



GOLDEN GATE GROOVES

RAPPIN' WITH A FRIEND: TOMMY CASTRO

by Johnny Ace (with editorial assistance by Cathy Lemons)



Courtesy of Tommy Castro, from the Castro Archives

Tommy Castro and I met in 1990 at The Grant & Green in San Francisco's North Beach on a steady Monday night gig I had while working with Johnny Nitro. Nitro hired Tommy and it didn't take long before Tommy and I became very good blues brothers and friends. From then 'til now I consider Tommy my little brother and part of my family, and I'm very proud of what he has done with his life. Here's our little "craniumization." I hope you like it.

It's Thursday night, December 15, 2011, at about 8 pm. I'm sitting with my pal Tommy Castro in his van parked across the street from the old and now new and much changed Grant & Green club in the North Beach section of San Francisco—same place we met some 30 years before.

We're about to do our annual Christmas gig at The Saloon with all our musician friends who are still on the planet. My trusty little tape recorder is plugged in and ready to go and YOU ARE THERE!

ACE: Well Tommy, here we are again, at the scene of the CRIMES! HA HA! What's goin' through your head as we sit here?

While we are talking, a street person that we both know, with his very keen, street-wise, eagle-eyes, spots us and like a bee to honey is knocking on Tommy's window asking for a handout. Tommy very graciously opens the window and hands him 3 bucks and wishes him happy holidays. Then, in a New York second, the guy's at my window wanting more! I open the window and hand him a buck. The street dude very angrily yells "Tommy gave me 3 and you only gave me 1!" I tell him "Tommy's workin' more than me! Be happy you got the bean!" He then drifts off into the night—4 clams heavier than he was before. Not bad for 1 minute's work!

TC: Ace, maybe this isn't the time or place to do this. Too many people know our mugs!

ACE: You're right. But I don't wanna go into one of these coffee houses where everyone is posing and waiting for the ghost of Jack Kerouac to appear and free their souls!

TC: (laughing) Nah, sittin' here's really putting me in the mood. Let's RIDE with it!

(continued on page 3)

IN THIS ISSUE

1. Rappin' with a Friend: **Tommy Castro** by Johnny Ace
2. **The Road to Memphis** for the IBC by Susan Preece
3. Photos from **IBC Finals & Road to Memphis Fundraiser**
4. CD Reviews (**Joe Louis Walker, The Cash Box Kings, Tip of the Top, Sista Monica Parker, Diunna Greenleaf,**

- David Landon, Scott T. Miller, Burton Winn, and Country Blues Revue)**
5. Remembering **Howard Tate, Hubert Sumlin, Johnny Otis, and Etta James**



FROM THE EDITOR

Deb Lubin



♪ Happy New Year, y'all! The Golden Gate Blues Society (TGGBS) sends our winning bands off to Memphis this week to compete in **The Blues Foundation's International Blues Challenge (IBC)**! We wish **Paula Harris and Blu Gruv** (band winner) and **Wendy DeWitt** and **Kirk Harwood** (solo/duo winner) the very best of luck as they jet off to Memphis to compete and meet and greet musicians from all over the world! Read more about the IBC from TGGBS IBC Coordinator extraordinaire **Susan Preece** and see photos from the finals and the fund raiser that followed, both held at the premier SF blues club, **Biscuits and Blues**! Thanks from the bottom of my heart to photographers **Bruce Fram** and **Peggy DeRose** and to **Tina Abbaszadeh** for sharing their fabulous photographs! ♪

This issue, we feature local and national favorite **Tommy Castro** in an interview with his long-time friend and musical co-conspirator, **Johnny Ace**! Johnny brings a unique perspective to his interviews and articles and TGGBS appreciates his contributions and enthusiasm! This interview mainly focuses on TC's past, how he got started, and who influenced him. Stay tuned for a future article on Tommy as he ventures forth with a streamlined band and the return to the fold of long-time bass player and friend **Randy McDonald**. TGGBS also wants to thank Tommy for participating in the IBC fund raiser (along with the fabulous **Chris Cain** and **Kenny Neal**). ♪

