't happen, does and everything you've prepared for, doesn't. Lightning in a bottle.

"Van performed at one of my annual charity concerts, in the days they were held at Cranleigh Arts Centre. He gave a list of about eight songs to the band, ones he might do. One was 'Georgia On My Mind' and I asked him if he wanted me to play on that. He said, 'No Paul, you sit that one out', so at the gig I was watching him from the wings and, sure enough, half way through the song, he turns and waves me on! Many have been the times with Van where I've ended up doing more than I thought I was going to do, and times when he's asked me to be there and I've not played a thing! But I absolutely love Van and I have to say, on multi-artist events, he doesn't close the bill. On this particular night, Bernie was there too and Van said he wasn't closing the show. Bernie went on after Van and went down a storm! People loved Bernie!"

Nicholas John
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OUT AND ABOUT



As we rushed to press with this issue, late night glad tidings arrived with the news that **Alice Armstrong** had won first place at the **European Blues Challenge**, held in Split in Croatia. With her trusty band, **Stevie Watts**, **Kev Hickman**, **Olly Knight-Smith** and **Josh Rigal**, she'd roared through the semis on the 3rd April to reach the finals, which were held two days later on the 5th April, culminating in her tournament winning performance. Blues In Britain's **Denise Lester** was the first to interview Alice as she got off stage (check out our Facebook and Instagram pages) and there will be a full review of the whole competition in next month's issue, along with an interview with Alice herself.

Congratulations from everyone here at Blues In Britain! ***(Images by Denise Lester)***









"Concentrating only on harp mics now, **Fat Tone Amps** return with the all-new **Fire Ball** microphone, the perfect partner to the acclaimed **Fat Ball** microphone." And if that sounds like a plug, then we're happy to admit it! Our very own harp player and feature writer, **Mark Cole** is delighted to be working with Fat Tone, saying: "Designed for comfort and featuring a boost button to amplify mid-range frequencies, the Fire Ball creates a big, fat Chicago sound that'll make you stand out on every solo!" Fat Tone's strapline for the mic is: "Ignite your harp sound — try the Fire Ball today!" Find out more at: **fat-tone-amps.co.uk**





Recorded "live, in one room in one day" in Sheffield, in January this year, **Emma Wilson** has released a new 6-track EP (or mini-album) entitled ***A Spoonful Of Willie Dixon***, her third release distributed through Memphis-based Select-O-Hits. Reviewed in this issue, the release was sparked by Emma visiting Clarksdale and recording Willie's 'Hoochie Coochie Ma(ma)' on her previous album, ***Memphis Calling***. Emma was inspired to sing more of Dixon's songs, including 'Spoonful', 'I Can't Quit You Baby' and 'Wang Dang Doodle', all recorded with her British band. She's pictured here with Blues In Britain's **Caroline Bradshaw** after her recent performance at the Ryedale Blues Club in Malton, Yorkshire.



Blues In Britain columnist and blues musician **Rebecca Downes** is lining up an album of new, original material for release on 31st October. Her headline gig at Solid Entertainment's **100 Club Tuesday Blues** on 28th October in London will be the album launch event. More immediately, she'll be releasing a digital covers EP called ***Stranger Blue,*** prompted by wanting to bring her five most recent singles together on streaming platforms.



Aaron and **Grace Bond**, better known in these pages as the mighty **When Rivers Meet**, took delivery recently of the vinyl stocks of their new album ***Addicted To You***, which will be released on the **23rd May, 2025** on digital platforms, CD and (by the look of it here) amazing, coloured vinyl LPs.

Because the Blues In Britain reviewing team exists 24/7 in a state of perpetual readiness, Grace and Aaron trusted us with a precious early review copy so **Liz Medhurst** could give her verdict on the album in this very issue. Responsibility wears lightly on our shoulders. And watch out for a full feature with When Rivers Meet in an upcoming issue.





Working with record companies is always fun and we love it when labels show their appreciation in the form of nicely-designed social media posts featuring the magazine. Here's a couple from **Ruf Records** for our page on **Ghalia Volt** in our March issue and last month's feature on the mighty **Popa Chubby**, which obviously pleased **Gulf Coast Records**. It pleased us too!

Most Played Album Top 40 – March 2025

Collated From The Playlists Of The Independent Blues Broadcasters Association Members

Pos	Artist	Album
1	Will Wilde	*Blues Is Still Alive*
2	The 2.19	*Keep My Will Strong*
3	Catfish	*Time To Fly*
4	Giles Robson & John Primer	*Ten Chicago Blues Classics*
5	Andy Fairweather Low	*The Invisible Bluesman*
6	Travellin' Blue	*Take The Edge Off*
7	The Too Bad Jims	*Over The Hill - A Tribute To RI Burnside*
8	Melon Jelly	*The Road To Memphis*
9	Juke Joint Kings	*Can't Be Satisfied*
10	John Doe Trio	*Jd Iii*
11	Vince Lee & Sophie Lord	*Out In The Sticks Vol. 2*
12	Bob Corritore & Friends	*Doin' The Shout!*
13	Johnny Burgin	*Ramblin' From Coast To Coast*
14	Erja Lyytinen	*Smell The Roses*
15	Emma Wilson	*A Spoonful Of Willie Dixon*
16	Fabrizio Poggi	*Healing Blues*
17	Kid Ramos	*Strange Things Happening*
18	Little Feat	*Strike Up The Band*
19	Eddie 9v	*Saratoga*
20	Tommy Castro & The Painkillers	*Closer To The Bone*
21	Jimmy Vivino	*Gonna Be 2 Of Those Days*
22	Reverend Peyton's Big Damn Band	*Honeysuckle*
23	Ally Venable	*Money & Power*
24	Cecilya & The Candy Kings	*Parisian Mambo*
25	Robbert Duijf	*Silver Spoon*
26	Wily Bo Walker	*The Rattlin' Bone Theatre Show Volume 1*
27	Larkin Poe	*Bloom*
28	The Davidson Trio	*Cougar*
29	Southern Avenue	*Family*
30	Lr Phoenix (Leighton Phoenix)	*If The Devil Sang The Blues*
31	Jim Kahr	*Keepin' It Hot*
32	The Jake Leg Jug Band	*Live At Green Note*
33	Eric Johanson	*Live In Mississippi*
34	Jarkka Rissanen & Sons Of The Desert	*Mixed Waste*
35	Guy Verlinde & Tom Eylenbosch	*Promised Land Blues*
36	Little Georgie & The Shuffling Hungarians	*The Compendium Of Unruly Caterwauling*
37	Mike Farris	*The Sound Of Muscle Shoals*
38	Big Dave Mclean	*This Old Life*
39	Delta Fuse	*Blown Fuse*
40	Cat Wells Blues Band	*Brand New Shoes E.p.*



Becc's Blues

So, after a lot of teeth sucking and hand wringing, I have set Friday 31st October as the date for the release of our next studio album. From the point we agreed the date until the day itself will be about the same amount of time as the gestation of a human child. In this case, the birth itself should be relatively straightforward – it's the time between now and then that's the hardest part.

I've quoted the world music stats here before (11 million artists, 100 million songs and 100,000 new uploads a day). Getting heard will require more effort than ever and it is no wonder that so much time and effort goes into publicity and promotion. What will also be interesting this time – three years on from our last album – is how the shift in demand for CDs will affect income from the release.

One thing that will have certainly increased is the cost of everything. This week somebody on an online musicians' forum asked what people would do if they were given $300k to promote their music. One wag responded by saying he would use it to start a profitable business of some sort so he could keep his music going in his spare time. The thought that I had was that it would be surprisingly easy to spend such a sum.

Why do we do it? That's a question I have asked myself a lot in the last year or so, and the answer comes down to the desire to make music and to find expression through this form of art. The vast proportion of independent musicians won't 'make it' (whatever that means), and many will give up. The challenge for all of us is to find cost effective ways to create, release and perform, while trying to grow our following. It's a tough, tightrope act and it prompts me yet again to thank everyone who reads this magazine, buys music and merch, streams music and videos, and goes to gigs. Your support is more valued than ever!

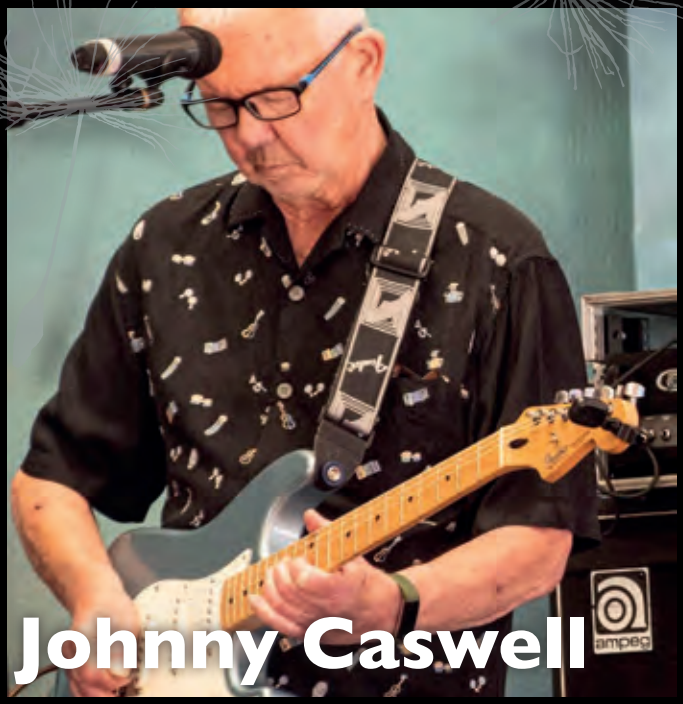


Image © Mark Roberts

Beccy x

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IN MEMORIAM



Johnny Caswell

An exceptional guitarist, singer and songwriter and all-round good guy, Johnny Caswell leaves behind a veritable army of good and close friends who will always remember him kindly.

Despite his all-too-obvious ability, he was, to many, a very well-kept secret. The reason for this may be quite simple - his ever-present self-effacing modesty. Although held in the highest respect by musicians and entertainers, he never went out of his way to court fame and fortune, he simply got on with the business of making great music.

I first met John in 1970 when my band, Locomotive, was on its last legs. It had been a successful band, touring UK & Europe, before we had a hit in 1968 with 'Rudi's In Love', a danceable ska single, but three of the band members, enamoured with the progressive music of the time, wanted to follow up with the doom-laden single, 'Mr Armageddon' which received fine reviews, but didn't sell, leaving our audience confused and our dates drying up. The band split, the breakaways forming the appropriately-named Sacrifice, and we replaced them with John Caswell on vocals, electric and 12-string guitar and Keith Millar, joining remaining Locomotive members Mick Hincks and Bob Lamb.

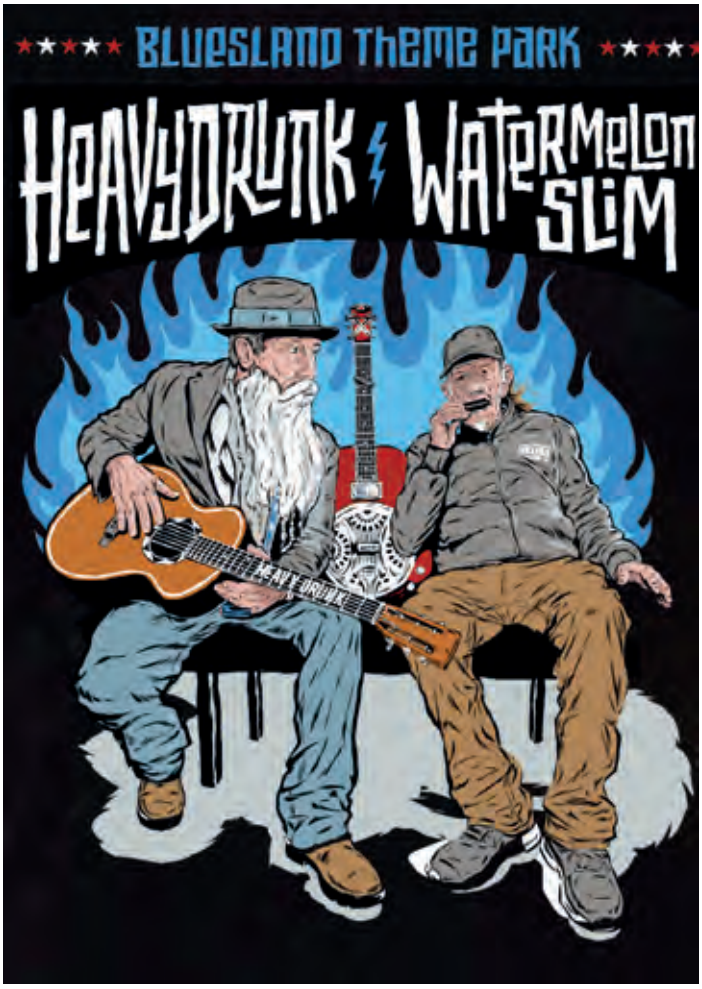
There seemed no point in continuing with the band name, and I decided, with hindsight somewhat foolishly, to name the band after a James Thurber novel, ***The Dog That Bit People.*** EMI stuck with us, and I got to produce my first album at Abbey Road Studios, with George Harrison spending an entire day quietly sitting at the back of the control room. We got terrific reviews, didn't sell a lot at the time, although I believe that The Dog That Bit People LP is now something of a collector's item and I am today still proud of what we did, and I know that Johnny Caswell felt the same. His singing and playing were right on the money, and he wrote seven of the twelve songs.

Johnny Caswell remembered that his first band was The King Biscuit Blues Band, and around that time he was teaching a young guitarist from Chelmsley Wood all about playing chords. The guitarist's name was Ted Turner, later to star with Wishbone Ash.

Johnny had a wide musical taste and spent a time with country rock band Little Ginny & Room Service when they backed such stars at Glen Campbell and Tammy Wynette. Johnny remembered a late-night motorway stop at Watford Gap Services and Tammy Wynette asking him what she should have to eat, taking his advice and ordering egg and chips.

Johnny supported Eric Clapton, played The London Palladium, and was invited by Ernie Wise to join him in singing 'Bring Me Sunshine', doing that famous dance with him at a charity concert in Chalfont St. Peters. He had his own Johnny Caswell Band and appeared on TV in France and played throughout Europe. Johnny was long a mainstay in The Steve Gibbons Band.

Jim Simpson
(courtesy Henry's Blueshouse newsletter)





HeavyDrunk & Watermelon Slim

Welcome To The Ride



Who can resist the thrills and wild rides of the theme park? Certainly not Watermelon Slim and HeavyDrunk (William P. Homans III and Rob Robinson respectively), two vastly experienced musicians who have collaborated on many occasions and now team up again for their fourth album together, the exuberant *Bluesland Theme Park* (reviewed last month). The pair made time to chat to Simon Green not long before their duo gig at the Bluesberry Café in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

"We're just hanging out," says HeavyDrunk, he and Watermelon Slim sitting outside the venue in Clarksdale in the evening sunshine. He moves his camera up and down to display an almost deserted street. It looks like a ghost town!

HD: It's a ruin. It was built in the 1920s when everybody got rich off of cotton. Clarksdale's small; downtown is around ten blocks, and at one time it had three performance theatres all going at the same time. It's a beautiful town that's trying to put itself back together around music; this is the birthplace of the blues and they're trying to capitalise on that. It's becoming a tourist destination. They're trying to promote it and the government are giving some money. Tourism in Mississippi is growing every year.

Slim: It's the farming business that has paid the taxes in the region but it's the entertainment business that increasingly sustains the taxes in Clarksdale.

HD: Back in the days there were a lot of small farmers, now there's these giant farms owned by big corporations, big agri-businesses, so there's not the same tax base there used to be.

You're playing as a duo tonight, but you normally play as HeavyDrunk with a bigger band?

HD: When we played the Pilgrimage Festival last year there were eleven of us I think. When we toured Europe last year we toured as a four-piece. Tonight, it's just me and Slim as the band are in hock; we had to sell the drummer and bass player to pay rent! We're going to try and get them out if we can raise enough money *(laughs)*.

The album is a really eclectic mixture of sounds; was that the idea, to throw everything in?

Slim: There's nothing more eclectic than Rob and I. We have a very different approach to the music -







HD: We meet somewhere in the middle. We recorded the album at Dial Back Sound in Water Valley, Mississippi, and then the ones I thought needed horns, and things like that, I took up to Leiper's Fork in Tennessee and added overdubs. It's where I live, a small town south of Nashville, out in the foothills. It used to be the poorest area and then it was discovered by artists and it's now where a lot of the big country stars build their houses. I overdubbed more so on my songs as Slim's stuff speaks so well on its own. I let his songs breathe as he rendered them - it wouldn't have been Slim if I'd added horns.

What was it about Slim that made you make contact and start to work together?

HD: I met Slim here in Clarksdale playing at the Bluesberry. Sometimes in summer they put on an outdoor show in the alleyway behind -

Slim: Weather and gunfire permitting!

HD: I was here, hanging out with my wife, walking down the alleyway, when I saw Slim playing. Seeing him play I could feel the blues flowing out of him. I identified with that. I appreciated something that was authentic and real. My first job was in a club when I was fifteen years old and I've listened to more music than most people will ever hear, listening night after night. When I see something that's the authentic article, I'm drawn to it. Slim is that. I was blown away particularly by his song 'Little Big Horn', which Slim said he hadn't recorded, so I said we needed to record it. We started talking and figured out a way to get that done without us writing together. I had written a bunch of stuff and he had written some, so I said we'll just capture what we've got. Slim playing acoustic by himself on 'Little Big Horn' is my favourite track on the album. It's the best Slim he's ever done. I think he's great and I think that everyone that sees him will think he's great. We're different but it works really well together.

You've both recorded a ton of albums -

HD: Slim, this your fourteenth, right? It's eleven or twelve for me. I've started writing some new songs. How about you, Slim?

Slim: I've got about five or six songs we may never get to; I haven't been writing any new songs lately, particularly as I've recently spilled water on my computer and its been dead for fifteen days. What I am doing is writing the longest poem in the world! The Guinness Book Of Records states than an Englishman published a poem in 1838 of 239,000 lines about King Alfred. My poem so far is 60,130 lines about the Ukraine war and the misadventures of Donald Trump. I am a Shakespearean poet so it's all in iambic pentameter. It's going to be around 300,000 lines.

That's going to be tricky to set to music…





Slim: *(laughs)* I'm waiting to get hooked up with a publisher. Money is not an object; I'm willing to pay into five figures to get published…

American musicians are often wary of talking about politics. What's your views on that?

Slim: Musicians have been told for a long time to stay out of politics, what do they know? Well, I've got two degrees; one in History and one in Journalism. Russian Studies was one of my fields. I know I'm likely to be more informed than most people you meet on the streets who talk about politics.

HD: The thing about being a musician and talking about politics is that you alienate at least half your audience, which is probably the main reason most people stay away from it. I would say that the song 'Bluesland Theme Park' is political. It's not taking a side; it's talking about the state of affairs.

Slim: I've noticed that you don't have to be explicit about politics because people will pick up on it anyway.

