

POSTED ON APRIL 21, 2011 BY TERRY MULLINS

Featured Interview – Diunna Greenleaf





### *Trying To Hold On.*

Those words can be taken as ones of desperation, or they can be taken as ones of purpose.

With the first few months of 2011 taking from us irreplaceable bluesmen like Big Jack Johnson, Marvin Sease and Pinetop Perkins, *Trying To Hold On* seems like a natural response when things don't seem so positive.

Just like many other blues fans stretched across the globe, the loss of those icons hit Diunna Greenleaf pretty hard.

But unlike many of those blues fans, Diunna Greenleaf was able to call those titans friends.

Even before Greenleaf and her band Blue Mercy burst upon the scene in a big way back in 2005 – winning the International Blues Challenge's best band competition that year – rubbing elbows with and working side-by-side with a who's-who of the blues had become the norm for the powerfully-moving vocalist from Houston, Texas.

Greenleaf has performed with Kenny Neal, Big Bill Morganfield, Keb Mo, Hubert Sumlin, and for 10 years she has been a featured vocalist with the Muddy Waters Legendry Band, a group that at one time or another boasted Bob Margolin on guitar, Calvin "Fuzz" Jones on bass, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith on drums, Carey Bell and James Cotton on harp and Pinetop Perkins on keyboards.

Greenleaf's new project is certainly a very personal one, filled with the influences and encounters that have helped shape her life and are responsible for making her a worthy successor to the throne of the late, great Koko Taylor.

Filled not with a sense of finality, but rather with a sense of strength and resolve, *Trying To Hold On* is stocked with reasons to believe everything will turn out OK, despite how grey things can seem at times.

"We've been losing a lot of friends," Greenleaf said. "And so the life-cycle has been doing its thing. And ironically, the name of my new CD that I've been working on is called *Trying To Hold On*. That speaks for the entire music community – and the blues community especially."

In a twist of fate, *Trying To Hold On* was the working title given to Greenleaf's new project over a year ago, but with the loss of Perkins, an artist that Greenleaf called a dear friend, that title seems to eerily hit the mark early in 2011.

"A little over a year ago, that was not going to be the title of the CD – it was going to be based on another song I wrote for the disc," she said.

The majority of the tracks on *Trying to Hold On* are originals written by Greenleaf, material that other artists have been clamoring to record for some time now.

“Friends of mine have wanted to record some of these songs, or for me to sell them some of these songs, for a while now,” she said. “But I always said I don’t want to sell any song that I’ve not already recorded myself. That may change later on, but that’s how I feel right now.”

Credit old chum Anson Funderburgh for coming up with a best-of-both-worlds solution to that dilemma.

“He said, ‘Since so many of us want your songs, why don’t you make them duets, or something like that, with us?’ So the songs on here are songs that I wrote and that my friends play and sing on,” she said.

Fitting then, that the disc is billed as “Diunna Greenleaf and Friends.”

The song that Funderburgh lays down his trademark guitar on was originally slated to feature Greenleaf, Funderburgh and long-time front-man and harp player for Funderburgh’s group *The Rockets*, the late, great Sam Myers.



“We had talked for some time about the three of us doing that song, but we never found the time,” said Greenleaf. “And then Sam got sick. Anson called me and said that Sam wanted to make sure that when he closed his eyes, I would sing at his funeral. I told Sam, ‘Don’t talk like that, because like the Bible says no man knows the hour and the date.’ I tried to make him laugh. But it ended up that it did happen like that. And at that time, I was really, really busy. But it happened that the funeral was going to be on the only weekend that we had open. Can you believe it? So I drove to Dallas and sang at his funeral. So at the end of the song on my new CD that has Anson on it, and was supposed to have Sam on it, I do a little Sam Myers vocal inflection, just for him. ”

In addition to Funderburgh, a few of the other friends that Greenleaf called in to help includes Margolin, Billy Branch and Bob Corritore. “I recorded some amazing tracks by Diunna that feature some beautiful guitar from Bob Margolin and were recorded during two separate sessions when we had her in town to do gigs at the Rhythm Room,” Corritore said. “Diunna really gave her all to the sessions and brought some fantastic original songs. These sides really will put a hurt on you! I am very excited to be a part of this new CD by one of the leading lights in the future of the blues.”

And as becomes evident on *Trying To Hold On*, slated for a late May release, Greenleaf is not only blessed with one of the most soulful voices around, she’s also an impressive songsmith, as well.

Asked for many years by her fellow veterans of the U.S. Army to pen a song for the troops, Greenleaf found the inspiration to do just that at the funeral of her older brother, who also bravely helped defend our country in service, even at a time when he may have been looked upon as a less-than-equal member of society by some.

“I was sitting in the limousine at the veteran’s cemetery at my brother’s funeral and I took this piece of paper and pen out of my purse while they were gathering the flowers up and I sat there and wrote a song. It was just flowing out of me,” Greenleaf said. “My sisters are 20 and 25 years older than me and my brother was older than them. I asked him one time what would possess a person to go into the army at a time when black men and women were not treated like human beings in the real world. And he told me it was a way to show, that we as a people, were also making contributions that make this country great. And I remembered my brother’s words. My brother was a non-commissioned officer, so he was very proud of the fact that I was an officer (during Diunna’s enlistment) and was in charge of a non-segregated company.”