We've expanded our CD review section to include artists from outside the SF Bay Area, so this issue, we have nine CD reviews! TGGBS President **Dorothy L. Hill** contributed reviews of the latest musical offerings from national stars **Joe Louis Walker**, **Sista Monica**, and **Dianna Greenleaf**, and local favorite **Scott Thomas Miller**. Our go-to guy for CD reviews, **Joseph Jordan**, reviews CDs by **The Cash Box Kings**, TGGBS' 2011 IBC winners **Tip of the Top**, and local guitar hero **David Landon**. TGGBS Vice President **Ron Purser** reviews an "outside-the-box" CD from local bass player/vocalist **Burton Winn**. Finally, a reviewer new to TGGBS, **David McGee**, reviews a 2011 offering from the **Country Blues Revue**, one member of which is former Bay Area resident **Michael Handler**. David is a Bay Area-based jazz and blues guitarist. Check out these reviews and please support the artists! ♪

Finally, within a span of 45 days, we lost four giants in the blues/soul world. We pay tribute to **Howard Tate**, **Hubert Sumlin**, **Johnny Otis**, and **Etta James** in words and photographs. Thanks to **Austin de Lone**, **Tim Wagar**, and **Paul Revelli**, band mates of Howard Tate, and to **Steve Freund** for their tributes. Johnny and Etta passed too close to the deadline for finishing this newsletter to include personal tributes. Instead we share photographs of these legends; thanks due to **Joe Rosen** and **Bob Cosman**. We remember them all with love and respect. ♪

♪ Go out and support live Blues! See you on the Blues trail. ♪

TGGBS THANKS THE FOLLOWING SPONSORS



Rappin' with Tommy Castro (continued from page 1)

ACE: Well all right. Now let's go back to the beginning. When did you know that you wanted to be a musician? And when did you know you could sing, and why the guitar?

TC: OK. I NEVER KNEW! (Laughing!) I played for fun and I enjoyed playing blues and rock & roll. I was young and playing with my friends like a lot of people do, and I never thought of it as something anything more than doing what I really enjoyed. I didn't play sports much, and I didn't enjoy school; I wasn't really academically inclined. So one thing I really latched onto was the music. I really loved the music—listening to my brother's records and playing his guitar when he wasn't around.

So to fast forward, I had been doing it awhile—playing in garage bands and bar bands—doing cover music. I'd wind up being the guy that had to sing this song or that one 'cause it sounded like my voice. I wasn't really trying to become a singer, but somebody had to sing that song. So I would sing it. So after a while, people said I sang good, so I sang more. There was never a point there where I said "I'm gonna be a singer," or "I'm gonna be a guitar player." I just kind of did it.



And later on in life, a light bulb went on for me. I was about 30. I was always playing in some kind of band, mostly for fun and a little extra money. And I

thought, this is the thing that I set out to do. And it would be better to figure it out now instead of never and it really hit me. But I knew then that this is what I should be doing, this is what I wanted to do, and I was gonna give it everything I had to make it work.

ACE: But why did you go into blues and soul and not rock and top 40? What made you love the blues?

TC: It's almost the same as the other story. I wasn't really looking for it or anything. Things were just coming at me. At that time, you could turn on the radio and different sounds would come through. Different friends would have different records. So when I heard like The Rolling Stones doing "Little Red Rooster," then I'd do a little investigation and I'd hear the original by Howlin' Wolf or I'd find out about Muddy and B.B. and all of that stuff.

ACE: I feel you're one of the finest singers out there now in this blues scene or what's left of it. But that's still something to say! Tell me where songwriting and getting your own voice fits into all of this.

TC: (laughing) I learned how to sing by listening to the people I liked. While I was young, living in San Jose, I had a very limited record collection. So friends would do what you later did, give me tapes of really cool stuff that I didn't have—everything that Little Richard did—and everything that Ray Charles did—along with Muddy, Otis, and Sam & Dave. So I'd drive around in my van doing my day job delivering dry cleaning and I'd sing along with these tapes.

ACE: Tommy, I'd like you to tell me more about how you got your own voice and how you got into song writing.

TC: As far as getting your own voice and your own sound you learn how to play by listening to the people you like and trying to sound like them. Well, maybe not EXACTLY like them. You're always gonna sound like yourself, but you are learning how to sing by listening to them and copying their styles. So, automatically, you come around with your own voice, and you lean towards the sounds you like the best. You find out what you are able to do with your voice. You're NOT able, obviously, to do everything that James Brown, Bobby Bland, or B.B. did, but you do what you can along those lines. You find your own voice by trying things on to see what fits you.