How would you describe your musical style, Slim?

Slim: I first heard the blues when I was five years old, in 1954, being sung by a black woman that looked after me and my little brother, what we called a maid at that point. She'd be singing what I later figured out to be John Lee Hooker's music. I grew up in North Carolina, so I have a church and country influence. Blues came from work and I'm a grunt labourer, retired a little bit. I did farming and labouring all my life. That's one thing that kids growing up today don't much have; knowing that you have to work to get along.

HD: Slim served in Vietnam -

Slim: I didn't do much but I enlisted and volunteered, just like others in my family had volunteered before me. As I say in one of my songs, we served in a common crucible and learnt some lessons that we took to heart and lived our lives by.

HD: Listening to Slim, I would say it's delta blues, gospel and country. His delta blues style is very authentic. He was a truck driver for a while.

Slim: Truck driver and saw miller. *(He holds up his hand:)* This finger is a little short, would've been a lot shorter if the saw had been sharp!

And how would you sum up your musical style, Rob?

HD: I would say it's blues and soul, a mixture of the two. I was born in Louisiana and grew up in Mississippi. Blues has always been a part of what I do.

Tony Joe White co-wrote 'Watermelon Girl' on the album; how did you meet him?

HD: I owned a BBQ joint for thirteen years and he would come by, especially when he was going fishing. We became friends and started writing that song; he died before we were able to finish it. I thought I had to finish it for this album. He mostly did the lyrics: we were sitting out back of his house and talking. I'd started it in one direction and he turned it another way. Tony Joe was the swamp fox, one of the greats of all time, and a hero of mine before I met him. He was one of the coolest men on the planet, genuinely down to earth.

Are the two of you planning to record together again? Would you do anything differently?

HD: I hope so; we have a live record recorded. We tracked a few of the shows we've done together in Spain and England. At some point I've got to go through them. I must say that we had a real blast in your country -

Slim: I might come back because, believe it or not, sir, I'm a genuine pretender to the throne of England. I'm from an earlier descent than the Coburg Windsors. I had my genealogy prepared professionally and I'm ready to declare my eligibility to be King of England!

HD: Watermelon Slim for King has a real ring to it, right there. That should be the title of your article –

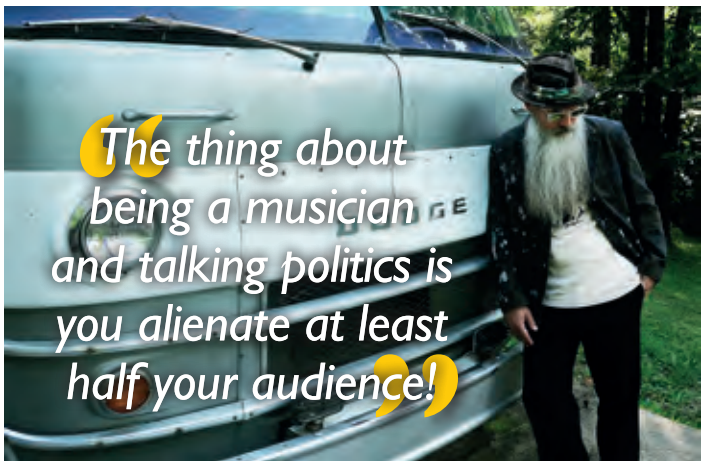
Should he be sharing a stage then with a mere commoner?

HD: I'm just here to support him!



Simon Green

heavydrunk.com
watermelonslim.com
Bluesland Theme Park is out now on Heavydrunk Records







Off The Page

JERRON PAXTON



Rising blues musician Jerron Paxton's musical view of the genre is rooted in the pre-World War II era. His recent album ***Things Done Changed*** shows how he's absorbed many traditional elements of the blues into his music and he attributes his early awareness to his grandmother who played a major role in raising him. He talks about her with real affection, and cites her move from Louisiana to California as a vivid example of how varied a country America is. "In some senses, it really was a different country (back then) because for a brief period in the Civil War, Louisiana was on the other side. Of course, my grandmother came along much later on, but I'm sure there must have been echoes of that. It's also a vastly different place with a vastly different climate, and a vastly different way of making a living. Most of the living my family was exposed to was agricultural, which can't be fun, especially if you didn't want to do it! My folks moved to an area that was much more urban, but a lot of people from that same culture did move down there too, so a lot of the music and the food was the same. Culture migrates with the people."

He elaborates: "I think one of the reasons blues music travels so well is that it is really folk music, and folk music all over the world has the power to get very close to people because it's a from-the-ground-up style of music and people from all over the place can really feel it."

Jerron Paxton is regarded as an accomplished multi-instrumentalist. He moves between guitar, banjo, piano and violin with a natural ease. "Eventually some of them have to slide because there are too many to give equal love to! There's no telling which one will be garnering your attention for any length of time. Maybe you've got to focus on what you're going to play at gigs, whatever instrument that is, but there's no routine. This is a problem with the life of musician - there is no routine at all ever, and that can be a problem sometimes, especially in the creative process. I don't have a routine that I follow when I make music, and that can be great because that loosens me up to go, 'this should definitely be a banjo,' and I experiment to see if I've struck gold! Sometimes you find a new way of doing things, other times you're better off not going near them! I'm a musician first and foremost. The music really inspires me the most, but on other occasions the lyrics are the main focus. If I focus mainly on the melody, the words are secondary, and if I focus on the lyrics, the music is secondary."



How does Jerron find the act of writing and recording music? Is it a relaxed process or a labour of love? "Writing an album of songs takes a long time because you can't write one or two songs, you've got to have a dozen, and it can take a whole year sometimes, but then I recorded in four or five days in Chicago. I'm a bit hard on myself. I think any true artist has to be, especially with something as permanent as a recording. A recording is what people are going to listen back to. It's part of the legacy. You are going to have to leave it and not go back and correct any details anymore. It gets to a point where you have got to say, enough is enough, if it ain't right now, then this is just what it's got to be!"

He recently reached a larger UK audience on the BBC's ***Later... With Jools Holland*** show. He enthuses about meeting the host: "Jools is a lovely gentleman, and he is deep into music. I like hanging around people like that. Most folks that take the music seriously and really have a love of it really attract me. So, it was good to be there and to have a lovely live audience experience my music in an important place."

David Robinson (aka The Cold Heart Revue)
Images by Janette Beckman

jerronpaxton.com
Jerron Paxton tours the UK in May
The album *Things Done Changed* is out now, via Smithsonian Folkways



THE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA

Ricky McKinnie is a member of The Blind Boys Of Alabama, the vocal group recognised worldwide as living legends of Gospel music. The original line-up formed in Talladega in 1939 at a school for disabled children and their early performances were for World War II soldiers in local encampments where they sang in exchange for small change offered by the ad hoc audience. By 1949, they had recorded their first national hit, 'I Can See Everybody's Mother But Mine', their reputation as one of the leading gospel outfits in America growing over the years so that by the 1960s, the group was performing at benefit concerts for Martin Luther King Jr.

McKinnie explained to me how he became involved with the group. "I became aware of the Blind Boys when I was about four years old. My mother, Sarah McKinnie, was a professional singer and that's how I came in contact with Clarence Fountain and The Blind Boys, because she'd work with them from time to time. She taught me Gospel music and was a choir director in the church. She was a big influence on what I'm doing today."

Ricky McKinnie began his musical journey as a twelve year old percussionist and drummer. "When I was younger, Buddy Rich was the one that I would watch. He was a great solo drummer, and then Buddy Miles who was a rock drummer. Those two influenced what I was doing. Also, when I was at school I would hear the marching bands. All those elements gave me a style, I took lessons as well. I didn't have vocal lessons though, but I listened to different people singing and I tried to make my voice work to the best of my ability. I used to love David Ruffin and also Sam Cooke, they had a mixture of the rough and the smooth!"

Recently, 91-year-old member Jimmy Carter decided to retire from performing with after a long involvement with the band. McKinnie described how the rest of the ensemble felt regarding Carter's departure. "It really makes a difference when one voice you know so well is not there. We respected his decision but for us it really made a difference because in The Blind Boys, singing the part is not necessarily only what you have to do. You have to blend with what the others are doing. It is not that a new person might be unable to sing the part we're needing, it's more they might not blend with the others, as a voice I mean. Our music is from the heart, and we always have members who can sing from the heart. We try to sing from the soul - if you turn up to a Blind Boys concert feeling bad, you're going to leave feeling good and that is why we just want to try to keep travelling.

As long as people can appreciate our music, we want to take it to the people. Friendship is what it's all about. I think we relate to people outside of America as well as at home, because even in countries where maybe English isn't necessarily a first language or if we're performing to people that have never had the opportunity to visit America, we are always authentic. We try to sing out how many people feel."

Religion remains an eternal part of McKinnie's life. "I have always been a believer. I trust my beliefs and I believe in God. I know that He can do anything, and I have to believe. I know I can trust in Him. It's an interesting part of my life, because without the Lord showering His favour on me and my career then I would not be where I am today, so I thank Him."

Up until around 2000, The Blind Boys wrote for themselves, but now (as is often the way), there's more involvement from producers and songs are often submitted to the group by outside writers. "We pick the material a little differently today," Ricky says. "With any new song, we might change the structure around to record or maybe add a new bassline or something. We'll make the background work for us. We know right away that not all of us are going to sing lead on every song, but that's alright, it's about the sound of all of us. That's the real thing of The Blind Boys's sound."

In McKinnie's time, The Blind Boys Of Alabama have performed for three Presidents at the White House: Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, moving experiences for a band with such a long and distinguished history. Their renown has expanded further, winning five Grammy Awards. As they move beyond their eighty-fifth year as an ensemble, albeit with an altering line-up, one thing has remained a constant: real American music performed with a remarkable range of vocal expression. "It's like everything else," concludes McKinnie. "You've got to study your craft and you've got to go in to see what it takes in order to make it happen."

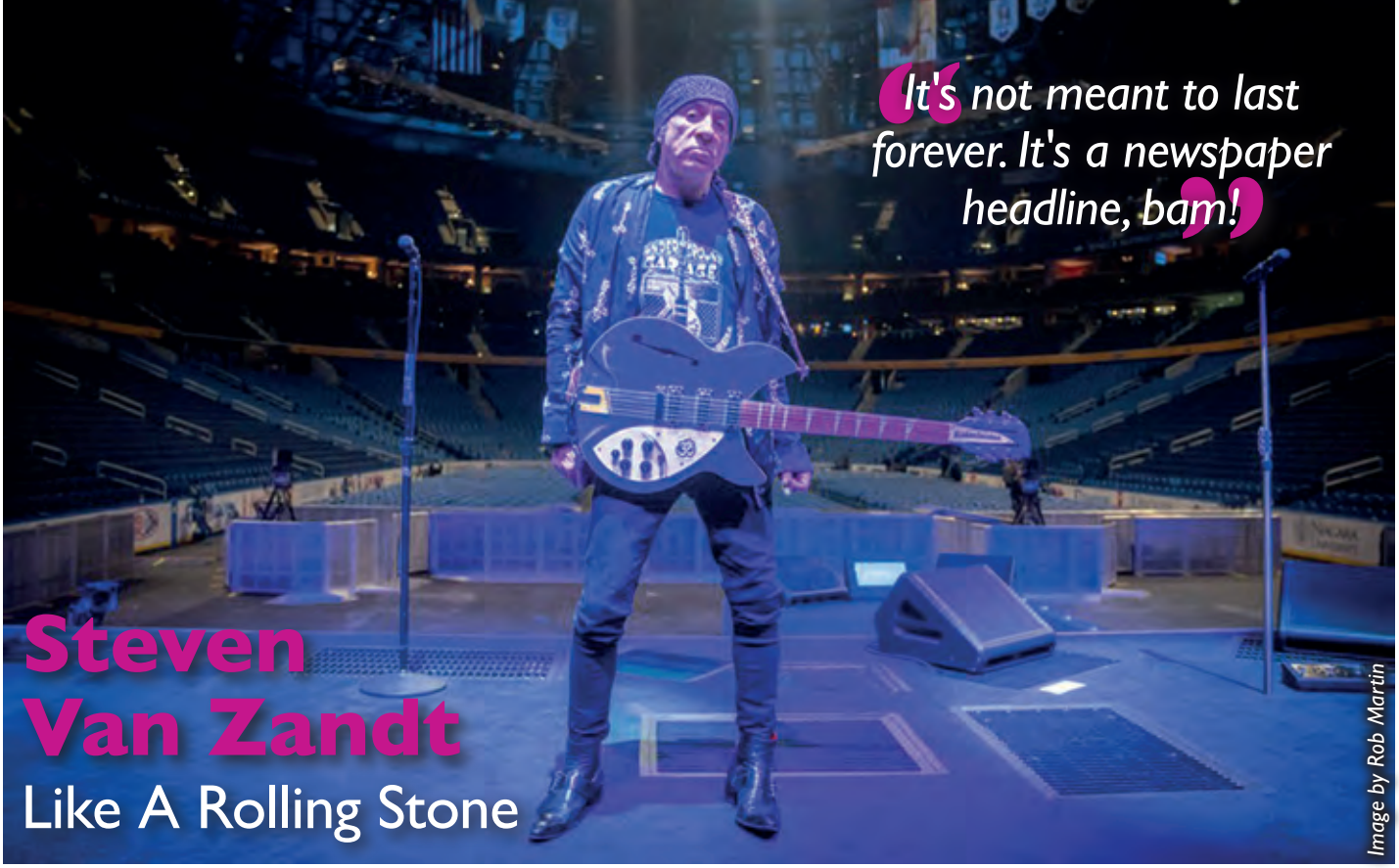
David Robinson (aka The Cold Heart Revue)

Images by Cole Weber

blindboys.com

The Blind Boys Of Alabama appear at The Cheltenham Jazz Festival on 4th May and at London's Union Chapel 6th May, 2025





Steven Van Zandt

Like A Rolling Stone

Image by Rob Martin

The musician, songwriter, record producer, actor and activist Steven Van Zandt is more excited than ever. I am his first interview appointment of the morning after the previous night's performance in Toronto with Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band. "Last night was amazing! The tour has been amazing, the most amazing ever and to be saying that at this stage of the game is quite remarkable. We haven't been to Canada for a while, and it's been right up there with the European response and the American response."

With the tour returning to the UK with big shows in Manchester and Liverpool in May and June, I asked him about how aware of British culture he was growing up, prior to the British music invasion of America in the 1960s."Nothing! The only thing from the UK that was big for us was James Bond really. That was right before The Beatles. Even the actors, Michael Caine and Richard Burton were a little later. But The Beatles were huge and, man, for a good year and half we had nothing but Great Britain, the UK was really hip and I loved that! A couple of things survived in America - soul music survived and flourished with Motown and the others, and then The Beach Boys and The Four Seasons, that was about it."

The influx of British music reaching American shores in the 1960s made a lifelong impact on Van Zandt. I was fortunate enough to see him perform with Springsteen and The E Street Band at Wembley stadium and he played a white teardrop guitar on 'Reason To Believe' in tribute to the late Rolling Stones guitarist Brian Jones who used a similar model. Van Zandt remembers Jones' death: "I would have just gotten out of high school. This is what, '68? Or I might have been in my early days in Asbury Park. I don't remember exactly where I was, but I remember how I felt. It was a shock. It is a shock to this day. I don't think it's ever really been resolved whether he was murdered or not. The Rolling Stones seemed to have a lot of resentment about him that really was right: he seemed to be a difficult guy, and rough with the women to say the least, and he had no responsibility whatsoever. He had kids all over the place. Hank Williams was first, but he was right there in the role of stereotypical rock 'n' rollers! Drugs were not a good thing for him or for anybody. He was an absolute force of nature. He was there to create the band, there's no question about that, they were the perfect rock 'n'roll band. They got the perfect configuration, which they basically took from the early Muddy Waters band, the perfect bass and drums, Jagger as a frontman - which separated them from The Beatles - and Jones as the utility guy who played everything, a second guitar when you needed one, a dulcimer, an accordion or flute. On 'Ruby Tuesday' he plays a lot! They went on to a straight ahead two guitar thing, which was great, and they would complement the band with Nicky Hopkins and horns but originally you had to stick with your own guys, you didn't have extra people on stage, so having Brian Jones was really handy. The only bad thing ***(The Rolling Stones' ex-manager)*** Andrew Loog Oldham ever did was make the mistake of discouraging their background harmonies. I talked to him about that many years ago. It was natural when Bill Wyman was singing and Brian. Obviously, Keith always continued singing but the others could have done more also. Yeah, they were not The Beatles or The Hollies, but they could all sing and I missed that when it stopped happening because I love that interaction between background vocals in a band."

Van Zandt learned how to mentally handle working with his boyhood heroes performing 'Little Red Rooster' in London with Bob Geldof and Bill Wyman for the ex-Rolling Stones' bass player's 80th birthday concert. "You learn to compartmentalise when it comes to that stuff, whether it's with Bill or Paul McCartney who came on my stage on my night at The Roundhouse. You have to just put that away and treat it like he's a friend, a peer or a fellow musician and we're just having fun. You can't think about that hero stuff. I mean, Bill in the original Rolling Stones was essential. In the entire business, he is the most underrated. If you really go and listen to Bill on a boogie like 'Around And Around', the Chuck Berry, he's the one who's making the thing. He had very low lows and very high highs. You could hear every note he played."

Reading Van Zandt's book ***Unrequited Infatuation,*** it becomes obvious how readily he recognises the nuances of record production, something he's passionate about. "There is a big difference between a Muddy Waters or a Manfred Mann song and the music of now. It is analogue versus digital. On those early 1950s and 1960s records, they were more or less live, and they sound amazing. They were warmer. Right up until the 1980s, if you wanted to put handclaps on a record, the band would stand around a microphone and you clapped. Now everything is doubled. You record more and more, and those older records will still never be beaten!

"I am really glad vinyl has made a comeback but it's not analogue vinyl. It does sound a bit different but it's important because of the artwork people get to see what a band looks like. They read the credits. The record companies and publishers agreed to have downloads with no credits. I'll never understand it, it costs them nothing. They should have sent them along with the digital downloads automatically so that

kids don't think the music falls off f***ing trees! But we're never going to get analogue recording to analogue vinyl again - I think Jack White was experimenting with it, he has a direct to two-track machine, I think. I don't know how we used to do it, because, man, on analogue you have to make decisions: is that the final vocal or not, or I'll have to erase it? Is that the right guitar solo, because if not, it's about to go away. Those Muddy Waters and Elvis Presley records were amazing. The records had real sound, but it was a different way or working."

In the 1980s, as a solo artist, Van Zandt released political albums such as ***Voice Of America*** and ***Freedom No Compromise***. "It almost goes against the art form in a way, to write songs with a real cause at heart, because the art form is built on communicating emotional information, not political or social. Bob Dylan changed everything. He brought those ideas from blues or folk blues into the pop idiom. That didn't happen before him, and he really went all in. My methodology was to research a subject thoroughly and make overall themes for each of those political albums and then have sub-themes. They all had to feed the main theme, and I had to have a range of ideas within that thematic concept. It was never literal or linear, it was not like The Who's ***Tommy,*** I'll always be reaching for that. I love that record. On my albums, I would decide what I wanted to say first and how to make it a real story with personalities and a reason for being. My one main difference was the 'Sun City' record where it was really pure rhetoric ***(1985's anti-apartheid anthem – Ed.)***. The purpose of that song is political and nothing else. You want to motivate people to action, and you want to explain the situation and that's a rare case where I was very specific about the information.