That song, “Cause I’m A Solider” features some powerful harp from Billy Branch and includes a bit of wisdom that Greenleaf’s brother imparted on her – “The people (the whole world) need to know we’ve always been there. No matter how we’ve been treated, this is our home and we need to protect it.”

That strength and character to stand up in the face of overwhelming adversity no doubt was channeled through Greenleaf’s father. “He always told us, as far as people riding your back or teasing you – as long as you bend over like a horse, they’re going to ride. But if you stand up like a real man or a real woman, they’re going to have to slide the hell off. And eventually, I’ll write a song and put that line in it, too.”

Another of Greenleaf’s old pals that turns up on her new disc with guitar in hand is fellow Texan Smokin’ Joe Kubek.



“The song that Smokin’ Joe plays on is a song I wrote for him and (his wife) Phyllis, way back when they were dating. I used to pull his chain and say, ‘When you gonna pop the question? You don’t want to let this one go. Since you been with Phyllis, you’re looking better than you’ve looked in a hundred years,’” laughed Greenleaf. “So one day he said, ‘I believe she’s ready to take a chance.’ So the song I wrote for them is called, “Taking Chances.” It kind of reflects on the things that we’re willing to take chances on and the things we’re afraid to take chances on. I really stuck my chest out when he told me how much he liked the song.”

The title track to *Trying To Hold On* speaks to the connection between the elder statesmen and stateswomen of the blues and those that are currently on the scene,

along with those that are yet to come to the party.

It didn’t take elder statesmen and stateswomen like Robert Junior Lockwood, Koko Taylor, Aretha Franklin and of course, Pinetop Perkins, long to acknowledge that Greenleaf did indeed belong at the party.

“They saw something in me. They saw that I could speak the old language,” she said. “And, that I have formal education and can hold my own in a boardroom. So, they see that I enjoyed presenting the old-style, in the old-style. And yet, I can also swing to the new style. And they know I’m sincere. People that have been around as long as them and have had as many experiences as them, can tell if someone’s sincere or not.”

That sincerity led Greenleaf to forge a very special relationship with Pinetop Perkins throughout the past several years, whether she was singing with him in the Muddy Waters Legendary Band, or whether Blue Mercy (John “Del Toro” Richardson, Vernon Daniels, Joshua Pressler) were backing Perkins on the Grammy Award-winning *Last Of The Great Mississippi Delta Bluesmen*.

Because even as he neared the century mark, Pinetop Perkins was as vibrant and full of energy as ever.

“It’s very poignant ... but Pinetop was like some kind of anchor (through the years),” Greenleaf said. “We’d be walking arm-in-arm – me in my really high heels – and Pinetop would say, ‘Be careful now, don’t you fall down, twisting like that.’ I was supposed to be helping him and he was worried about me. But Pinetop knew I loved him, we talked on the phone all the time. And we traveled together.”

Just like many of the singers that she admired as a kid, Greenleaf found her voice, and the confidence to go with it, in church.



Greenleaf's father ( who also shares a Sept. 28 birthday with Koko Taylor) was a famous gospel vocal coach and counted Cecil Shaw, Johnny Taylor (Mr. Cheaper to Keep Her) and Sam Cooke as pupils.

That's some amazing star power.

"Sam even lived here in Houston for a time with my mom and dad," she said. "My dad even had a group that traveled, called The Spiritual Gospel Singers of Houston, Texas. That was before my time, but my older sisters used to travel with dad when his group sang. And our house used to be a house that other artists stayed in when they came through town. And Joe Tex was a big hunting buddy of my daddy, so there was always music in our house. And it wasn't always gospel – mom and dad allowed us to listen to any kind of music."

At a time when the tide of blues and other roots-related music seems to be ebbing, Greenleaf is doing more than just performing. She's spreading the gospel of the blues to an up-and-coming generation of music lovers.



"We still do Blues in the School programs, even out of my own pocket," she said. "And I do three-day artist in residency programs for universities. I do seminars on women in blues and on Texas blues, with a special emphasis on Houston."

While Dallas and Austin grab most of the accolades when it comes to the rich legacy of Texas blues, Greenleaf's stomping grounds of Houston by no means takes a back seat to any locale in the Lone Star State.

"There's been a commercial push to make Austin the spot for blues, and Dallas had a time when it was the hot thing, too, but no ... Houston was poppin', she said.

"Houston was where Duke/Peacock Records was located, you know? Who didn't record here? Little Richard did, Gatemouth Brown did, Esther Phillips, Big Mama Thornton, Johnny Clyde Copeland, Albert Collins ... doggone it, even Freddie King recorded here and a lot of this is not known by people. Houston was the place."

And while the blues may never dominate mainstream radio as the likes of Kid Rock, Britney Spears and other pop acts do, Greenleaf, who to date is still the only female to take top honors in the IBC band competition, still feels that is no excuse not to continue to push roots-related music to the next level.

"We have to be proactive. We have to keep thinking ahead of the curve," she said.

"Did you see the awards show that county music (CMAs) had the other night at that big, fancy place in Las Vegas? That could be us (the blues). We could have our award show on television and have it watched by millions. But I'm glad the Blues Foundation is getting its own building. You know, years ago, the country music

foundation was right next to ours, size-wise. Now look what they've done. We could be there, too.