ACE: NO! You HOPEFULLY find YOUR OWN voice! Because as we speak now, in this business, there are MANY so-called singers who DON'T have their own voices and who imitate other singers, and it's VERY bad. So you found this. You had your own voice when I met you 30 years ago, and that's where it's at! If you were an imitator, we WOULDN'T be talkin' now! NO WAY! I'm a VERY strong believer in being yourself.

TC: Johnny, do you want to laugh?

ACE: Does Wilson Pickett RIDE? Of course I want to laugh!

TC: I gotta tell you the truth, you know, just because I think it's funny. I attribute my style to laziness! (Laughing VERY hard). I don't wanna work so hard at trying to sound like somebody. I would rather just kinda' come close and say I wound up sounding like myself. And it happened on the guitar pretty much that way too. I was not interested in mimicking anybody EXACTLY. But I wanted to get the vibe, the basic idea of how they played and sang. But I was never gonna' dig into like, you know, how you hear some people just nail some other guy's style. I kinda' instinctively knew that that was a lame

thing to do, but at the same time I was NEVER gonna sit there until I sounded like someone else. I would never do that. So you can chalk it all up to a combination of maybe a little intuition, some good sense, and also *laziness!*

ACE: (laughing) Well it all worked to your benefit!

TC: Now the songwriting, I do think I put a lot of my time and energy into, especially in recent years. I've been focusing on the songs. I know that the songs are the most important things. I've heard that from a lot of people in this business on all sides of it. You could take a really good song, and it could be done by an average artist. But if it's a really good song, you still gonna' like that song. And you can take an amazing artist and have him perform a really bad song, and you're still not gonna like the song. (laughing) So the song is the most important thing. And because it's blues and because it's a simple art form, a lot of people don't care enough to write good songs. They just write some words to fill in the 12-bar form so they can play guitar solos and harmonica solos, and there's not enough care that goes into the song itself. I know that you get that. You and Cathy [Lemons] write really good songs, and a lot of other people do too. There are so many great songs in blues, but there are also a lot of awfully bad songs out there.

ACE: Well, in life, there's good and bad. It's that simple!

TC: Yeah, I happen to think that. The form is simple and you have a lot of people doing it. So there is a lot of bad songs out there that get out onto the web because you're now able to record on a laptop at home; you're able to make records cheaply. At one time, the only way you could release anything was if you had a record deal. And you could only have a record deal if you had something good to record. Now there's so much stuff out there. So I think there's a responsibility to all of us who make this music to try to do our best to write good songs if we are gonna put 'em out.



put your first band together in 1992.

ACE: What did you learn back in the North Beach days from Johnny Nitro, Stu Blank, me, and then later from Walter Shufflesworth when you were with him and The Dynatoners? This was before you

TC: Wow Johnny, I'm glad you asked me that question. I wouldn't be who I am today without the influence of guys like Stu Blank, Nitro, Walter, Randy McDonald, and you. All of you helped me get to where I am today as a musician, as an artist, and as a person.

I look at things differently from other people because of you guys. I hear things differently. I appreciate different things that I don't think other people get.

I have been very fortunate to have had the chance to play with B.B. King, Buddy Guy, Elvin Bishop, and a lot of



my heroes, but there's nothing that can top looking into Johnny Nitro's squinting eyes in the middle of The Saloon when the

energy is high and the people are rocking, and the band is rocking, and everybody is sweating, and all you can do is yell "RIIIIIIDDDDEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Those were such great times. I'm so glad we were all together in that fine scene long ago. RIDE IN PEACE Stu Blank and Johnny Nitro.

ACE: Tommy, you had the privilege of recording with John Lee Hooker on your *Guilty of Love* CD in 1999. What



did you learn from John Lee? And when you and your band went on tour with B.B. King in 1999, what did you learn from B?

TC: (long pause—then imitating John Lee) "Ah—it's cheaper to kill her! HA HA!!!!!!!!!! NO, NO!!" (Laughing) Now seriously, from B.B.—well he gets up there every night and he plays great and sings great every night. And he could just phone it in being B.B. King and people will still pay large amounts of money to see him. But I watched him night after night after night being so professional and always really caring about giving a good show to his audience. And he was always so very nice and caring when SO many people wanted to meet him and wanted his attention. It has gotta be tough to maintain that attitude and welcome people night after night. More than the music, that's what I learned from B.