I'm telling the story very literally about what's going on in South Africa, and it's not meant to be poetic. It's not meant to be something that lasts forever - it's a newspaper headline, bam!

"We wanted impact and some kind of effect of that impact, and we were, of course, luckily very successful. Then it goes away because the issue goes away if you're really successful and that happened with apartheid. But mostly you're not doing that. Mostly you're conscious of trying to engage people emotionally and yet tell a story about a specific situation."

The Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band tour returns to the UK in May and June and he employs an enviable range of guitars during their long nights of performing. He is refreshingly honest regarding their use. "There are no more than two or three different sounds live, and the bigger the place, those options are restricted even more. You got a fairly clean sound, or on a solo a fairly dirty sound or a delay, but there are no subtleties whatsoever. You're changing guitars really for yourself or to keep yourself amused, mostly. I do have a good friend though who has a wonderful relationship with Rickenbacker and they made me the only purple 12-string Rickenbacker in the world. I've gone full Jefferson Airplane using the 12- string!"

David Robinson (aka The Cold Heart Revue)

littlesteven.com

Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band play selected stadium dates in Manchester and Liverpool, in May and June



Image by Edward Phillips

"There's a big difference between a Muddy Waters or a Manfred Mann song and the music of now"

Image by Teach Rock

Richard Clarke

Something's Going On



"The guitar spoke to me, and I was hooked from the moment I picked it up." So says Richard Clarke, a London-based blues artist known for his intricate guitar work and stirring vocals. He has nearly two decades of experience performing across the UK and Europe, and most recently was a part of Connolly Hayes, before striking out under his own name. Entitled Good Thing, his first EP (reviewed in last month's issue) is an assured four tracks of catchy, soulful blues.

"I was happy to be the "second banana", as Buddy Whittington famously put it!"



Born and raised in Surrey, in Claypath, on the outskirts of London, Richard Clarke began playing guitar aged just thirteen, though he'd wanted to play drums at first, that notion being firmly squashed by his parents. "They flat out refused to have a drum kit in the house!" he says, laughing. "I had a cousin who played though, so guitar it was. By coincidence, the guitar teacher at my school was Robin Bibi and he must have seen something promising because he soon helped me get involved in local jams, including the one he used to run at The Grey Horse in Kingston. In fact, I rapidly became obsessed by the guitar, sometimes playing all day long and I was in a few bands at school, even winning a Battle Of The Bands competition - we got £50 between us as a prize!"

Cutting his teeth in local venues, he talent soon became obvious and he made his professional debut aged fifteen, as he recalls. "I was quite fortunate that the local scene had lots of young talent: Andy Cortes, Frankie Connolly, of course - it was a great scene for a young player in the early 2000s. I made rapid progress and was playing a lot at places around the South. I owe a huge amount to people like the late Rex Everett at Basingstoke Blues Club and Matt Williams at Bentworth Blues Festival who were so encouraging to a young lad starting out." With such helpful support and encouragement, it was no surprise that this emerging talent inevitably found himself recognised and established on the UK blues scene, earning nominations for UK Blues Male Vocalist and Guitarist of the Year in 2013. Over the next decade, Clarke continued to refine his craft, taking his infectious personality and energetic performances across Europe, including a prestigious show for royalty in the UAE.

Perhaps it was all a little too good to be true. Real life came calling and the realities of being a fully-professional musician hit home. "As they say, life gets in the way," he shrugs. "I needed to pay the bills! I have been extremely fortunate to be able to make my living playing music and I set up a company doing events and corporate stuff. But as a consequence, my own music took a back seat. I always kept writing, and finding yourself playing the same songs everyone wants for their wedding or party over and over again does wear thin after a while! So, a couple of years back, I decided that I wanted to start playing my own music again."

This readjustment led to Clarke becoming a regular member of Connolly Hayes, the band fronted by singer Jess Hayes and guitarist and vocalist, Frankie Connolly. "In a way, Frankie and I have known each other since school and we both filled in as guitarist when Jess started her band. It seemed inevitable that Frankie's and Jess' bands would combine and I was pleased to be involved. My role was guitar and a few backing vocals, though I did contribute a couple of songs to the band's first album. With a great guitarist and two excellent singers, I was happy to be the "second banana", as Buddy Whittington famously put it!"

As a part of Connolly Hayes, Richard toured Central Europe as well as the UK, as the band grew in popularity but in October 2024, he left the band, opting to begin a new musical chapter, going solo and forming his own band. "I thoroughly enjoyed playing with Frankie and Jess but I really wanted to play my own material," he says of his departure. "Going solo was the next step."

Influenced by blues legends John Mayer, Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and B.B. King, Richard Clarke's signature blend of blues, R&B, soul and pop is very much in evidence on his debut EP, ***Good Thing***, four original tracks produced by Adrian Hall, released in March. The EP showcases his musical range, opening with the upbeat title track, before easing into a soulful re-release of 'Sleeping Easy', the heartfelt 'Don't Know Where I Went Wrong' and the funk-infused 'Something's Going On'. Backed by an accomplished line-up featuring bassist Sonny Winslow (Connor Selby), drummer Jonny Brister (Jake Shears) and Paul Jordanous (Rag 'n' Bone Man) on keys and trumpet, Clarke is understandably excited in bringing his new material to UK and European stages in the year ahead. His live performances combine melodic guitar work with infectious, soulful grooves, but nonetheless, stepping forward as a solo artist without the security of an established band set-up must be somewhat challenging, as well as nerve-wracking?

"It is a solo project, yes. It's my songs and me as the lead vocalist. However, I have been brilliantly supported by the guys on the EP: Jonny Brister played drums on Jess's debut EP and did a great job, and Sonny is a super bass player

who works regularly with Connor Selby. Paul Jordanous is an old friend who plays keys, but also trumpet. When I arrived at the studio producer Adrian Hall suggested we could add depth to some of the tracks by adding horns. Well, Paul always has his trumpet with him and he suggested we bring in Lee Richardson on sax; they both play with Rag n'Bone Man, in fact they are off on tour with him to Australia any day now!

"We recorded the ballad 'Don't Know Where I Went Wrong' first and the way the guys played the core riff gave the song a real emotional lift. That set the tone for the session and I was delighted by how it came out, rather different (but better!) than how I had imagined the songs. It's a broad approach with a good variety of material, With plans to get back in the studio again later in the year to record and produce another EP, he's written new material that he's keen to lay down in the studio. A full-length album may well follow, but this most likely won't see light of day till 2026. "I want it to be a full album of new material, so it won't include the songs from the EPs, unless we decide to re-record any in a markedly different way. I do feel that the notion of putting out EPs and then combining them into an album is a form of cheating and certainly does not treat the fans well.

"On the live front, I am keen to get more gigs set up. I enjoy recording, but I feel that I am at my best up on stage where it's all about how you react in the moment. It has been quite a slow start on the gig front but, to be fair, I have been off the live circuit for some years, so I am going to have to work hard to establish myself again. I am doing that by contacting as many clubs as possible and I hope that having the EP will help too. Watch this space for a much larger gig list in the future! This is a passion project and I want it to be fun, for me, for the guys in the band, and for those who pay to see us play. I am not expecting to become rich and famous overnight, I just want to enjoy it."

And how would he sum himself up? How does he see himself? He laughs, "I have very eclectic tastes! Of course, I love the blues and I am, at heart, a blues guitarist, but I also like R&B, rock, pop, even hip hop and rap. I guess I'm not your standard blues guy!"

"I guess I'm not your standard blues guy!"





John Mitchell
richardclarkemusic.co.uk
Richard Clarke's *Good Thing* EP was released in March

"I wanted to start playing my own music again"

PAPERDOLL

Samantha Fish

No Such Thing As Quiet

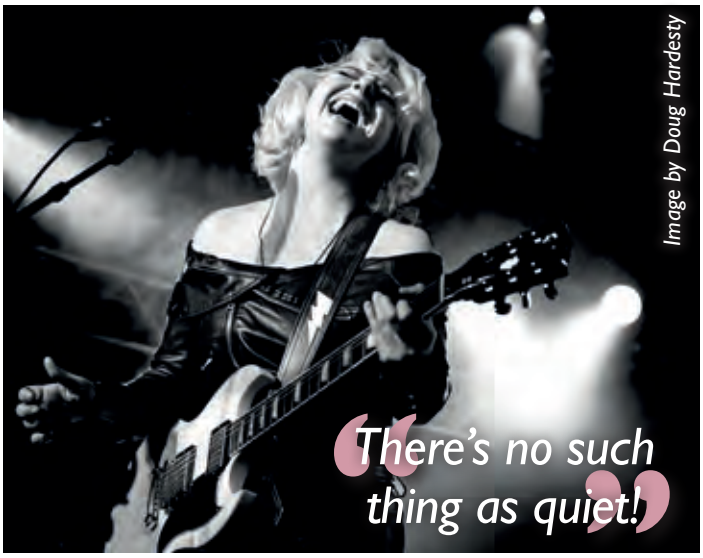


Image by Doug Hardesty

"It's gonna be hellacious trying to figure out how to play this thing!"

Samantha Fish has consistently captivated audiences with her unparalleled energy, boldness, emotional depth and her unique blend of rock, blues and soul. Known for her expressive guitar playing and powerhouse performances, the Kansas City-bred, New Orleans-based musician unveils her fiercest work to date with Paper Doll, her new studio album released on Rounder Records.

"It's taken me years to finally find my voice in a studio setting," she tells Liz Medhurst. "With this record, I took everything I had and slammed it right on the table."



It's Mardi Gras season in New Orleans, the adopted hometown of Samantha Fish: "There's no such thing as quiet," she tells me with a grin. But I'm guessing that the quiet life has never been of much interest to this electrifying guitarist, so it seems that it's business as usual for an artist who is perpetually touring, recording, making special guest appearances and being a welcome and thrilling presence on the scene. She's prolific but never predictable and her new studio album, *Paper Doll*, marks yet another high point in a career of many. There's a lot to catch up on, so let's get going!

Samantha, looking back at your schedule since your last album (2023's *Death Wish Blues* with Jesse Dayton) begs the question, where on earth did you find the time to do this? You must be a phenomenal multi-tasker!

This was the first time I've ever done an album where we didn't carve out a week or two to go make it. We literally would go, 'OK, we have two days off between our show in Austin, Texas and Oklahoma City, so let's go into a studio for two days' - that's how we did the entire record, a couple days at a time between tour dates. It was a little overwhelming, but sort of romantic. We recorded all over the country in different studios and there is an urgency I feel exists on this record that could only be due to the fact that we were at breakneck speed making this thing happen. It was an interesting experience!

It sounds it! There's usually a different headspace for studio recording and live, but you had it all going on at the same time. Were you jamming out the songs at soundchecks doing development, or was it really just hit the studio and go for it?

The band was mad at me, and they probably hate me for this, but they wanted me to send them the demos and I wouldn't. Only because I know what I would do if somebody sent me a demo, I would write a part and I would have it ready to perform. I really needed everybody to be in the same room, creating at the same time, so I kept everything mysterious. We went in the studio and learned the changes. It was just like I wanted it to feel, a little urgent, and that's what you get when everybody is working on that together. This is exactly how I would treat a normal session, as session musicians are always learning on the fly, it's the norm. It was only my band that got angry at me, I'm afraid! *(laughs)*

I'm sure you can roll with that! They (Ron Johnson (bass), Jamie Douglass (drums) and Mickey Finn (keys)) are so flexible and talented. I'm loving the sound of the album. I don't know if you've developed it from *Death Wish Blues*, that had a heavier energy to it. This is not an exact continuation, but it sounds like you've taken a little bit of that to season and put it into these songs as well.

Well I learned a lot on that session, through Jesse and through John Spencer, our producer. I'll take pieces of what I learned to the next record too. You're constantly learning. John's approach and production and how he spreads things out sonically is a party because there's stuff happening on this side, there's stuff happening over here, all of a sudden you'll hear a voice come out of nowhere from the left, and it's constantly teasing your ears. Bobby (Harlow, producer on ***Paper Doll***) also has the sensibility where he wants to create something that's constantly engaging, pulls you in further to the song. I picked up a lot from those guys.

***Paper Doll* is a great album with lots of standout tracks. I do genuinely love all of them, but I absolutely adore 'Fortune Teller', the vibe that you managed to get on that was chilling, so atmospheric. And then there's 'Rusty Razor', featuring Mick Collins of The Gories. Different moods but blending together really well -**

Yeah, I think it tells a story, I hear a cohesive thread throughout. It's eclectic, I guess. I hate that word, but you know what I mean. I think that's a good thing 'cos you don't know what the next track is gonna sound like. If the first three or four tracks informed what the whole record was gonna sound like, then why would anybody listen to the whole record, right? I enjoy bringing together all these different styles and 'Rusty Razor', that's a little bit of a nod to Bobby's Detroit garage rock scene.

Your vocals are as stunning as ever, really intimate, up-close mic'd, front and centre. Given you've used lots of different studios as well, did you change the settings for each song, or try to get a consistency in the production values with the vocals?

We recorded all the vocals in the same studio in one block. Vocals are so, so weird and little things can throw you off when you're trying to sing on a record, maybe the headphone volume isn't right or something. Once we found a studio where I was really comfortable to do the vocals, we just went for it. Let's get them all!

When we see you live, you're changing guitars a lot in between songs. How many did you go through with the making of this album?

I should have taken pictures of all of them! I can't tell you, I don't know! Maybe if we were holed up somewhere and had a little more of a chill, relaxed atmosphere, I would have been taking pictures of all the gear I used just so I could remember what guitar I played on what song. But we went to Savannah Studios, they had all these old weird guitars, and some were really set up well, some were really hard to play. I brought some of my guitars and we frantically picked up a different instrument: 'How does this sound? No? OK, move on!' And we picked up two or three more till we found the one for the solo - whatever I was holding was the one for the record. It's gonna be hellacious trying to figure out how to play this thing, because I'm gonna have to go through all my collection and see what sounds right.

Do you ever do that when you're in a live situation? Pick up one thing and then part way through a song think you should have chosen something else?



Oh, all the time, all the time. People are always like, 'Why are you always changing guitars on stage?' Well, because first of all, I'm knocking them out of tune. But they all have a different personality, and you should be approaching every solo differently and sometimes a different guitar will inspire a different approach. You gotta give it a chance.

You went on the road with Slash following his *Orgy Of The Damned* blues album last year. When we spoke to him around the release, he was telling us about the festival dates coming up, saying he didn't know how it was going to go, just that there would be guests and you would probably jam, work it all out as he went along. How was that for you?

It was wonderful. That was one of those "pinch me" moments for the adolescent that still exists in my heart. The idea that I'm getting to do a tour with Slash is pretty crazy, I definitely got a lot of phone calls from the family the day that was announced. He was amazing and super gracious with us, and he got up and played with us, he had me get up with his band. It was a really cool, collaborative experience. We're all, especially him, professional party throwers, we'll make something fun out of it, and I thought it worked out really well, pretty seamless. I got to do a magazine cover with him and 'Kingfish' for ***Guitar World***, and that was wildly cool to see yourself on a magazine cover with someone that's an icon and somebody I've looked up to for years.

You also supported The Rolling Stones last year, didn't you? How was that?

Dream come true, honestly. I've always said that if I was asked 'what's your bucket list band if you could open for anybody in the world?' I always say them - as if, right? How's that gonna happen? And the fact that we got to share the stage with them twice last year was one of those moments where you're like, 'OK, things are going all right, smell the roses a little bit!'

You're back over here in the U.K. in May, and it's always great to see you. Do you find UK audiences or reactions any different to anywhere else?

I find the U.K. to be very attentive. They are very responsive, but they get quiet fast, they clap for the song and then I have to scramble to get to the next one - but that's because they're paying attention and they'll banter back and forth with you. I feel a good response in the U.K. is a good indication for somebody's music because I've always said the U.K. to me are the tastemakers - if they don't show up, you know something's wrong, but when they do start showing up, you're on the right track. It took a few years to really get momentum built, so when we finally got good responses from the audience and great turnout, it felt like a massive win.

And you're bringing your regular band on this tour. They're still talking to you then - that's a good sign!

I think they still like me! ***(laughs)*** We're on good terms. I have a laugh about it, but I'm really proud of the work that I've done with them, on stage and in the studio. They are really a talented group of guys and different from each other in approach to playing, backgrounds, how they communicate on stage. It's cool to see how we fit together.



Liz Medhurst
samanthafish.com
***Paper Doll* is released on 25th April via Rounder Records**

"A different guitar will inspire a different approach, you gotta give it a chance..."

Image by Aries Photography NOLA

Charlie Musselwhite

The Hard Road Highway

More than any other harmonica player of his generation, Charlie Musselwhite can rightfully lay claim in inheriting the mantle of the great harp players that came before him. An American icon, his music is as dark as Mississippi mud and as uplifting as the blue skies of California. His story is one that's entangled in the story of America itself, and he's been tracing its highways and entertaining its audiences for nearly six decades.

"For me, music is exciting and endless, it just never stops!"

Image by Michael Weintrob



Image by Michael Weintrob

It's indeed remarkable that a man who has spent more days on the road than off it can still bring such spirit and passion to his music. With its signature blend of Delta and Chicago blues mixed with Memphis soul, his latest album, ***Look Out Highway*** is pure Charlie Musselwhite. Recorded at Kid Andersen's Greaseland Studio in San Jose, California, it's the first time Charlie has recorded with his long-time touring band: guitarist Matt Stubbs (from GA-20), drummer June Core (Robert Lockwood Jr.) and bassist Randy Burmudes (James Cotton), along with Andersen himself, who has been in and out of the band for many years. It's a terrific record (reviewed in last month's issue) and Charlie chuckles when I ask him how he manages to keep the music fresh, after so many albums? "Well, I'm working all the time and always thinking of new things to do. For me, music is exciting and endless, it just never stops!"

He's also enthusiastic about working with younger musicians like Matt Stubbs and Kid Andersen: "We all feed off of each other when we're playing together, we inspire each other - I hope I inspire them! We love the music, that's what keeps it fresh. Kid is an old and close friend, and I met Matt when he was in another band, when I sensed great potential in him. We have big plans around future collaborations."

Always good to hear, but let's get to talking about ***Look Out Highway***: the title track opens the album, Musselwhite prosaically explaining its origins. "The beat came from an old Gospel tune and I had it rolling around in my head until I caught the scent and found the trail that led to the melody and lyrics." Songs like 'Open Road', 'Highway 61'and 'Storm Warning' build on these themes of rambling and the road. On 'Baby, Won't You Please Help Me', a driving infectious rhythm, soaring guitar and searing harmonica are interwoven with tinkling piano as Musselwhite sings of a man tailed by the blues, nodding to his own roots, "I was born in Mississippi, I was raised in Tennessee."