And from John Lee, I'd have to say I learned his mic technique—he was so great! I was always amazed by the sound of his voice. I loved his songs. He had a great knack for coming up with great hooks. They were so raw. Plus he had great feel on his guitar. But the thing that I couldn't help noticing, that fascinated me, was the sound of his voice and how he got that rich sound out over the P.A. system when he sang live. And his mic technique—I don't think he'd tell you that he even had a mic technique—but it was great. He just had a way of getting his voice into the mic and he would fill up the whole room. And it sounded like the whole room was vibrating and of course it was.

ACE: I think that was the voice he was born with, like Muddy. They both had these tremendous rich, deep, resonant voices. I don't think it was mic technique as much as that they had GREAT voices.

TC: Of course, that goes without saying. But the thing I learned from John—'cause you can't learn to have a voice like that—you just can't—you are BORN with that—but the thing I learned from watching him is how he got it out there. He wasn't singing really loud or pushing it. He used the mic in a way to where he got that big rich sound out over the band; it was the way he put the mic over his face that made it happen. It was just a little something that I learned. I never saw anyone use a mic like that.

ACE: Where do you see the blues going now? Where's the road—the WORK? What's happenin'?

TC: I think blues is coming back. And more fresh ideas are coming. We're getting back to basics. I think the sounds that are getting popular again are electric guitars—great, natural amp distortion on the guitars. And I hear more and more some sort of African-based rhythmic thing that is bringing cool elements to blues. It's going back to a more real state. That's just what I've been observing from different acts out there.

ACE: Give me one act that you think people should be grooving on now.

TC: I like The Black Keys. And for very progressive blues and gospel: Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi. I also like Ruthie Foster.

ACE: Is there anything now that you've NEVER said in an interview that you would like to talk about to add to this?

TC: (a very long pause) I just wish that when I figured out that this was gonna be my job—I found out about that later on in my life—that I woulda known it sooner, because I would have spent MORE time studying when I was young. (Laughing VERY HARD!)

ACE: (laughing) Tommy, I wish I was 26 again!!!

TC: Well, there is something in me that wants to be constantly working at improving my skills. And I've been working at getting better for years now. I wound up with a career and gig. But if I'd known that I was gonna be doin' music seriously, I would have studied more when I was young. Once you get to working on the road all the time, it's hard to put the time in to learn other things. But I never stop tryin' to play better guitar, and I never stop tryin' to write better songs. I'm always workin' at it.

A lot of people had the notion on what they were gonna do when they were really young. And they're amazing now. I think there is a message in that for young people, right now, who are thinking about playing. Put the time in now while you're young and you have the energy. It's a better way to go. Don't wait a decade to get serious. Don't fool around.

ACE: I agree with that.

TC: Yeah! And on a different subject, you have gotta take the lead from the universe. Certain things happen and you have to take notice. Somebody's tryin' to tell you something. And to end this interview, all I'm gonna say is that you should all stay tuned for a leaner and MEANER Tommy Castro Band. And I want to thank all the people all over who come out to support us. And we're looking for a really great and interesting 2012! Now to THE SALOON to RRRRIIIIIIIIDEEEE!!

ACE: O.K. Thanks for the interview. PACK UP!!!!!!!!!!!!

Photo Credits:

Page 3: Shaun Roberts, taken at Biscuits and Blues, 2010

Page 4, column 1: Tommy Castro, Johnny Nitro, and Johnny Ace at The Saloon by Julie Monedero, 1996

Page 4, column 2, top: Tommy and Elvin Bishop by Jen Taylor and Scott Allen, 2010

Page 4, column 2, bottom: Tommy and John Lee Hooker by Johnny Ace, 2001

Page 5: Tommy Castro and Ronnie Baker Brooks courtesy of Tommy Castro from the Castro Archives

Johnny Ace can be reached through Facebook.

All about Tommy Castro: Go to www.tommycastro.com





THE ROAD TO MEMPHIS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL BLUES CHALLENGE

by Susan Preece, IBC Coordinator for The Golden Gate Blues Society



It's very hard to say no to President Dorothy Hill, who approached me a couple of years ago to coordinate The Golden Gate Blues Society's International Blues Challenge. I tried. I immediately said, "It's now

June, and we have to do five shows by early November. We have no initial funds, we have to raise thousands of dollars, and no one gets paid, from performers to fans to venues. I can't do this. I teach KINDERGARTEN." By the end of the conversation, Dorothy had spun her magic, and I was letting her know that together we would make it happen. So began the Road to Memphis.