It's easy to interpret the cover of the Allan Reynolds song, 'Ready For The Times To Get Better', as a response to recent events in the States. "For sure it is!" he laughs. "As far as I'm concerned it's pretty much a nightmare. I heard that tune and I liked the lyrics; I thought I could blues it up. I changed the melody a little bit to make it more bluesy." The Reynolds song aside, the songs on the album are all Musselwhite originals, with just the one collaboration on 'Sad Eyes', a wonderful soul tune with a memorable guitar lick. Stubbs and Bermudes brought in the music and Charlie flipped through his book of words and stories until he "found the scent", casually painting the picture of two people filling a void for each other, knowing it's not going to last. He's a prolific songwriter with a real emotional depth to his songs. Does he find it easy to come up with song ideas, new ways of looking at an ever-changing world? Again, he answers with a dry chuckle: "They just keep on coming! It's hard to explain where they come from, they just keep bubbling to the surface."



Charlie Musselwhite's career quickly took off, soon after arriving in Chicago in the early sixties ("When I got to Chicago, there were tons of guitar players and not many harmonica players. It was easier to carry around, just stick it in my pocket!"), where he became an integral part of the blues renaissance along with the likes of The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, both genuine protégés of Little Walter, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. His debut album ***Stand Back!*** came out in 1967, when he was just twenty-two. On something of a whim, Musselwhite relocated to San Francisco that same year. Contemporaries like Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield followed suit and were welcomed into the Bay's counterculture scene around the Fillmore West as purveyors of real, authentic blues.

Looking back to those early Chicago days, was he writing his own material, even back then at the start of his career? "Yes, I tried to always have at least some of my tunes on an album, including the first album, that's kind of what you did then." What you kind of did back then too, was get to play with everybody you could. Musselwhite worked with Muddy Waters, Junior Wells and Sonny Boy Williamson. "That was part of my environment that I soaked up," he recollects. "I loved the blues and it came easy. I'm pretty sure it's the same for everybody; you learn from what's around you. They were pushing me too, to play and to sing, so I had to sink or swim." Was it hard being a white boy in South Chicago and playing in mainly black clubs? "Well, you put your best foot forward; everybody was so encouraging. We were having fun. No-one was trying to outdo one another. Anybody that had something to offer was welcome, it was a friendly contest. Everyone wanted to do their best and I did too. I just got better and better, hanging around with them and pushing myself."

Big Walter Horton and Charlie became firm friends. "We both had a connection with Will Shade and Walter took me under his wing. We weren't playing together, we were just hanging out, plus we both came from Memphis, so we had that background in common. Wherever we would go Walter would introduce me by saying, "Well Charlie, he's from down home," it meant something. I wasn't a local Yankee, I was



from down home and that set me apart. The whole scene was people sitting in with each other, you'd see the same musicians in different places. Everybody got to know each other. Everybody and everything was an influence; anything that sounded good. People were inspirational rather than me wanting to play like them, they inspired me to follow my own path, they made it exciting."

Playing on John Hammond's album ***So Many Roads*** in 1965 must have been a big break for him? "That was a pretty good situation there, there were a lot of good musicians on that album. It came out ahead of Butterfield's album (his debut: ***The Paul Butterfield Blues Album***) by a year, I think. That was a real classic album which was real fun to do. I just happened to be in New York City when John was recording. I knew John real well; every time I would go to New York I'd call him up and see what was going on."

He was also very close to Big Joe Williams and has played with a lot of different people over the ensuing years like Bonnie Raitt, Tom Waits, Elvin Bishop and George Thorogood to name but a few; which have stood out as being particularly memorable? "I liked playing with Big Joe Williams, that was a lot of fun. Big Joe and I roomed together at two different places and so I got to hear a lot of stories and play gigs with him. Tom Waits was over the top memorable and I loved recording and touring with the great Cuban musician Eliades Ochoa. Playing with Ben Harper really helped get my name out there to a lot of people that hadn't heard of me. Cyndi Lauper's audience hadn't heard of me either, although by the end of each night we played they sure knew who I was!"

His collaboration with Cyndi Lauper was certainly one of the more unexpected of his long career. "She'd always loved blues, she told me. When she started out she was singing blues and got side tracked into rock. She always wanted to go back to the blues but her management said she'd confuse her audience. Anyway, she decided to make a blues album and came to Memphis to use all Memphis musicians and we toured the world for a couple of years doing blues tunes; we took her hits and blues'd them up, so 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' had a harmonica solo. We think the world of her. She's really nice and at the same time, tough as nails."

Is it frustrating that it took those collaborations to achieve wider recognition? "Blues has always been the lowest man on the totem pole. It's probably the most influential music yet still at the very bottom of people's musical awareness. It was worse when I started out. There were no blues magazines, no books on blues, no DVDs, no blues festivals or blues cruises. In a book on jazz there might be a short chapter on blues, but it wasn't usually very long!"

Talking of wider recognition, in 2023, Musselwhite was cast in Martin Scorsese's film ***Killers Of The Flower Moon***. Charlie explains how that came about: "The casting director is a roots music fan and saw me in the video that celebrated Arhoolie Records' 60th Anniversary and thought I'd be perfect. Nobody knew about my family connection to the real story. In the book of the same name is a photo of a bad hombre named Al Spencer. I have Al's rifle with his named carved into the stock along with notches for the men he killed. He died in a shootout with my grandfather, whose name was also Charlie Musselwhite. Scorcese thought that was really far out!"

In an era when the term "legendary" gets bandied-about at the drop of a Vera Black hat, this singular blues harp player, singer, songwriter and guitarist has earned the title, hands down. A true master of American music.

Simon Green

All images by Michael Weintrob

charliemusselwhite.com

***Look Out Highway* is released on 16th May via Forty Below Records**







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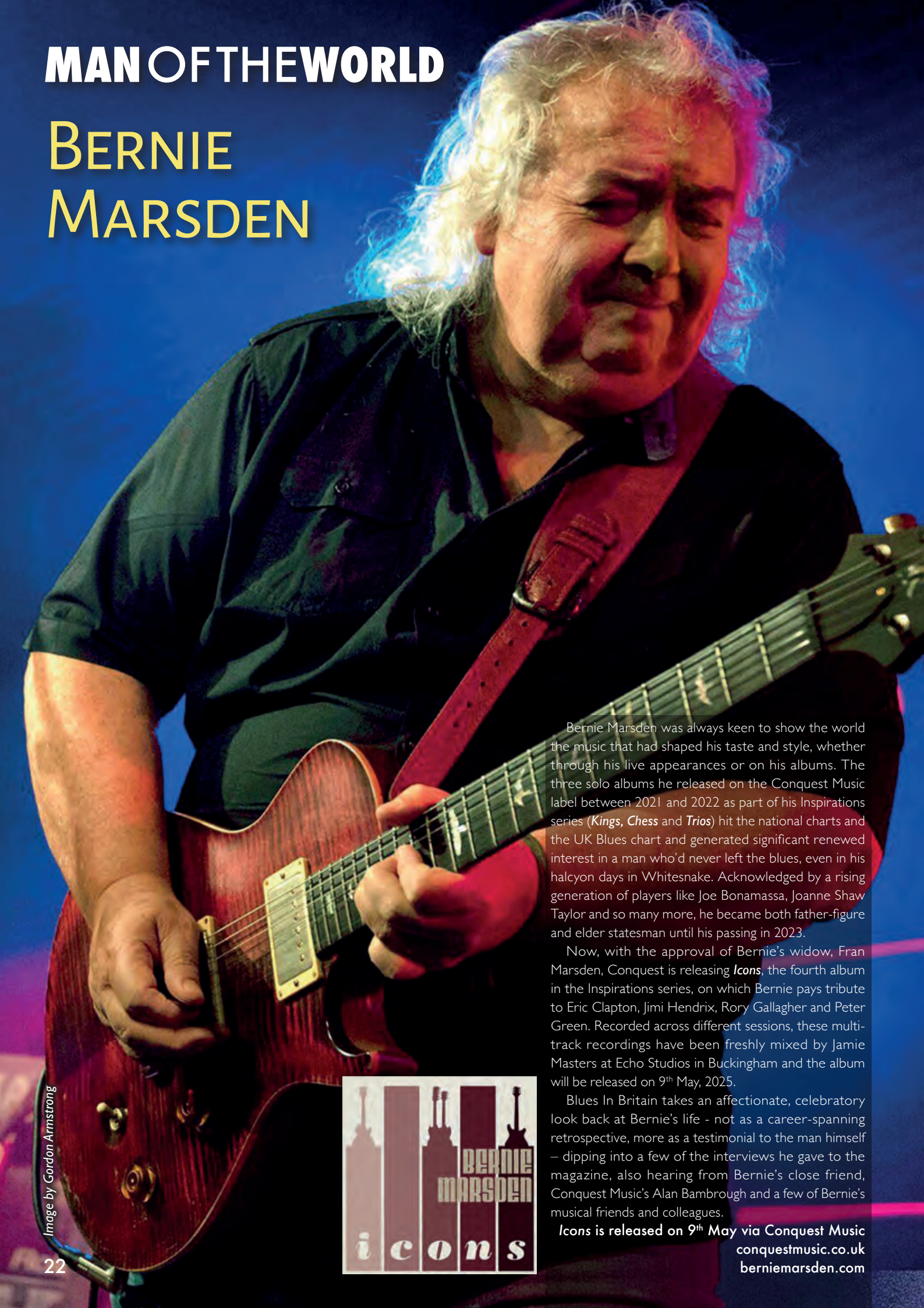


Image by Gordon Armstrong

Bernie Marsden was always keen to show the world the music that had shaped his taste and style, whether through his live appearances or on his albums. The three solo albums he released on the Conquest Music label between 2021 and 2022 as part of his Inspirations series (***Kings***, ***Chess*** and ***Trios***) hit the national charts and the UK Blues chart and generated significant renewed interest in a man who'd never left the blues, even in his halcyon days in Whitesnake. Acknowledged by a rising generation of players like Joe Bonamassa, Joanne Shaw Taylor and so many more, he became both father-figure and elder statesman until his passing in 2023.

Now, with the approval of Bernie's widow, Fran Marsden, Conquest is releasing ***Icons***, the fourth album in the Inspirations series, on which Bernie pays tribute to Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Rory Gallagher and Peter Green. Recorded across different sessions, these multi-track recordings have been freshly mixed by Jamie Masters at Echo Studios in Buckingham and the album will be released on 9th May, 2025.

Blues In Britain takes an affectionate, celebratory look back at Bernie's life - not as a career-spanning retrospective, more as a testimonial to the man himself – dipping into a few of the interviews he gave to the magazine, also hearing from Bernie's close friend, Conquest Music's Alan Bambrough and a few of Bernie's musical friends and colleagues.

Icons is released on 9th May via Conquest Music
conquestmusic.co.uk
berniemarsden.com

"Once we found The Yardbirds and John Mayall, we had to go back from there. That's what we all had to do." Bernie Marsden's in his first band, The Jokers, and he's learning Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley riffs. He's fourteen. It's 1965 and, as he writes in his engaging autobiography, ***Where's My Guitar?,*** "the blues hit me like a hurricane." Indeed, "going back from there", tracing the blues lineage back to its beginnings, its origins and to the singers and guitarists who fashioned it, is what so many of today's musicians have done. For Bernie Marsden it was no different. And now, nearly two years since his passing, the erstwhile Whitesnake guitarist, solo artist and elder statesman of British blues is a player who's now revered and admired by many younger guitarists in his own right.

I interviewed Bernie on several occasions; one memorable phone conversation took place in April 2021. Bernie was chatting on his car phone, having just left London to drive back to his home near Buckingham, certainly a good hour and a half journey. "I may have to cut you off and call you later," he said, the roar of the rush hour traffic clearly audible. Needless to say, our conversation ended with him saying, "Right Nick, I've just pulled into the drive and I need a cuppa." Ninety minutes had gone by in a flash and I think I'd managed just three or four questions. But that was Bernie; friendly, warm and funny, and generous with his time. Just point him in the general direction of an answer and he'd do the rest.

I asked him about his hearing John Mayall and The Yardbirds ***et al*** for the first time, then heading back to the source of these songs: did it matter back then whether he played electric blues or acoustic? He replied that, retrospectively, he went for the electric because, "that was what I could pick up quickly!", adding "To this day, I can be astonished by something recorded in the 1930s. Take it from me, as a guitar player, what Robert Johnson was doing was remarkable." Bernie immersed himself in the blues: and when the band he was in began playing the U.S. Air Force bases, he found further joy in discovering soul singers like Wilson Pickett, Otis and Aretha and James Brown. Freddie King was one of his biggest influences, Marsden seeing him playing live in the UK in 1969, backed by Chicken Shack.

Bernie Marsden had one foot in the blues camp, one in the rock world, periodically shifting his weight from one to the other. He moved from North Buckinghamshire (and his first band, the Skinny Cat Blues Band) to the capital and immersed himself in the world of Melody Maker small ads and auditioning. He'll be forever connected to Whitesnake, yet he also played with hard rockers UFO, Babe Ruth and Wild Turkey, Cozy Powell's Hammer and Paice, Ashton and Lord. "When you've been in a band like Whitesnake, you become rock stars: your playing doesn't change but people's perception of what you're doing changes," he told me sagely.

After Whitesnake, he quickly formed a band called Alaska, "For what seemed like about fifteen minutes!" he laughingly told me. "I didn't want it being called 'a poor man's Whitesnake' so I wrote songs in a more AOR fashion, but my love for the blues was always there in everything I did. I was chatting to Gary Moore once at The Marquee and I was saying to him that I wanted to play more blues but, y'know, we weren't from Mississippi, and Gary said, "Well, Peter (Green) wasn't from Mississippi!"

Gary and Bernie played the Hell Blues Festival in Norway in 1997, where Marsden met Peter Green again (he'd met Green at the same festival the year before), and it was the start of an enigmatic friendship between the two guitarists. Bernie recalled, whilst recording with Whitesnake, asking producer Martin Birch (who had been the engineer on Green's last album with Fleetwood Mac, ***Then Play On***), "What would Peter have done here?" and Birch replied, "Play better than you!"

Bernie co-wrote a couple of songs and played on Joe Bonamassa's 2020 ***Royal Tea*** and he worked with Joanne Shaw Taylor as well. He was rapidly becoming an elder statesmen to the next wave of blues-rock players. What goes around, comes around: he himself had blagged his way into B.B.'s dressing room in London and there's a photo of him looking like a little kid who's meeting the King, which of course he was! "He explained the blues to me," recalled Bernie during one of my conversations with him. "You couldn't pay money for that kind of experience. There's no money in the world could buy you that." And it's worth remembering what B. B. King said about Bernie Marsden: asked if British guitarists could play the blues, King said, "Some can; Peter Green, Eric Clapton, they feel the blues. Oh, and that Whitesnake guy, Bernie, he got it."

Bernie told me: "You know, Cozy (Powell) never got it, he never got the blues. He'd say, 'It all sounds the same' and I'd say, 'No it doesn't, listen to this!' I can listen to a record I first heard sixty years ago and hear something new. Listen to the remastered Robert Johnson tracks on headphones and it's spooky: you can hear him breathing. But the blues excites me all the time."

The final time I interviewed Bernie was at a live Q+A session in front of an invited audience at a bookshop in Bicester, in June 2022. Bernie was promoting his autobiography ***Where's My Guitar?*** and was on fine form, entertaining the assembled audience with witty, informative tales and anecdotes from his career, funny stories spilling out, one after each other. He recounted visits to Peter Green's house (in Green's later years), including an ***ad hoc*** demonstration on his acoustic showing how a deadpan Green would completely re-jig the riff to 'Oh Well' to throw Marsden's best efforts off the scent. You could hear a pin drop as he played a divine, stripped-back version of his signature song, the song he co-wrote with David Coverdale, Whitesnake's 'Here I Go Again'. The world is a poorer place without Bernie Marsden in it.

Nicholas John
Editor: Blues In Britain



Someone once told me that you shouldn't revise on the night before an exam. They probably meant that rest and relaxation was recommended, but I was always one to cherry pick the morsels of advice that suited me and ignore well-intentioned guidance that didn't.

And so it was that on the rain-soaked evening of Wednesday, 18th June 1980, this fifteen year old lad was in seat D12 at Newcastle City Hall. The maths O-level test was at 9:00 a.m. the next morning, but that didn't matter - nothing else mattered at that moment than savouring every second of the Whitesnake performance I was about to witness. I'd bought the ***Ready an' Willing*** LP on the day of release a month earlier, played it constantly, poring over the sleeve notes, learning the lyrics and studying the guitar parts with a discipline that was sadly lacking in my academic pursuits. The lights went up and the opening riff to 'Come On' blasted out, and there he was, stage right with The Beast crying out its beautiful tone. It was the very first time I was in the same room as Bernard John Marsden.

Thirty years on from that night, Bernie and I were in the same room once more. During those intervening years, I'd seen him on tour many times, but on this occasion we were to discuss a business matter. For the first time, instead of artist to fan, it would be peer to peer. Bernie was personable, engaging, charismatic and humble. He always had a keen eye for a deal, but never once was there any feeling of conflict or unease. Although we didn't proceed with that particular venture, Bernie quickly became a great friend and from that day on, we would meet and speak often, helping each other with advice, encouragement and support. Always entertaining, with a wealth of brilliant stories, Bernie had that rare and generous quality of actually listening to others. Although a natural entertainer, he didn't feel the need to always be the centre of attention.

A few or more years ago, over a cup of tea and one of Fran Marsden's delicious cakes, I mentioned to Bernie that I was starting a record label with my old friend Cliff Evans.

With a glint in his eye, he immediately said, "I'll be your first artist." I was stunned and humbled. Thrilled and just a little bit scared but bursting with pride that he had the faith in me to take care of his music.

In July 2021, Conquest Music released ***Kings***. With a catalogue number of CNQ 001 (Bernie was quite proud of that) ***Kings*** was the first of his Inspirations series of albums where he paid tribute to the artists who had helped Bernie develop his own style and sound. With recordings of songs originally recorded by Albert, Freddie and B.B. it entered the UK album sales charts at #18 and #1 on the Amazon blues chart. The ***Chess*** album followed, inspired by the legendary Chicago label, and then ***Trios***, Bernie's take on songs by the great power trios of the '60s and '70s. All three garnered great praise in the music press and with fans. It led to his considering recording a new album of original Bernie Marsden songs and before long, we had a pool of over twenty great tracks to choose from. During early summer 2023, ***Working Man*** was mixed, sequenced, mastered and the artwork prepared, all overseen and approved by Bernie. Despite wrestling with health issues, he remained as bright, attentive, capable and witty as ever. ***Working Man*** was scheduled for a September release.

Bernie Marsden passed away on the evening of 24th August, 2023. ***Working Man*** was eventually released in the December of that year. In his review for ***Classic Rock*** magazine, Neil Jeffries wrote: "Two discs, twenty-two songs, one very worthy epitaph."