Not only did it happen in 2010, but we had a great turnout with wonderful bands and The Golden Gate Blues Society was proud to send Tip of the Top as our first band representative. The band not only made it to the semi-finals, but their popularity is still rising as their latest CD, *From Memphis to Greaseland*, is now on the charts and has been nominated for [The Blues Foundation's 2012 Best Self-Produced CD](#).

When this year's IBC started coming into focus, the last one had just ended. First on my agenda was getting bands to enter. That seemed like a straight forward task. They get the opportunity to be among the hundreds of excited performers in clubs up and down Beale Street in Memphis sharing their talents in front of a worldwide audience of serious blues fans. I wanted to let them know how important it is to be able to represent the San Francisco Bay Area at one of the largest gatherings of blues bands in the entire world. What better way to promote blues in our own backyard than to have venues, performers, and fans all come together to choose their favorite blues band to enter the IBC as a TGGBS representative.

So, I made a poster. It had super-hero colors and looked like it was ready to jump off the page. We put it on our www.tggbs.org website and Facebook, and posted it everywhere. My husband, Marty Preece, and I passed them out at clubs, music stores, and every place we could think of. Then, after a great deal of nail biting and courting in some cases (you know who you are), the applications started rolling in. We went around listening to as many live performances as we could, and heard as

much as a CD or YouTube would allow. Finally, 12 solid, talented bands were chosen to participate.

By the time summer rolled around, Dorothy and I had convinced venue owners to take a chance on us and set the dates for the upcoming shows. All bands had their schedules tentatively set, and backline was arranged for most of the events. Gelb Music and King Amplification donated needed equipment. The performers themselves hauled in drum kits and amps, some staying all the way from the first sound check to the end of the last performance. Marty donated his sound expertise at a few of the shows, while many other TGGBS volunteers, such as Deb Lubin, Brad Robertson, Julie Bitnoff, Jenifer Santer, Ron Purser, Wendell Hanna, Wendy DeWitt, Dee Wallace, and Stan Erhart, helped in the wings selling tickets and t-shirts, donating raffle items, signing up new members, editing fliers and press releases, and doing any other job that would help send these performers to Memphis.

Throughout the summer, fans attended shows to vote for their favorite TGGBS member band: The event at **The Poor House Bistro** featured Pinkie Rideau & Blind Resistance, Blues Kitchen, and Kickin' the Mule. The **Bluz By-you** event featured the Good Life Rhythm & Blues Revue, the Smokin' Kingsnakes, and the David Landon Band. At **Club Fox**, Kathy Tejcka, the Gigi Amos Band, and Paula Harris and Blu Gruv performed. And the last preliminary round at **Biscuits and Blues** featured the Delta Wires, the Eddie Neon Band, and Mari Mack & Livin' Like Kings.

We were even able to hold a solo/duo event at **The Grand Dell Saloon**, which featured the Fritz Brothers, Cleome, Scott Thomas Miller, and Wendy DeWitt and Kirk Harwood. Wendy and Kirk were the fan favorites at that event and will represent The Golden Gate Blues Society in Memphis this February. Despite it being a "challenge," the atmosphere at all performances was one of a dedicated team of blues enthusiasts coming together for a great cause. I was, once again, proud to be part of a series of events that presented so many talented blues musicians.

Our Finale at **Biscuits and Blues** was the last Bay Area stop for the semifinalists. We had an expert panel of judges, consisting of Lee Hildebrand, Frank DeRose, and Sista Monica Parker, which accounted for 60% of the total score. After stellar performances from Pinkie Rideau & Blind Resistance, the David Landon Band, the

Delta Wires, and Paula Harris and Blu Gruv, Paula and her band (Terry Hiatt, Joey Fabian, Doug McKeenan, Al Diaz) emerged victorious.

I feel indebted to Frank DeRose of Tip of the Top and his friends Chris Cain, Kenny Neal, and Tommy Castro, who were willing to support our winning performers at a fund raiser held earlier this month. These acclaimed artists understand that it is important for the SF Bay Area to continue to be a visible and energized presence on the national blues scene. I also, once again, feel grateful to so many fine musicians who put their egos on the line, and

were willing to venture into unknown territory. We have our fair share of incredible blues entertainers in this area, and it takes confidence and a healthy sense of adventure to take advantage of this opportunity.