From the perspective of a record label, Bernie Marsden was the perfect artist. He brought us a number of incredible albums to release. Excellent songs, beautifully arranged and recorded, always with the tasteful and remarkable guitar work that made him one of the all-time greats. Bernie would always make time to fulfil every promo request we asked of him and, at the end of each call, every interviewer would feel they'd made a warm, personal and lasting connection with him. It was that same generous humanity which he'd show to every fan who wanted to talk to him. Never too busy to chat and sign an autograph, Bernie loved people, and they loved him.

They say never meet your heroes…they also say never work with your friends…I will be forever grateful that I met Bernie Marsden and honoured that we became friends. I consider my professional association with him as the pinnacle of my career. I miss him terribly.

Oh, in case you were wondering, that kid passed his maths O level, getting the top grade. A shot of rock and roll really is the best preparation for what lies ahead.

Alan Bambrough
Conquest Music

Bernie was a great encourager, a confidant, a brilliant writer and a dear friend. He championed so many young careers whilst being such a brilliant musician on his own. I never saw him happier than at Abbey Road Studios writing music together for what would become the ***Royal Tea*** album. So much talent wrapped up in such a wonderful human being.

Joe Bonamassa

Bernie Marsden was such a humble sweet person, you could hear it in every song he wrote and every note he played.

Doug Aldrich



ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons



Eric Bibb

I knew Bernie as a friend and musical colleague for almost fifty years, starting with Cozy Powell's Hammer, through Whitesnake, MGM, Moody Marsden Band, Company Of Snakes and then Bernie's own band in more recent years, mostly blues-based but always with Bernie's trademark humour and stories. He was down-to-earth, friendly and great company. Musically, a true student of the blues with a vast collection of records and books and he struck up friendships with some of the original masters of the blues who he learned so much from.

Neil Murray

In 1986, Bernie brought me over from Dublin to join his band Alaska in London and my life was forever changed. Years later, I produced his album ***Shine*** at Abbey Road and we got very close. Getting him on Jack Bruce's album, working with Ginger Baker and many other incredible musicians was thrilling. He was one of the best blues rock guitar players of all time.

Rob Cass



With B.B. King

My first meeting with Bernie was in the Paice, Ashton & Lord collaboration. When he came into the audition, he was like a breath of fresh air and got the job immediately. When I joined Whitesnake, it was great to work with him again. I never laughed so much as on the road with the 'Snakes and a lot of that was down to Bernie.

Ian Paice

A genuinely funny, gifted man, whom I was honoured to know and share a stage with. Bernie…once a Snake, always a Snake.

David Coverdale



Bobby Rush

I think I first met Bernie at a Blues Band gig at Friars, in Aylesbury. I would run in to Bernie here, there and everywhere, we had the blues in common, though he was playing at the heavier end than me! His ***Stacks*** album is a real favourite of mine and, I know, Joe Bonamassa's too. Every great rock or blues guitarist was a personal friend of Bernie's!

Paul Jones

Bernie was part of the first wave of UK guitar players I got into post Clapton, Beck and Page, an incredible player, songwriter and singer. Tone, touch and taste, that was Bernie! He introduced me to Jeff Beck in the UK in 1982. I was carrying around a huge dead fish post-show, a fish with lipstick on, pouring shots of tequila into its mouth. I turned round face first into Jeff Beck!

Steve Lukather (Toto)



Bernie with Robert Plant and Paul Weller

Many years ago at Frankfurt Music Messe, Bernie had a demonstration in one part of the huge building, and he was running late for his next gig. We helped him carry his pedals and some stuff and rushed around trying to find where he was playing next, Bernie carrying his PRS guitar. He must have cut his hand, on a string probably, plugged in to jam with Nicko McBrain and had no idea blood was running down his arm. He still played a blinder! What a trooper dear Bernie was!

Phil Campbell (Motorhead)

Bernie was the most affable of men: funny, dedicated to his family and friends, adept in his youth at soccer, and at snooker in his middle age, and with an amazing talent for playing guitar. Last time we worked together was at our charity bash performing a half hour blues set: 'Crossroads', 'Hoochie Coochie Man', 'Same Old Blues' and 'Here I go Again' which brought the house down!

Don Airey



Bernie with David Coverdale in 2013

Bernie was not just a great guitarist and songwriter, but also an extremely nice guy and great fun to be with. He had such a unique style but we never had the chance to play together, which is one of many sadnesses in my life. The front cover of Blues in Britain is well earned and well deserved.

Rick Wakeman

"Bernie was a treasure of a human and a passionate guitar player."

Peter Frampton

Bernie came to a lot of my gigs in the late'80s and '90s, he often used to sit in with the band. He was a great natural player and a terrific songwriter. I've recorded 'Place In My Heart' from his ***Stacks*** record, for my next album. All the greatest musicians I've had the honour of meeting and working with in my lifetime have all been humble: and Bernie was both a great musician and a very humble man.

Elkie Brooks



Doug Aldrich and Jimmy Page

As a young teenager, Whitesnake were a gateway into my musical education. I was always impressed and seduced by Bernie's amazing ability to play with great melodic sweetness and a burning blues ferocity. He really was a master of his art.

Nicky Wire (Manic Street Preachers)



Neil Murray, Ian Paice and Don Airey

I first met gentleman Bernie back in the '70s, his band had been signed by our then agents Quarry Productions (above the old Marquee Club). He enthused about my brother and I said, "Well, he's down the corridor, why not say hello?" Once introduced, Rory and Bernie were like magnets! Dear Bernie was one of the first musicians to call and pay tribute to Rory after his passing. At the Buxton Opera House tribute concert, Bernie was the first guitarist to perform with Rory's Stratocaster. He did Rory's orphaned guitar proud.

Donal Gallagher

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21.03 CHURCH CROOKHAM MEMORIAL HALL
03.04 EUROPEAN BLUES CHALLENGE, CROATIA
11.04 LAMP TAVERN, DUDLEY, W. MIDLANDS
12.04 LOUTH BLUES CLUB, LINCOLNSHIRE
13.04 HRH BLUES, O2 ACADEMY LEICESTER
19.04 THE GARIBALDI HOTEL, NORTHAMPTON
25.04 NIDAROS BLUES, NORWAY
01.05 CHELTENHAM JAZZ FESTIVAL
02.05 THE GREEN HOTEL, KINROSS, SCOTLAND
03.05 ARRAN ROCK & BLUES FEST, SCOTLAND
08.05 THAMES SIDE BREWERY, STAINES
22.05 TEIGNMOUTH JAZZ BLUES, DEVON
25.05 EUPEN MUSIC MARATHON, BELGIUM
27.05 TUESDAY NIGHT MUSIC CLUB, COULSDON
31.05 WELFEST, STRATFORD-UPON-AVON
14.06 WEST END CENTRE, ALDERSHOT
28.06 EMSWORTH SUMMER FEST, HAMPSHIRE
04.07 ALFOLD ROCK & BLUES FESTIVAL
08.07 DEER BARN, BURTON, STAFFORDSHIRE
18.07 FOREST ARTS CENTRE, HAMPSHIRE
19.07 THE ARC, WINCHESTER, HAMPSHIRE
26.07 PLAYING WITH FIRE FEST, OMAHA, USA
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BLUES FOR SALE



Catfish: Time To Fly
Own Label

I cannot begin to imagine how Matt Long's father, Paul Long, managed to curate ***Time To Fly,*** the final Catfish album, a tapestry of pieces and a lasting tribute to the late (and much-missed) Matt Long. With Paul at the helm of a collective of talented, supporting musicians, it brings together studio demos, key parts of two songs discovered on Matt's computer and a partial lyric and acoustic chord sequence from Matt's phone.

The title track opens the album with style and substance, Matt's lyric framing the searching guitar lines. The vocal is taken from a live recording and Chloe Josephine pours on emotive backing vocals. 'Don't Turn Around' literally stopped me in my tracks, a song written by Paul and musically rooted at the progressive end of the Catfish spectrum. That's before Matt carves it open with a mesmerizing solo that's Bonamassa-***esque*** in scale. Chloe floods the melody with her haunting backing vocals. New song 'Sick Of It All' follows and reveals itself as a shin-kicking hard rocker that the collective have brilliantly brought to life. At the opposite end of the scale, the aching ballad 'Forever More And Again' is heart-rending as the lyric depicts two lovers where one is dying. Paul has done an incredible job in taking the elements found on Matt's phone and piecing together lyrics and acoustic guitar before adding his own voice and empathic keys. It's sparse, but such a poignant song.'Say The Word' is the perfect way to close the album: a 10-minute, sprawling soundscape that immediately put me in mind of the Catfish interpretation of Foy Vance's 'Make It Rain'. Five musicians have the space to illuminate the melody, a precursor to the climax of the piece, Matt's intricate, passionate solo.

What Paul and a group of gifted musicians have created is an emotionally powerful and permanent testimony to the brilliance that was Matt Long. Paul and Fiona Long, Sam Leese, Adam Pyke, Phil and Ash Wilson, Alex Voysey, Kev Hickman and Chloe Josephine be proud.

Nigel Foster



When Rivers Meet: Addicted To You
One Road Records

The fourth studio album from Essex-based multi-award-winning band When Rivers Meet comes out of the stalls all guns blazing with the title track, 'Addicted To You'. It sets the scene beautifully for an album packed full with riffs galore, an expansive sound and one hell of a groove. Husband and wife duo Grace and Aaron Bond really do complement each other well and the vocals are a real highlight. They take turns at lead vocals and perform some together and the whole effect is up close and intimate no matter what the style. And there is diversity here over the ten tracks recorded at Boathouse Studios in Suffolk: the ballads are strong, the rockier numbers tight, and there's moments that are genuinely moving. The whole thing manages to sound simultaneously raw and polished.

Tracks such as 'Soft White Sands' or 'Never Change' are clearly autobiographical with themes of strength, defiance, independence and forging your own path. 'Coming Up For Air' is a mature reflective number and they're even following in the traditions of Bad Company, Bo Diddley and Fleetwood Mac by writing a song named after themselves! ***Addicted To You*** has a real classic feel, perfectly at home across the genres of blues rock, Americana and even soul. With passion and high energy, this dynamic album cements their reputation and talent for being a refreshingly exciting voice on the scene.

Liz Medhurst



Kai Strauss: Wailin' In Vienna
CRS Records

Germany's Kai Strauss has demonstrated his command of blues and soul over a series of impressive albums. On this occasion he has gone back to basics with a set of traditional blues, all original compositions, recorded in Vienna with local musicians and a slew of guests, notably fellow guitarists Alex Schultz and Rusty Zinn, plus Sax Gordon adding his muscular style to five of the fifteen tracks, with not a dud in sight.

Kai sings on nine tunes and six are instrumentals, the title track being one of those, a fast-paced tune with Rusty and Kai sharing solos. '$5 Shake' is a highlight, US-domiciled Austrian Christian Dozzler shining on the piano (as he also does on 'Slow Roasted') and Rusty and Kai again sharing solos on a Texas-styled rocker whilst 'Sweet & Salty' finds Kai and Alex combining on a lovely slow blues. Sax Gordon is on hand for the tribute tune 'Thank You Mr Doggett'.

There are lots of highlights among the vocal tracks too. 'Old Fashioned Daddy' is an upbeat opener with a solo spot for Sax Gordon, Kai explaining his preference for "old school ways", a phrase seemingly applying to both his relationships and his guitar style! 'Stranded' and 'Cooking For My Baby' are further highlights, both with Sax Gordon on top form: the former rockets along with Kai's guitar terrific as he sings of being stuck on the highway and the latter has some saucy double entendre lyrics, which Strauss delivers with tongue-in-cheek relish over an upbeat T-Bone Walker style tune. Indeed, T-Bone looms large over several tracks here, notably the late night slow blues of 'My Old Time Used To Be' and the jazzy finale 'Three Bells In A Row'.

Any fan of traditional electric blues will spend a very happy hour in the company of Kai and his bandmates.

John Mitchell



Eric Johanson: Live In Mississippi
Ruf

Louisiana born Eric Johanson's 2023 debut album for Ruf, ***The Deep And The Dirty,*** gained critical appraisal, reaching top slot on the Billboard chart: here's the follow-up, a 10-track album recorded live at the Ground Zero club in Biloxi and, as you'd expect, it sizzles with energy.

'Nowhere To Go' is a full throttle start to the album: a drum tattoo punches through, the bass rumbles ominously, Eric's fingers dance busily along the neck, bending 'n' blending chords. 'Undertow' is an outstanding, explosive rock blues, one of several numbers here co-written with Jesse Dayton. Easing back

and picking up his slide, Eric takes a more traditional southern road with 'Just Like New'. Then you'll find a swampier sound under the light of a 'Yellow Moon', a superb take on The Neville Brothers' original and, along with his menacing version of Dr.John's 'I Walk On Guilded Splinters', an acknowledgement of Johanson's home city of New Orleans. An acoustic classic, Skip James' 'Hard Time Killing Floor Blues', is superbly delivered and segues directly into a thumping, slide-driven 'Familiar Sound'. And don't overlook the beautiful, slow burning 'Changes The Universe'.

There's an awful lot to enjoy in this live recording, Johanson's vocals delivered confidently, his guitar talking dirty or slip slidin' away. I can't think of any good reason not to seek out ***Live In Mississippi***.

Graham Munn



Robin Trower: Come And Find Me

Provogue

Just eighty years old and continuing his epic journey, Robin Trower invites us to ***Come And Find Me*** with his latest album, an eleven track contemporary rock juggernaut. There's no mistaking the sound of Trower's honey-toned Strat as we open with 'A Little Bit Of Freedom', an appeal for a little less red tape. The Fender is worked beautifully over the drums and bass of Chris Taggart and Glenn Letsch, the lyrics wonderfully granular through Richard Watts' vocal. Freedom seems a fleeting moment before the pulse slows, revealing we only have 'One Go Around': it's totally absorbing, touches of wah, a gorgeous rich tone. The titular track 'Come And Find Me' stands out as a more complex slice of progressive rock, slipping from slow passages to pumping rock rhythm, before the Fender kicks in atmospherically.

Powerful, dark, full of angst yet anthemic, 'Take This Hurt Away' came from thoughts of creating a James Bond theme, which sums up the grandeur of the song nicely.

More upbeat and hopeful, 'The Future Starts Right Here' talks of putting aside our political differences to pull together for the common good. Then a touch of soul with guest vocalist Jess Hayes on 'Tangled Love' - a lovely intermission as she sonically counterbalances the weight of the band along with that fuzzed-up Strat. 'I Fly Straight To You' brings light and a freedom of spirit, ***"like an arrow swift and true,"*** surely destined to be a radio favourite.

The slow, brooding 'Time Stood Still' is a beautiful closure to another milestone in Robin Trower's journey, as he goes from strength to strength. This is a must have, though I'd have liked to have heard a little more from Jess Hayes. An unhesitating recommendation for those with a leaning towards the dark side.

Graham Munn

Max Hightower: Nothin' But The Truth

MoMojo Records

Max Hightower travelled to New Orleans to record this all-original album at Big Jon Atkinson's studio, assembling a strong band for the sessions, including Big Jon on lead guitar, alongside sax and keys, with trombone added to

We're Not In Kansas Anymore...



Samantha Fish: Paper Doll

Rounder

Samantha Fish is a musician who seems to try a slightly different approach with each successive album, keeping things fresh for her ever-expanding fanbase. This release is no exception and the influence of Detroit garage band leader Bobby Harlow, employed as producer, is evident. There's a rough edge to the recordings, (made at The Orb in Austin and Savannah Studios, in Los Angeles) and vocally Fish really gives it everything. As she puts it: ***"It's taken me years to finally find my voice in a studio setting, but with this record I took everything I had and slammed it right on the table."*** You can't say fairer than that.

Her fans can also take everything she's got and more, so songs like 'Can Ya Handle The Heat' with its insistent, crunchy, waspish low end riff are surely rhetorical. Opening track 'I'm Done Running' is classic Fish; a cool open string groove and commanding vocal are the prelude to a tight slide riff that you know is going to sound fabulous live. 'Lose You' is powered by a hypnotically alternating two chord pattern and the all-out powerplay is leavened by massed backing vocals singing a gloriously uplifting hook - the wailing at the fade out epitomises the "giving it everything" approach. 'Sweet Southern Sounds' is similarly enhanced by massed backing vocals, overlaid to sound like a gospel choir on another memorable chorus. Co-written with fellow New Orleans resident Anders Osborne this is something of a modern classic. The album has a bit of everything and incorporates different changes in atmosphere: 'Off In The Blue' is wistfully moody with shimmering percussion and rolling toms as Fish's voice flows into a gloriously tuneful trill on the high notes. 'Rusty Razor' features guitarist Mick Collins, who takes on the Jesse Dayton role as her rocking partner for a full-on joint vocal and features a punky, frenetic solo. The cool interplay between the chords and the melodic guitar fills on 'Don't Say It' are the sort of magical combination that make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. This is a peerless collection.

Simon Green



Samantha Fish: Runaway

Ruf

Released in 2011 as her solo debut, ***Runaway*** broke Samantha Fish out of Kansas City and into the big time. Just a few short months before that, very few people outside her hometown had ever heard of the mercurial 22-year Missouri guitarist who'd been paying her dues on the local blues scene, yet fourteen years on, Samantha Fish is one of the biggest stars in the blues firmament, and here's Ruf Records, re-issuing that same debut on transparent red vinyl.

Fish described her debut as ***"all the sounds I grew up with, with my own spin,"*** and ***Runaway*** features sharp-edged riffs ('Leavin' Kind'), hard-rockin' boogies (the title track 'Runaway'), sultry blues ('Otherside Of The Bottle') and even smoky jazz on 'Feelin' Alright'. Mike Zito occupies the producer's chair and guests on their co-written 'Push Comes To Shove' and there's a gorgeous cover of Tom Petty's elegiac 'Louisiana Rain'. Throughout, Fish's vocals are assured, her guitar work brash and exciting, the band (Cassie Taylor on bass, Jamie Little on drums) the perfect rhythm section (check out the down an' dirty 'Down In The Swamp' or the insistent 'Money To Burn').

If you're a Fish fan, you'll either have this already or be reaching for your credit card. In truth, it won't be her defining statement but, as debuts go, it set the bar pretty high and showed an artist surging out of her home base, eager to make her mark and confident in her own undoubted abilities. There's a track on ***Runaway*** entitled 'Today's My Day', a sunny southern slice of retro-styled blues: it wouldn't be long before every day would be Samantha Fish's day.

Leon Blanc



three tracks to further increase the Crescent City flavour. Max is on vocals, harp and guitar and has a gritty vocal style that fits the mainly up-tempo material well. His searing harp opens 'Double Bubble', bari sax "parping" beneath the rhythm throughout. 'It's On Me' finds Max's nagging guitar riff underpinning sweeping keyboards. 'Here She Comes' is one of just three cuts on which Max doesn't play harp, his jagged rhythm guitar setting the pace throughout. Big Jon takes over guitar duties on 'Damned If I Do', the first tune on the album taken at a slower pace, offering the opportunity to appreciate Max's vocals and harp all the better. 'Twitchy Witcha' is a title that must be influenced by New Orleans and the addition of trombone and sousaphone alongside the bari sax emphasises that connection, a tune that is sure to make people move. In contrast 'My Baby And Me' is more stripped back with the twinkling piano, Max's guitar/harp and the rhythm section; Max delivers another fine harp solo on this one. Harp also features strongly on the opening of the catchy 'Sweet Gum Tree', as does the trombone and Big Jon's clean guitar picking. No horns on 'Too Much Of Not Enough', Max's rhythm guitar laying down the foundations over which Big Jon adds the leads, before trombone and bari sax again team up on 'Thick Jello'. 'I Ain't Lyin" ups the pace pleasantly with excellent piano and alto sax, giving the tune a lighter, jazzy feel. 'Snuggle Bug' is naggingly catchy, Max paying lyrical tribute to someone special, with strong sax, harp and piano featured. The album closes with an instrumental with an intriguing title, 'Assmograph', Max's harp leading the way.

John Mitchell



Jennifer Porter: Sun Come And Shine (Redux)

Overton Music

Multi-talented Maine resident Jennifer Porter, who took the blues charts by storm in 2024 with her gritty ***Yes I Do*** set, has chosen to follow that with a revisit to 2021's ***Sun Come And Shine,*** rather more introspective in style, if benefitting from a rhythm section featuring soul/funk veterans Bernard Purdie (drums) and Wilbur Bascombe (bass).

The title track opens in mellow style, Jennifer's Hammond B3 keyboard setting the mood for her poetic lyric. 'Satin Shoes' stretches out in bluesy tempo with some rasping tenor sax from Tom Timko, then 'Stop Your Talkin" lifts the tempo and adds a funky groove and a harmonica bridge. 'In And Out With You' maintains the tempo with the gritty arrangement built on piano and horns and a fine guitar bridge by George Naha. 'Bitter New York Nights' is an epic bluesy ballad, based on Jennifer's personal experience of a freezing night in Times Square. 'You're So Easy To Be With' adds a touch of goodtime Louisiana, Porter trading her Hammond for piano, driven by the backdrop of C.J. Chenier's accordion (a hint of zydeco), then the mood changes with the poignant balladry of Dino Valenti's 'Something On Your Mind', Timko's wistful soprano sax adding to the moody delivery. This style maintains as the album closes with 'I'll Be Here', the pedal steel of Cindy Cashdollar adding a tinge of country to the waltz-tempo ballad, serving to display the full range of musical diversity in Jennifer's repertoire.

Clive Richardson



Southern Avenue: Family

Alligator

To us Brits, the idea of growing up in a home where gospel is the only music allowed may seem to be a tad tough on the kids. In Memphis it means giving them a head start.

The Jackson sisters forged their musical bond singing in church with the family band so their voices were well-honed when they first embraced the power of their home-town soul and blues. Cue Israeli bluesman Ori Naftaly who moved to Memphis fully armed with appropriate and inventive guitar styles. In Southern Avenue he found kindred spirits, joined the band and then married the lead singer.

Tierinii Jackson's mighty vocals soar throughout but in keeping with their gospel upbringing, Tikyra and Ava are much more than backing singers. Yes, they harmonise deliciously right on cue but also complement their big sister in more assertive ways, adding vocal depth and power when needed, all three using their voices as added instrumentation while, just as importantly, Tikyra also drives forceful drums throughout and Ava adds violin. The 'extended family' includes Luther Dickinson who drops by to share bass duties with Blake Rhea while Jeremy Powell's keyboards are crucial, particularly his sweeping organ underlay.

Southern Avenue itself stretches through downtown Memphis, all the way to Soulsville, so is a name which will surely strike just the right chord at home but undoubtedly less so on this side of The Pond. But pick any track here and the connection will be lit. Opener 'Long Is The Road' builds smoothly before Naftaly's expressive bluesy rock solo proves his ability to pitch the perfect guitar for each occasion. His rustic slide is spot-on for both the gospel stomp 'Found A Friend In You' and also the title track testimonial which somehow manages to squeeze both light and shade into its 39 seconds, putting us on stand-by for further unabashed celebrations of sisterhood. 'So Much Love' is sweet soul, smoothly clicking into gear, 'Late Night Get Down' is dark and edgy while 'Flying' sees Tierinii's vocal power soar high and mightily before the perfect punchy postcript 'We Are.' As in "family", of course.

John Bottomley



Tomislav Goluban with Crooked Eye Tommy: Nashville Road

Overton Music

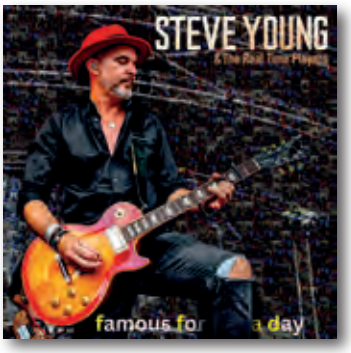
Tomislav Goluban may not be a familiar name in the UK, but his achievements as a vocalist and harp player, particularly in his homeland of Croatia, are considerable: multiple awards and fifteen studio albums since his debut in 2001. He's had a series of collaborations with musicians in Europe and the U.S. and ***Nashville Road*** sees him with Californian Crooked Eye Tommy (Marsh), with whom he's played live in both Croatia and the States.

The instrumental 'Hard Run' opens: saturated harp very much to the fore with ear-catching drum and piano adornments, plus some 'busy' guitar fills - clever abrupt ending. 'Rock Dog' opens with

throbbing drums; Crooked Eye Tommy taking the vocals on a ZZ Top-tinged number. 'Up Is Down' has Goluban's growling vocals doing the honours on a Cajun-flavoured piece; the harp has a more natural acoustic sound on this. The delightfully titled 'Bad Choices Make Good Stories' is a more laid-back number with Tommy returning to the vocal spotlight. 'Hip Hop Shake' (fortunately) does ***not*** do what it says on the tin – the instrumental lets each band member stretch out as it ebbs and flows in intensity. The upbeat 'Hard Candy' is a nice play on words; referring to a lady, alongside some confectionery references. Tomislav's gritty vocals return for the slow-shuffling 'Keep Moving On', with prominent harp fills and solo, effective change of tempo towards the end. The suitably cheery 'Life Is Good' finds the writer grateful for what he has, rather than bemoaning what he doesn't: Goluban's vocals are a good fit for the song, coupled with some Sonny Boy-styled harp lines.

There's nothing ground breaking on this collection, but anything too left-field would be to the detriment of the solid songs and performances, whilst allowing Goluban's harp (which he mixes up in terms of delivery) to be front and centre of proceedings.

Russ Cottee



Steve Young & The Real Time Players: Famous For A Day

Own Label

Looking at the cover of the album (in reality of course you can pretty much always judge a book by its cover), you might be mistaken in thinking that here comes yet another guitar player with a bag full of riffs and an empty head. Happily, to the contrary, this is a very enjoyable collection of proper songs, all highly melodic and full of ideas. The twin guitar backing is suitably powerful, and crunchy guitar parts abound, high in the mix but always subservient to the vocals. It's a high quality production overall.

Famous For A Day quickly announces itself as something different; opening track 'SYUK Special' (I'm none the wiser after listening to it several times) has one guitar playing clipped chords that give it a reggae feel, whilst the other growls in the background. The vocals are immediately interesting, and the song quickly goes through several melodic gear changes that catch the attention.There's also some nice Hammond playing adding extra texture, presumably courtesy of the ubiquitous Stevie Watts who's listed as a guest. 'Dog 'n' Bone' is a delightfully breezy and tuneful mid-tempo number featuring sweet backing vocals and a fiery guitar solo. 'Who? You' is an accomplished acoustic ditty, complemented by some slightly incongruous tub-thumping halfway through and nice guitar frills.

This is a superior set of songs; not quite the blues but pleasingly full of riffing rhythms and guitar interplay. The title of the album refers to the artist being the centre of media attention for being the first person to receive a revolutionary new mRNA cancer vaccine. Happily, it seems to have been effective as Steve Young sounds in extremely fine fettle on an extremely fine collection.

Simon Green

Bees Deluxe: Smash Hits

Slapping Cats Records

Anglo/American outfit Bees Deluxe are an intriguing outfit of consummate musicians fronted by Conrad Warre on guitar and vocals, with Carol Band on piano and harmonica, Paul Glovine on drums and Adam Sankowski on bass. Joined by guest musicians, they deliver jazz-fused, "acid blues" originals and reimagined



modern blues classics.

Smash Hits revisits earlier recordings from their back catalogue, giving new twists and turns along the way and it opens with 'Somebody Loan Me A Dime', a Fenton Robinson song. What strikes you immediately is Warre's voice, a rough diamond with a timbre that sounds honed on gargling paint stripper. His guitar is starkly beautiful, woven over Band's keys and Glovine's cool drum beat. Understated yet alluring, if this is acid blues I want more of it. Bad luck runs throughout blues, this is from the 'King Of Bad Luck', the music is hangdog chilled, dark clouds overhead.

The musicianship is superb, the oddball lyrics paint the scene. Then lift that mood with 'Beer', this tipple has a lovely frothy rhythm as Carol's harp lands on top, a fun party song. 'Blues For The Decline Of Western Civilisation' is a gorgeous instrumental, with sweet guitar and Sankowski's bass throbbing through: lovely lift music for the penthouse suite. Next, the irresistible 'Nitro': screwball lyrics and added horns and a piano solo on 'How To Play 96 Tears'.

There's so much to unwrap in this thirteen-track album. Lyrics aside, the instrumentation and style fascinates, as on the snappy 'Can't Do My Homework Anymore', with double bass, driving drums, interwoven guitar and understated keys. I'll sign out on 'Kidnap', the plot unwrapped by Warre, tailing his target. The music is edgy, perfect as a soundtrack to a black comedy. All weird, wonderful stuff: try it, damned if you won't like it.

Graham Munn



Andres Roots: Royal Spa Blues (Live From Temperance)

Roots Art

Temperance Art & Music Cafe in Royal Leamington Spa puts on music most days of the week and has established itself as a leading small venue, not just through the quality shows there but also as the venue for some excellent live recordings. The Estonian king of (mainly) acoustic blues instrumentals Andres Roots has re-established his following since Covid as a regular and welcome visitor to these shores, and this extremely entertaining set revisits his first appearance at the venue in July 2024.

Fifteen songs, all instrumentals, all solo and acoustic, and all well worth a listen. They vary from the lovely blues of 'Springtime Blues' and 'Station Blues Medley' and the sprightly '4 A.M. Hot Dog' (nice bass string snapping) to the self-explanatorily titled 'Tango Walk', the "confusing" 'Django' and excellent covers of Jimi Hendrix's 'The Wind Cries Mary' and, to finish off, The Beatles' Come Together', whilst 'Spanish Run' sounds like a vintage rock guitar instrumental from the early '60s – maybe.

If you're one of those who mutters***"Shut up and get on with it!"*** when a performer begins to talk to the audience, please pass on swiftly now: what really makes this set special is the rather humorous between-song banter, as Andres provides context for the songs, puzzles over comments made about his style or songs, or just hopes everyone will go home nicely. It certainly does bear repeated listening and adds a warm, good-natured feeling to what is a lovely recording.

Norman Darwen



Ma Polaine's Great Decline: Live

Own Label

A live recording from the Green Note, London and Dorothy Pax, Sheffield, where Beth Packer and Clinton Hough were joined by drummer Jimmy Norden, and that's the key to this lovely collection drawn from their previous albums. Norden's drums add an extra dimension to what's already engaging music. Eleven songs that perversely opens with an 'Old Fashioned Goodbye' and goes out dosed up with the deliciously dark 'Morphine'.

An old favourite of mine, the quirky 'Paris Is Burning' retells the tale of a transvestite with an old lover's body tucked away in the wardrobe. Jimmy's hand and stick percussion adds extra sparkle as Beth's voice relays the story. Beth throws in a gorgeous 'Purple' grenade, before revealing the tangled relationship where 'The Poison Sits', Clinton gently accompanies, before percussion joins in for another beautiful Packer oddity. Beth and Clinton seem to make their songs sound so simple, but they have a collection of gems that reveal facets of deep colour and dazzling reflection. 'Audrey' dances alone in her secret world, driven by the beat of drum and sympathetic guitar rhythm. The atmospheric, rolling waters drive 'The Wreck' under the aching sea, as we're drawn into the lively song by siren Beth. 'Molecules' was the title track from Ma Polaine's last release: a little hint of jazz and Gallic charm, Clinton's guitar is a delight. If you're a fan of Ma Polaine's Great Decline, or just intrigued by their music (which is pure sorcery), you'd be hard pressed to better this live recording. It brilliantly encapsulates their magical music.

Graham Munn



Buddy King And The Moondogs: Lunar Blues

Rambling Boy

This new collection (recorded in Dolby Atmos (immersive audio) which gives us some sharp production) is a mix of self-penned numbers and classic songs that everyone will recognise - after a fashion, because there are some innovative arrangements here:'Hoochie Coochie Man' (titled here as 'Coochi Man'), for example, is given the reggae treatment. Whilst some might think that sacrilegious, do you really need another blues take on Muddy Waters version? It works surprisingly well and retains much of a blues/rock vibe. Similarly, Buddy's take on 'Eleanor Rigby' is radically different from The Beatles original and the track 'Jackie' is a thinly disguised version of Chuck Berry's 'Nadine' – as thinly disguised as putting a pair of glasses on Superman and calling him Clark Kent!

Lunar Blues contains strong original songs like the opening 'Hear This', the slower, staccato 'She's Got Zazz', the rocky 'Never Alone' and the moody 'Nothing Ever Happens In Rock City', with its novel baritone guitar. 'You Stay, I'll Go' is another song with a reggae backbeat and then there's Robert Johnson's 'Come On In' (My Kitchen) and 'She Don't Show It', long time staples of the Moondogs' live shows. A collective led by Derik Timms, (alias Buddy King) on vocals and guitars (including bass on four tracks), the other musicians are a well-seasoned collection of proficient players who have been on the circuit seemingly forever: keyboards and sax, Richard Cottle and Richard Belmont, other bass players Carl Holt and John Gordon, drums and percussion Howard Tibble, Graham Walker, Steve Vintner and Terry Finn, guest guitars Jimmy Brewer and Dzal Martin. Catch them live if you can because they give an electrifying live set, likely to include most of these songs.

Moz Copestake



Phil Vermont & The Electric Wizards: Time Has Come

Dixiefrog

After Covid saw the end of his previous project, French singer and guitarist Phil Vermont returns with a new group featuring the cream of musicians from the local blues and rock scenes: Boris Branilovic on keyboards, Jossein Sauvage on trumpet, Laurent Gruau on harmonica, bassist Clément Landais and drummer Jean Michael Tallet. This, their debut album, gathers together twelve songs Phil composed during the pandemic, with influences coming from some of his most admired musicians, such as Joe Bonamassa, Eric Gales, Gov't Mule, Larkin Poe, ZZ Top, Gary Moore and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Which pretty much tells you what you're going to get here.

An energetic guitar intro, then lots of brass leads into opener 'Last Man Alive', which to me has the feel of Electric Flag from back in the day. 'Sexy Sexy Sexy' adds a funky guitar rhythm before 'Your Time Has Come' adds harmonica to the mix. 'I'll Be There' slows it down, with keys more to the fore. 'Me And The Devil' finds plenty of crossroads locally where the devil can be met and features tasty slide work. A diversion to 'Tribal Dance', which despite the title is a fairly gentle guitar instrumental. We're back to rocking guitar plus harmonica on 'Hard Love', before a vocal chant leads into the slow acoustic 'Working Man' where Phil questions, ***"How can a few tyrants exploit the millions?"*** The acoustic vibe continues on 'Who's That Lady' with Phil's acoustic guitar and vocals decorated with distant touches of electric slide. Then back to heavy rock riffing as he seeks out 'Lady Luck'. 'Sad Story Of A Blind Man' shows one of Phil's major influences as it's very Gary Moore-ish. Another sideways swerve to finish; 'The Waders' is a jazzy instrumental. Vermont is an excellent guitarist with a tight band and this is his blues rock opus and delivers in spades.

Arthur Ely



The Jake Leg Jug Band: Live At Green Note

Coastal Light

With well over six hundred live shows under their belts, the prolific Jake Leg Jug Band bring out their second live set, following 2022's ***Live at The Audley Theatre***. Having played Camden's Green Note on many an occasion, they're clearly very popular indeed and this is a nice fifteen song release featuring their trademark sound as purveyors of vintage American roots music – theirs is an infectious style that lifts the spirits every time.

Duncan Wilson and Warren James are the constant members, joined here by Liam Ward, his final recording after eight years with the band, with Gabriel Garrick joining on trumpet, trombone and percussion. With a mix of a few

The EP Corner

Bernie Marsden: Purple Haze (EP)

Conquest Music

How much we still miss the incredible talent that was Bernie Marsden, not only one of the nicest guys in the music business but an awesome guitarist and fine singer as well. In advance of the release of the next (fourth) release in the Inspirations series, ***Icons,*** here's a 5-track set, featuring some fine covers. Kicking into action with Jimi Hendrix's classic 'Purple Haze', Bernie brings freshness and feeling to this great song, before moving into Canned Heat territory with a fabulous version of 'On The Road Again', honouring the original but making the song his own.

With tone and depth, Bernie's take on Howlin' Wolf's 'Sitting On Top Of The World' shows how deep his love of the blues was and things wind up with a couple of not so well known songs in 'Joe's Place' and 'Pick It Up'. A word also for the fabulous band Bernie brings on board here, the rhythm section is tight and simply right on the beat.

Pete Clack

GA-20: EP2

A taster of things to come? Four tracks with Matthew Stubbs still up front, but two new protagonists breathing fresh life into the music: Cody Nilsen on guitar and vocals, Josh Kiggans on drums. They still draw influence from the raw roots of electric blues, but there's a distinct shift in the drive and timbre with Cody taking over from the frenetic energy of Pat Faherty. 'Cryin' & Pleadin' has his higher pitch bringing life to an infectious rock 'n' roll ripper. More soulful, with shades of Buddy Holly, 'I Love You' has Cody finger-picking his way over sugar sweet lyrics, Stubbs quietly applying the essential rhythm guitar fill. (For those who've seen GA-20 live, you'll be aware that Charlie Musselwhite's guitarist, Stubbs, is not a showman, but his guitar credentials are unquestionable).

A lovely vintage sounding, slow smoocher 'I Don't Mind' prefaces the blistering rocker 'Stranger Blues', with its driving rhythm, Kiggans making his presence felt. Changes sure, but GA-20 have retained the vintage vibe, reminding us of the raw, visceral music of yore, a million miles from the overproduced studio creations that fill our airwaves today.

Graham Munn

Emma Wilson: A Spoonful Of Willie Dixon (EP)

Own Label

Emma Wilson is rapidly becoming a major force on the international blues scene, especially after the success of her last album, 2023's ***Memphis Calling***. Here she moves both north and south; the initial spark for this set came from her singing at The Ground Zero Club in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and the songs themselves are Willie Dixon-penned Chicago blues classics.

It's a real treat to hear Emma tearing into this: six varied songs from the famous 'Spoonful' to the eight moody minutes long, late era 'It Don't Make Sense (You Can't Make Peace)' and the collaboration with the late, under-rated Buster Benton, 'Good To The Last Drop'. Nice to note that Emma, guitarist Nic Svarc and keyboards player Bennett Holland pay tribute to Willie's influence on UK blues with a tough sound in places – try 'Spoonful' and 'I Can't Quit You Baby', Ian Leese and Mark Barrett (bass and drums respectively) laying down a particularly strong rhythm on the latter. A grooving 'Wang Dang Doodle' allows Emma to show her Koko Taylor influences and 'I Want To Be Loved' references Muddy Waters and has a lovely attitude-laden vocal.

Norman Darwen

originals and splendid covers – 'St. Louis Blues', 'Makin' Whoopee', 'Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho', 'Little Black Train', 'Midnight Special', 'Champagne Charlie', 'Ella Speed' - all have that 1920s and '30s feel. Imagine being on a New Orleans riverboat, having a drink and enjoying the view with a good ol' time band recreating those songs of the famous jug bands. Wilson brings both his voice and bass to the party, Warren James is on vocals, guitar and banjo, Ward's on harmonica, jug, washboard, saw, kazoo – even comb and paper!

If you've not yet seen the band, keep an eye out for them, they're a great, joyful, hugely talented team and one of the finest acoustic-based bands in the land.

Pete Clack



Peter Kern: Guitar Man

Cairn Creation

Peter Kern is from Vienna and has supported many blues emissaries on their European tours: he's also attained third place in the Memphis Blues Challenge in 2001, a tough test taking your blues to America. ***Guitar Man*** is his fourth solo album, bursting with acoustic and electric tracks influenced by country and Chicago blues.

'One More Kiss' opens, brought in on bass as a harp tootles away and Kern's guitar weaves in. The vocals are nicely balanced and his solo lead is straight-cut electric. 'Good As Well As Bad' is a shuffling blues rhythm cut throughout with lovely electric riffs. The shuffle rhythm pins the piece but the lead takes a more explorative journey. Title track 'Guitar Man' details his picking up his first guitar aged seven, walking his life through an easy listening country blues - you can't ignore the beautiful finger work which takes off with the road still to travel. 'I Don't Need No Doctor' is a cracking rock'n'roll boogie as Peter runs through his influences, Chuck Berry on heat, with boogie piano running alongside. To a slow, throbbing shuffle with superb twangy guitar, 'Do It While You Can', the harp dips in to have its say, a lovely track, but overshadowed by the superb 'Friend', a blues ballad with expressive mellow guitar in the B.B. mould. Then pounding drums and a touch of vocal reverb for 'What I Like About The Blues', which will get in your head, and the rattling ride through 'I Get High', a brilliant slice of blues, the guitar spicing up the rhythm, as tasty as an apple strudel.

There's a lot of music on this release. If you like to hear a guitar talk the blues without the need for distortion and noise, then I heartily recommend ***Guitar Man***.

Graham Munn



Pepe Ahlqvist & Jukka Gustavson: Coahoma, Stovall: A Tribute to Eddie Boyd

Bluelight

Finnish blues stalwarts Ahlqvist and Gustavson (and friends) pay heartfelt homage to one of their country's adopted sons, Mississippi piano man Eddie Boyd.

Keen to escape the racism still plaguing his home state, Boyd headed to Europe in the early '70s, eventually settling in Helsinki where he would remain, rejuvenated, respected and, to some, revered. Warm feelings were mutual: ***"I don't care about what neighbourhood I'm in, everybody sure treats me good,"*** sang Boyd in 'Praise To Helsinki,' a song here used as a proud,

upbeat finale to a fine, if indirect, retrospective.

Boyd is perhaps best known for 'Five Long Years,' covered by Junior Parker, Buddy Guy and Clapton (following a trial run with the Yardbirds thirty years earlier!) but the two Finns scan many pages of Boyd's back catalogue with equal conviction. The set is regularly fired up by Ahlqvist's mighty guitar and Gustasvon's smooth Hammond sounds, though on a driving 'Reap What You Sow' the latter turns to his Kurzweil to add 'xylophone' to the mix. Opener 'Stovall, Coahoma' is actually not a Boyd song, being an eerie, haunting preface, the man's impoverished plantation upbringing depicted in soul-baring lyrics by Teppo Nuorva. National steel slide enhances the rustic feel. Here (and throughout) Ahlqvist sticks to what seems his default vocal setting; a broken, lived-in delivery squeezing every ounce of emotion from the lyrics - and then some. He seems in genuine pain on 'Five Long Years.' It's certainly heartfelt. Gustavson's vocal style is not as ambitious but more than does the job. He adds a fine organ solo to the soulful 'I Cried', equals parts dexterity and sweep, following Ahlqvist's suitably wailing harp

'She Is Real' is full-on swing, punchy organ, wandering upright bass, and chunky jazzy guitar. Those familiar with the sparser, bluesier version Boyd recorded with (Peter Green's) Fleetwood Mac will still recognise it, a sign of a song strong enough to be safe in different hands. Equal respect is paid to the soulful slow blues 'Nothin.''. 'The Blues Is Here to Stay' is pure Chicago, building up to Ahlqvist's fired-up guitar solo, 'Let It Be Me' casts Gustavson in New Orleans while 'Backslack' is swinging instrumental shuffle, boogie piano, guitar twang - at first muted then set loose - plus slapping bass and a punchy drum break, all almost big-band style and all wonderfully recorded.

John Bottomley

Steve Howell & The Mighty Men: Yeah Man

Out Of The Past Music

Here's a delightfully understated collection honouring past masters with grace and respect. Finger-picking blues guitar man Howell and band roll through a wonderfully eclectic set which, in the hands of producer Jason Weinheimer, is captured in a sound as smooth as velvet. Weinheimer's bass also provides tight rhythm, alongside drummer Dave Hoffpauir.

A nicely-paced surprise shuffle through Blind Lemon Jefferson's 'Long Lonesome Blues' sets the tone. Chris Michaels' tasteful guitar signature underpins before he breaks out into something more expressive (briefly, of course). Howell makes no attempt to capture Jefferson's vocal range but here does add a little verve to his own dusky voice, a controlled, distinctive vocal which suits the whole set well.

Eddie Hinton's 'Yeah Man' is also tweaked with empathy, the original's powerful cry and moan replaced by a smooth shine enhanced by Weinheimer's easy-style keyboards. And when the guys are called to add power to the title refrain, that's laid-back too!

This is all mood music, recognising a song's quality without attempting to replicate it. It would be brave indeed to attempt to match the vocal extravagance of JB Hutto but here his '20% Alcohol' is reworked with care with Michaels firing in controlled raunchy guitar. 'One Mint Julep' is also safe in these hands, favouring the Ray Charles instrumental version before a swaggering 'Little Old Wine Drinker Me,' here restored as swinging country-pop. Howell's lived-in vocals are ready-made for the '30s ballad 'I'm Glad For Your Sake,' nicely reminiscent of fellow Texan Doug Sahm. 'Just Like Romeo And Juliet,' made famous by doo-wop group The Reflections, is here revived as a lilting pure pop gem, a mood preserved in the '60s time capsule



that brings us 'Mercy Mercy Mercy,' period organ to the fore.

Hoffpauir ensures 'Dearest Darling' pounds a familiar Bo Diddley beat but this version finds other strengths, flashes of slightly distorted guitar are far from out of place and also enhance a confident take on the traditional spiritual 'Wade In The Water.' Howell throws a real curve ball to finish, Dylan's 'Chimes Of Freedom' - not as you would expect, naturally. The lyrics are binned. Instead we get a gorgeous, almost dreamy, instrumental, which manages to enhance the melody by tip-toeing through it.

John Bottomley





Richard Clarke Unveils Debut EP "Good Thing" – Modern Blues meets Soul

British singer-songwriter-guitarist Richard Clarke is no stranger to the UK and EU blues scene. Picking up where he left off with Connolly Hayes, he's due to release his debut EP, "Good Thing," on 11/03/2025. The EP carefully blends melodic guitar work with infectious grooves, producing a sound that bridges blues, soul and pop. Clarke's first official release marks the beginning of a new, exciting era.

"Good Thing" features 4 tracks, each with a different vibe that ties nicely together as a cohesive offering. The EP's lead single, which shares the title of the EP, is already generating buzz, showcasing Clarke's triple threat of vocals, guitar playing and songwriting. Produced by Adrian Hall, the EP highlights Richard's ability to blend modern and classic influences into a fresh, captivating sound, reminiscent of heroes Mayer, Vaughan and Clapton.

Fans can stream "Good Thing" on all major platforms, starting 11/03/2025. To stay updated on Richard Clarke's music, upcoming performances, and latest news, visit www.richardclarkemusic.co.uk and follow him on social media:

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Debut EP



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Christopher Wyze & The Tellers: Live In Clarksdale (CD+DVD)

Big Radio Records

Towards the end of last year an album came through for review and it just stuck on my player, it was that good. A full interview with Christopher Wyze soon followed for Blues In Britain and during our conversation, Christopher mentioned a new album he and the band had recorded live in Clarksdale, Mississippi in October, 2024.

And here it is: not only the promised live album, but also a full concert DVD, with a bonus, 50-minute documentary that includes a fascinating travelogue taking the viewer on a tour of Clarksdale and its suburbs, hosted by Wyze himself. The package is topped-off with an informative, 12-page booklet. The ten tracks were recorded on the Juke Joint Chapel stage at the Shack Up Inn, where folks like Charlie Musselwhite, Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram, Cedric Burnside and many others have performed before. It's a venue that takes you to the very heart of the Delta; small, not too polished, but clearly alive from the blues played there. Everything has a great live feel to it and the concert sound is superb. Wyze's expressive vocal and neat harmonica stand out front and John Boyle graces the band with both electric guitar and slide. On keyboards, there's Mark Yacovne, Douglass Banks on drums and Gerry Murphy on bass and backing vocals. The Tellers are Wyze's touring band and throughout they get every note and beat spot on.

The set contains eight of the thirteen tracks from Wyze's recent ***Stuck In The Mud*** studio release (reviewed in these pages), including the radio hit 'Back To Clarksdale', alongside a couple of blues classics from the 1920's. The cover of ***Stuck In The Mud*** portrayed a tractor stuck fast in the mud, but this time the motor's running smoothly. The deep, downhome ***Stuck In The Mud*** title track establishes the Oxford, Mississippi beat and just lets it lead the way: it's pure Delta magic, as is 'Hard Work Don't Pay'. The covers are Leroy Carr and 'Scrapper' Blackwell's 'How Long, How Long Blues' and 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out' - Wyze and two of his Tellers hail from Indianapolis, Indiana, the very city where Carr and Blackwell lived and died – and Wyze's introduction of ***"You folks down here in the Delta might think we don't have the blues up in Indiana, but I can assure you, we do,"*** is right on the money.



It took twenty years for Christopher to make one solo album and now he's followed up nine months later with another one that's already pencilled on my list as one of the best albums of 2025. This is a real blues gem of an album.

Pete Clack



BOOKREVIEW



Mark Knopfler: Celtic Bard, Guitar Mystic, Melody Maker, Superstar (Volume 1, Dire Straits)

Richard Koechli

Tredition GmbH

In 2021, John Illsley, bass player, close friend and bandmate of Mark Knopfler OBE (born in Glasgow but raised in Blyth, near Newcastle) told the story of the origins of Dire Straits, from playing small gigs to huge worldwide acclaim; it was his story: ***My Life In Dire Straits*** (***Penguin***). Here, we have another side of the Dire Straits story; the music itself and the man behind it.

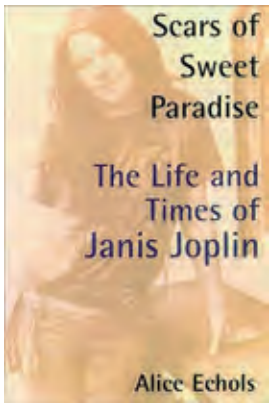
Writer and musician, Richard Koechli is based in Switzerland and after previous books on Robert Johnson, J.J. Cale and the first ever biography of Tampa Red, he now turns to Mark Knopfler, one of the finest guitarists in rock history, looking at how Knopfler's music has developed over the years, the styles and influences. He calls his subject, "A Celtic bard, a guitar mystic," adding that Knopfler is "a sensitive storyteller, a master of subtle virtuosity and a relaxed superstar."

Covering a career that breaks almost all records, the book is long on detail but remains hugely readable. It exudes a passion and admiration, all delivered with a light touch and in humorous style. We get to meet Knopfler's forerunners, his companions and those who inspired him and how Knopfler developed his craft. Koechli analyses the Dire Straits discography, from the debut ***Dire Straits***, through ***Communique, Making Movies***, stopping off to detail the use of marimbas in ***Love Over Gold***, the cover of ***Brothers In Arms*** (the instantly-recognizable photo of a National Resonator guitar) to the final album, ***On Every Street***. You'll find yourself, as I did, going back to listen to the albums, often with a fresh and deeper insight.

Apart from the detail, there's scores of cracking anecdotes and background stories and, if you love guitars, this is a wonderful book to pick up. It's a drawback that there are no photos included -Koechli says he wants the reader to concentrate on the music - but you do get to read enlightening interviews, in which you hear Knopfler's own voice and thoughts. This is a richly rewarding book that brings Mark Knopfler's music to us in a new, informative and readable way.

Pete Clack

(Note: Included with the book is Koechli's double album 'Laidback Universe: Remembering J. J. and Mark', 28 songs and instrumentals in tribute to both Knopfler and J.J. Cale)



Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin

Alice Echols

Picador

First published in 2001, this book is beautifully researched, with interviews from a multitude of sources woven into an engaging chronological narrative, from her childhood in Port Arthur, Texas during the war years to her death in 1970 in Los Angeles. Those who knew her tell very different stories, from different perspectives; her bands, school mates, promoters, managers, friends, junkies, lovers. It paints a fragmented, often contradictory picture of a girl who is confident yet insecure, sensitive but hard, and both open and secretive.

She presented different sides of herself depending on who she was talking to and her emotional state at any given time. She had an ambiguous relationship with her family: her ambitions were for a picket fence Middle America family life but her lifestyle was wild and rebellious and her trajectory always took her away from that ambition. Joplin left Texas for the Haight district of San Francisco just as the hippy movement was emerging, with the liberal values it promoted. She embraced the bohemian lifestyle and music, bringing her own blues sensibilities to the party. She thought of her band mates as family and treated them much as she treated her family, badly, with apologies, but still they emerge with great affection for her, empathic to her insecurities.

But this is not a story primarily about her career but an exploration of the woman, her conflicts, vulnerability and uncertainties, the contradictions she represents. She was a trail-blazer for women in rock at a time when there was still much misogyny, particularly for women who didn't conform to the stereotype of the day. It all makes for an absorbing read with insights into a blues legend who died too young and whose legend and legacy are steeped in tales of excess, many of which appear grounded in truth.

Moz Copestake



Castles & Parcels: More Musical Stories

Trev Turley

The Cherished Synapse

A couple of years ago Trev Turley published his autographical memoir ***Sky Trails & Pie Tales***. Here's the follow-up, a book full of the bass player's tales and forgotten stories and, I should say, another excellent read, a continuation of his own experiences and unique grass roots view on the music business.

The first book ended with the story of the Random Earth Project and here Turley explores more about that project and his Mojo Preachers band. He's a talented writer: you feel you're in his company and he's sharing his stories with you personally. It's a skill that enables you to be a part of each anecdote (both here and in ***Sky Trails*** - I particularly like his story about being asked, "Fancy a gig in the Philippines?") and ***Castles & Parcels***, like its predecessor, has a wealth of career-spanning photos, and there's a superb drawing of Jeff Beck, alongside another of the author on the back cover.

This is the story of what real music is all about. Forget the superstars and divas, this book is about real people who are compelled to make music. Recommended.

Pete Clack

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Swiss Blues Award winner Richard Koechli dives deep into the universe of the British singer-songwriter with that unique guitar sound, to pay tribute to his life's work with passion, know-how, respectfully critical and in a light-footed language. A must read for Mark Knopfler fans, blues-guitar geeks, audiophiles and lovers of music history.

The world's most comprehensive **500-page** book about Mark Knopfler and Dire Straits! (written by a real author, **no AI**)

Everything about the book including bookstore links at:

www.richardkoechli.ch/en



A founding member of the Climax Blues Band, Pete Haycock was a master blues-rock musician, known for his gold-plated Veleno guitar, and arguably one of the best slide guitar players to have emerged from Britain. He played alongside Son House, Albert King, B.B. King, Albert Collins, Johnny Winter, Steve Miller, Lynryd Skynryd, ZZ Top, Bad Company, Wishbone Ash, Fleetwood Mac and Aerosmith. Sometimes underrated and often overlooked, this, at last, is the biography of one of Britain's finest blues musicians.

A5 paperback,
378 pages,
198 photos

SO MANY ROADS — Pete Haycock: True Bluesman
is available only from
www.moonshineeditions.com

'Castles & Parcels'





Image: © Eileen Cooper

Published 1st April 2025

The sophomore book by Trev Turley, a follow up to 2022's 'Sky Trails & Pie Tales' an autobiographical memoir and carries on from where Trails/Tales left the reader. A professional musician from 2015 'Castles & Parcels' concludes with his personal view and a timely prediction of what is left and might be around the corner for the music business. A familiar story to any musician starting from those first few notes, to a first gig and onwards, and upwards.

168 pages with 8 pages of colour photographs

Front Cover painting copyright: Eileen Cooper OBE RA

Published by: The Cherished Synapse

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The Cherished Synapse - March 2025



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SHOWDOWN

Live and loud! As the Blues In Britain reviews team boldly goes forth, armed with notebook and pencil, Austin Powell looks back at some of the best blues gigs of the past months.

Andres Roots / Dave Arcari
Temperance, Leamington Spa
5th March, 2025

Estonia's estimable slide guitarist, **Andres Roots**, and Scotland's paddle-boarding bluesman, **Dave Arcari**, put on a thoroughly entertaining show at Temperance in Leamington Spa, one that saw Roots returning to the venue where he recorded his just-released ***Royal Spa Blues: Live From Temperance*** record and tonight's performance was, like the album, solo and acoustic. Andres has a dry wit to accompany his dexterous playing (he apologized for reciting a few of the spoken stories from the album piecemeal) and this approach to gentle storytelling enhanced his fine set of instrumentals, his guitar weaving through tangos ***("How to confuse an American blues audience!"),*** swing and folk blues.

If restrained subtlety is Roots' stock in trade, **Dave Arcari** operates at the other end of the scale: the wild man of acoustic, country blues, one who drags his audience into his orbit with catchy songs and enough foot-stomping to shake the Temperance floorboards. 'Nine Pound Hammer', Devil's Left Hand' (Steve Earle, eat your heart out) and 'Cherry Wine' tell their own tale and there's a banjo on hand for 'Whisky Trail' and the nostalgic 'Still Friends'. Roots joined him on stage for 'Key To The Highway' (a la Big Bill Broonzy) before Arcari closed out with a re-worded 'Loch Lomond', in homage to his Highland home. Quite the partnership, quite an evening.

Nicholas John

Wille & The Bandits
Red Arrow Club, Ramsgate
20th March, 2025

Having seen Wille and bassist Harry Mackaill as an acoustic duo on a couple of occasions supporting Beth Hart, tonight saw the band again in its full glory, which is where the power



Wille & The Bandits by Simon Green

lies. Charismatic frontman and songwriter Wille Edwards harnesses the amplified power of his lap steel, electric guitar and effects-driven acoustic like a roots music Shaman, conjuring up a visceral energy that is totally engaging. His musical vision is pretty much unique in the landscape of the British blues scene, even though it superficially shares similar musical stylings. His songs contain intelligent and morally persuasive lyrics wrapped inside infectiously dynamic grooves. I'm not sure how Wille has managed to regularly get hold of Stevie Watts, given his multiple commitments, but his keyboard additions, whether on piano (particularly effective on a beautiful, lyrical introduction to 'When The World Stood Still') or trademark organ, complemented the fireworks coming from centre stage perfectly. Very few artists could conceive of the dynamic ***tour de force*** that is 'Angel', a song dedicated to the singer's mother, which contains multiple musical textures and rises and falls with a tectonically powerful force that has an epic quality, maintained for over twelve minutes.

The set contained a selection from across the back catalogue, including the lovely acoustic number 'Mammon', featuring some gorgeous Spanish style soloing on the flowing fills, and the stone cold killer, crowd pleaser 'Keep It On The Down – Low', which was even funkier than usual. The night ended with two absolute belters: the anthemic riff of '1970' (with its brilliantly uplifting chorus) and 'Bad News' with its razor-sharp slide riffs and splendidly anguished vocals. This was a band operating on all cylinders, absolutely magic.

Simon Green

Will Wilde / Star Circus / Thea Watson
100 Club, London
4th March, 2025

Thea Watson opened with a soul sweetener of a set, shining on 'It's A Man's World', before **Star Circus** delivered a set of high voltage rock. With Dave Winkler fronting and flame-haired Sophia Aurelia Young's strutting bass catching the eye, 'Over And Over', 'Chained To You' and 'Love Is The Enemy' were the standout tracks.

But this evening's album launch show was, of course, all about **Will Wilde**. His physicality on stage is awesome – rightfully the U.K's harmonica powerhouse. With an exceptional band that featured Brave Rival's Lindsey Bonnick and Will's sister Dani Wilde belting out 'Learn How To Love' and Greg Coulson



Dave Arcari and Andres Roots by Margaret Arcari



Will Wilde by Denise Lester

playing honky tonk keys on 'Gypsy Woman' and Hammond for 'Stole My Love', Bobby Harrison delivered fine blues guitar with bassist Russell Carr and the superb Steve Rushton on drums. 'Trouble Of That Girl' rocked the crowd; 'Broken Dreams Blues' moved them and the catchy 'Don't Trust Me' got them singing. With an astonishing, closing 18-minute harmonica-led version of Canned Heat's 'On The Road Again' this gig was wild!

Denise Lester

Giles Robson and Dino Baptiste

Vonnie's Blues Club, Cheltenham

11th March, 2025

Giles Robson stole into Cheltenham to deliver an incredible evening of truly classic blues, one that opened with a well-received set from local musician, **Tommy Woodsmoke**, who busks all over the Gloucestershire area and is a quite superb musician and songwriter.

For this show, Robson was joined by the amazing keyboard skills of **Dino Baptise** and from the off (an extended instrumental of a piece by Duke Ellington), this was indeed a very special set. J. B. Hutto's 'Your Dirty Look And Your Sneaky Grin' was real blues and how, followed by Eddie Taylor's 'Bad Boys' and 'Shake, Rattle And Roll'. 'How You Learn To Shake Like That' kept everyone's feet tapping, before Robson nailed Sonny Boy Williamson' Nine Below Zero'. He then introduced 'Hoodoo Man Blues', dedicating it, rightly, to Junior Wells, before giving us the world premiere of 'Vonnie's Boogie', written just that day. This was a masterful set of blues by two absolutely amazing musicians at their very best.

Pete Clack



Giles Robson by Pete Clack



Mississippi MacDonald by Mark Stratford

Mississippi MacDonald

Temperance , Leamington Spa

15th March, 2025

England's best small venue hosted Oli Mac and his kicking band on another rousing and atmospheric night in the place. Mac and Co are so tight the playing actually seems relaxed, and it presents spaces for improvisation. The singing, banter and playing has developed enormously over the last couple of years since we first saw him play venues outside London – the loudest shout out tonight being"Great shuffle!" from someone who couldn't contain their excitement at drummer Jim Kimberley's performance on the song 'Howlin' Wolf'.

The albums ***Heavy State Loving Blues*** and ***I Got What You Need*** are plundered heavily for the two sets. There's heavy blues, Texas shuffles and soul-blues. The soul element crept in through Little Milton's 'We're Gonna Make It' and the new song 'Bad Attitude' - a result of recent trips to Memphis. Mac is sporting a vibrant wide collar blue nylon shirt circa 1970 Freddie King, and his finale was appropriately the tune he wrote in tribute; '3.35 a.m'. In its released form the tune is a twanging toe tapper; live, the edges are rougher and there is space in the middle for an extended solo, after which the band shift up a gear. It exemplifies why seeing and hearing music live from a band as good as this is such a rewarding experience.

Mark Stratford

The 2:19

The Longfellow, Belfast

15th March, 2025

The 2:19 returned to The Longfellow to a full house and riding on a crest of popularity due to the success of their latest release, ***Keep My Will Strong.*** Chris Chalmers (acoustic guitar, harmonica and lead vocals), Paul Wilkinson (lead guitar), Ady Young (rhythm guitar), Marty Young (bass) and Monty Sneddon (drums) kicked off with a couple from the new album: 'One Thing I've Figured' (which started slowly before settling into a heavy beat with great slide guitar and harp) and 'Dead Dogs'. 'Diamond In The Rust' had a jazzy feel, a good swinging beat and great vocals,' Bad Blood' had Chalmers showing his acoustic guitar skills , before the melodic 'Who Do They Think They Are' followed with twin leads from Wilkinson and Ady Young.

The second set opened with 'No Time To Bleed' with great harp from Chalmers and a strong stomping beat, 'All Kinds Of Evil' had a good Delta blues feel while 'Dancer' had a powerful Bo Diddley beat and the audience grooving on the dance floor. 'My Oh My' had a great ZZ Top sound to it but these guys are no mere copyists, they meld their influences with their own sound and come up with songs stamped through and through with their own originality. This was a great afternoon of original blues from a first class band and they



The 2:19 by Chris Horner

weren't getting away without an encore, so we were treated to a blistering version of 'Shame, Shame, Shame.'

Joe Allen

The Gary Fletcher Band

The Blues Bar, Tring

6th March, 2025

What a fabulous band Gary Fletcher has assembled since his days with Paul Jones and The Blues Band. Whether they're playing original songs like 'River Keeps Flowing' and 'Jacob Burkel', classics like 'Nobody's Fault But Mine' or 'Why You Wanna Let Go' or material from Blues Band days, the songs allow different players to emerge into the foreground at times.

Three of the band play a different instrument for some of the songs, so we get Gary playing banjo (accompanied at times by Tom Leary playing pizzicato violin), Tom swapping his violin for a mandolin with Andy Billups on bass showcasing a few neat runs and Sam Kelly on drums throwing in a few skillful fills. Completing the band, Nick Ritchie on guitar and Alan Glen on harmonica both interweaved mellow sounds in the first set, before rocking it up a bit more for the second. There's never anything laboured or overworked, just six musicians enjoying each other's company and allowing a little space for each other. A highlight was the self-penned 'SPAD (Signal Passed At Danger)'. This was a thoroughly enjoyable evening from a group of musicians so in tune with each other that a guitar break can slide seamlessly into a harmonica solo seeming contrived or rehearsed.

Moz Copestake



The Dirt Road Band by Russ Cottee

The Dirt Road Band

Barleylands Blues Club

15th March, 2025

Following their album ***Righteous,*** Steve Walwyn (guitar and vocals), Ted Duggan (drums) and Horace Panter (bass) have resumed their extensive live schedule. The first set opened with 'Never Got Over Losing You' and 'Next Train Out Of Town', Walwyn's guitar versatility on his "Plank" Telecaster prominent, while Panter's Rickenbacker bass cut through. Duggan's drumming offered both a solid rhythm and a series of dynamic fills on Johnny "Guitar" Watson's 'She Moves Me' and 'Cheap Talk & Whisky'. Walwyn switched to slide guitar for 'Instinct To Survive' and 'Cutting Room Floor', driven by a Bo Diddley beat, kept up the momentum. A new composition, 'The Ballad Of Jimmy James' recounted Chas Chandler's first encounter with Jimi Hendrix, before the set concluded with a swing version of Bobby Bland's 'Further On Up The Road'.

Set two started with Charley Patton's 'Dirt Road Blues' segued into 'Rollin' and Tumblin'', featuring Walwyn's slide guitar. Another new song, 'No Time For Heartaches', preceded Rory Gallagher's 'Laundromat' accompanied by Walwyn's anecdote about meeting Gallagher and handling "that Strat." 'I Know A Little' and 'Worry No More' maintained the pace, leading to the familiar 'Down At The Doctors' and the set concluded with 'Bullfrog Blues' before the band returned for deserved encores of 'Give Me Back My Wig' and 'Route 66'. This was an energetic performance, enhanced by engaging banter, demonstrating stagecraft that could serve as a model for many a younger band.

Russ Cottee



Gary Fletcher by Moz Copestake

Tim Hain

The Half Moon Putney

1st March, 2025

This ***Tales Of Timeless Tim*** album launch show had a warm vibe and an inclusive feel as Tim reached out, connected and explained each track. First up was an acoustic re-working of 'Now I'm 64' with a personal Paul McCartney story about the song, before the poignant 'Father's Child'. Tim's Jamside band (Ian Glen on harmonica, Phil Ramacon on keys, bassist Caswell Swaby and Barry Prince on drums, with Belinda Campbell on backing vocals) perfectly supported Tim's tenderly curated set. The fem-centric 'Sister Rosetta' featured Ese Okorodudul on guitar and vocals and Hain talked courageously about surviving

Tim Hain by Denise Lester



prostate cancer. 'Shine On' and 'Love Lives On' were super-sensitive. Tim's stand out talent is that he can play what he calls "bleggae" – reggae-infused blues - as well as rock and blues and the audience's warm reception augurs well for the album.

Denise Lester

Ma Polaine's Great Decline

Temperance, Leamington Spa

2nd March, 2025

Temperance is a lovely venue, with an intimate atmosphere, ideal for Ma Polaine's inaugural visit. Beth Packer and Clinton Hough were joined tonight by Jimmy Norden on drums, adding an extra dimension to the music. Sweeping brushes, subtle percussive touches and impeccable timing could only enhance Beth's voice, while Clinton, often stooge to Beth's tales inspiring wonderfully quirky lyrics, brings seemingly effortless but essential, jazz impregnated guitar to the mix.

'An Old Fashioned Goodbye' set the tone for much of their bittersweet music; the tempo lifted into a Latin-fused bluesy jazz riff for the superb sun-blessed 'Coldwater Harbour,' and 'Gasoline Can' hooked everyone in, before 'Paris Is Burning' revealed a dehydrated body resting in the closet of a deceased transvestite (strange but true). 'The Wreck' had Jimmy creating the thunderous atmosphere as Beth's voice rides the rolling seas and the steamy 'The Poison Sits' had the vibe of a smoke-filled bar in Piaf's Paris as we neared the end of this engaging evening, but not before a bit of participation as Ma Polaine reprised the wonderful 'Minnie The Moocher'. A brilliant evening in a truly wonderful venue.

Graham Munn

Ma Polaine's Great Decline by Graham Munn



McHale's Permanent Brew

Leeds Blues Club

14th March, 2025

McHale's Permanent Brew may not be widely known, even across the Pennines, but for the sold out crowd they were nothing short of exceptional. Many in the audience were seeing them for the first time, yet by the end of the night, they knew they'd witnessed something special.

Fronted by the McHale brothers (Paul on acoustic guitar and Frank on electric), the band boasts a rock-solid rhythm section in drummer Stephen Houghton and bassist Chris Orrell. Though their regular keyboard player was absent, the sound remained full-bodied and dynamic. They opened with an atmospheric instrumental that built to a roaring crescendo before diving straight into the driving groove of 'Flamingo Blues'. From there, the night was a whirlwind of rhythm and melody, with standout moments like 'Third Lane Baby Blues' and 'Café Bar A Go Go' where the band's sharp lyricism adds a layer of social commentary that sets them apart from your average blues-rock outfit.





Buddy King & The Moondogs by Moz Copestake

One of the band's strengths is the interplay between Paul's rhythmic acoustic and Frank's electrifying lead guitar. Frank's solos, fluid and emotive, wove seamlessly into the songs, never showboating but always hitting the perfect note. Anthemic tracks like 'Cracks' and 'Angel On My Shoulder' showcase both lyrical depth and musical ambition. The finale was an utterly unique take on 'All Along the Watchtower' that fused blues with hip-hop elements, inviting audience participation in a way that has to be seen to be believed. It was bold, unpredictable, and completely their own.

If there's any justice in the world, McHale's Permanent Brew won't stay a hidden gem for long.

Rob Bradley

Buddy King & The Moondogs

The Blues Bar, Tring

13th March, 2025

Buddy King (aka, Derik Timms, who's toured with Kiki Dee and Elton Joh) and The Moondogs (Eddie Masters (bass), drummer Graham Walker and Steve Oakman on keyboards) are gigging to promote their new album ***Lunar Blues***. 'Eleanor Rigby', 'Hoochie Coochie Man' and originals like 'Blue Tattoo', 'Hear This', and the excellent 'Nothing Ever Happens In Rock City' were punctuated with stories about life on the road and tales of where the songs came from.

Guest guitarist, thirteen-year-old Hanley Webb, with a beautifully hand-painted (by his mother, I believe) Fender Strat looked un-phased on 'Little Wing', before joining in on a wonderful take on the ever popular 'Crossroads'. (I'm expecting to see Hanley amongst the young musician's nominations for future U.K. Blues Federation awards). The band closed the show with 'Baby Please Don't Go', always a crowd pleaser, as their encore.

Moz Copestake

David Sinclair Four

The Merrymouth Inn, Burford

20th March, 2025

There are some great venues to bring in live blues, but this 17th century coaching inn takes some beating. The return of the David Sinclair Four saw the line-up increase to five with the addition of the amazing harmonica playing of Laurie Garman. This was an evening of mainly original songs by a band that was tight and kept things moving along nicely. Opening with an original, 'Hip Hopping', which gave the band the chance to warm up, they delivered plenty of songs from their widely-rated album ***Apropos Blues.***

Among the covers was a cracking take on Fleetwood Mac's 'Long Grey Mare' with some neat guitar licks from Geoff Peel, and The Kinks got a bit of a blues makeover with Ray Davies' 'Where Have All The Good Times Gone', before a neat little shuffle 'Southern State'.

Laurie Garman's playing was such a bonus for the band, bringing out fine solos, especially on songs like 'Little Rock N Roll' and on covers like Lee Dorsey's 'Get Out My Life Woman' and Chuck Berry's 'Let It Rock'. The second half of the evening featured another mix of originals and covers, even including a touch of country. 'The Bands Of London' and 'I'm Waiting' went down well before things closed with a little more Chuck Berry ('Bye Bye Johnny').

Pete Clack


David Sinclair by Pete Clack





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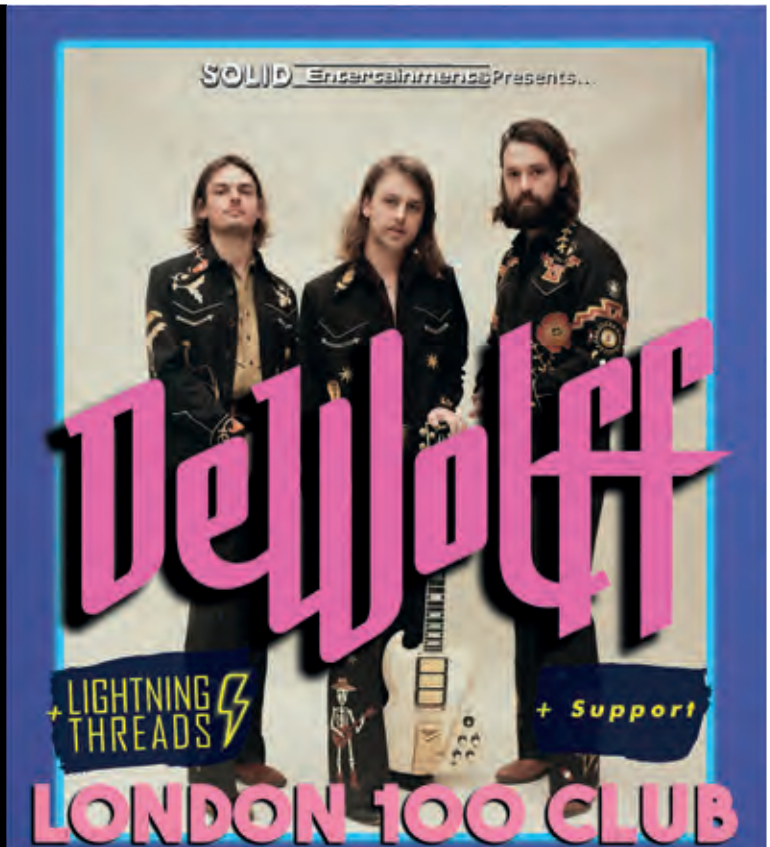
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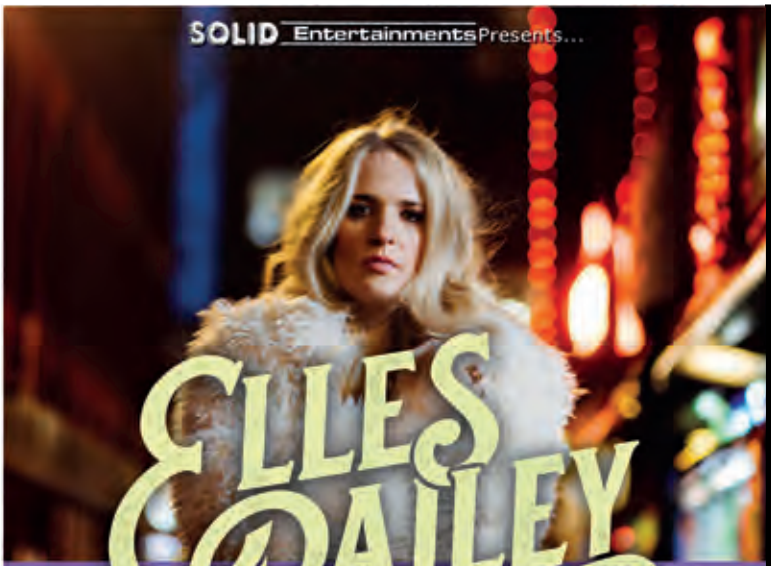
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