Marty and I are looking forward to joining and cheering on our winning acts on Beale Street in February. Then it's back to our Bay Area home to begin the next IBC journey... on the Road to Memphis.

Photo on page 6: Susan and Marty Preece by Deb Lubin

PHOTOS FROM THE TGGBS IBC FINALS AT BISCUITS AND BLUES

by Bruce Fram



Pinkie Rideau and Blind Resistance



The David Landon Band



Ernie Pinata of The Delta Wires



Paula Harris and Blu Gruv (THE WINNERS!)

TGGBS AD FOR OUR PARTICIPATING ACTS IN THE 2012 IBC PROGRAM

B
A
N
D

W
I
N
N
E
R

www.paulaharrismusic.com



©Bruce Fram 2011

Paula Harris & Blu Gruv

"Paula is one of the finest modern blues voices around today and her interpretation is impeccable."
~William Bell

WC Handy Award recipient and a principal architect of the Stax/Volt sound

Winner of the 2011 Monterey Bay Blues Festival's Battle of the Blues Bands

S
O
L
O
/
D
U
O

W
I
N
N
E
R



www.bluzbyyou.net



www.thegranddell.com



www.tabernacleoftone.com



www.biscuitsandblues.com



www.poorhousebistro.com



www.clubfoxrwc.com



www.tggbs.org



www.wendydewitt.com

THE GOLDEN GATE BLUES SOCIETY BOARD OF DIRECTORS

www.tggbs.org

Dorothy L. Hill, President
 Ron Purser, Vice President
 Brad Robertson, Treasurer
 Judy Edmonson, Secretary
 Karen Richards, At Large

Wendy DeWitt, Media
 Stan Erhart, Website
 Wendell Hanna, Education
 Deb Lubin, Publications

Susan Preece, IBC Coordinator
 Jenifer Santer, Events

IBC SOUND
 Marty Preece

The Golden Gate Blues Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit affiliate of The Blues Foundation, based in Memphis, Tennessee. The purpose of The Golden Gate Blues Society is to enhance the appreciation and understanding of the Blues in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area through:

- Sponsorship and promotion of Blues performances;
- Educational programs and publications on the performance, interpretation, preservation, and growth of the Blues as an American art form; and
- The financial, as well as moral, support of the Greater Bay Area Blues community.

PHOTOS FROM THE TGGBS ROAD TO MEMPHIS IBC FUND RAISER at Biscuits and Blues, San Francisco



Vince Caminiti, our Master of Ceremonies by Peggy DeRose



Paula Harris, Band Winner by Bruce Fram



Joey Fabian, bass, and Doug McKeehan, keys (with Paula Harris) by Peggy DeRose



Wendy DeWitt, Solo/Duo Winner by Peggy DeRose



Terry Hiatt (with Paula Harris) by Peggy DeRose



Jon Lawton (with Tip of the Top) by Bruce Fram



Kirk Harwood (with Wendy DeWitt) by Tina Abbaszadeh



Aki Kumar (with Tip of the Top) by Bruce Fram



Frank DeRose (with Tip of the Top) by Deb Lubin



Kenny Neal and Aki Kumar by Peggy DeRose



Tip of the Top with Tommy Castro by Peggy DeRose



Frank DeRose and Tommy Castro by Peggy DeRose



Carlos Velasco (with Tip of the Top) by Bruce Fram



Kenny Neal by Peggy DeRose



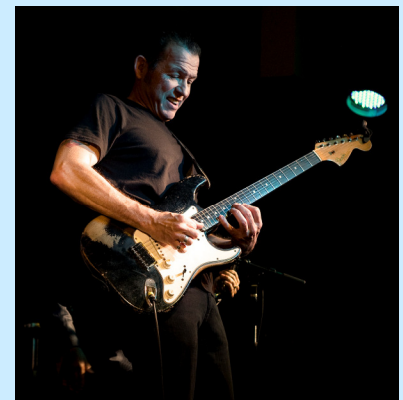
Frank DeRose and Tommy Castro by Deb Lubin



Frank DeRose and Chris Cain by Bruce Fram



Kenny Neal by Bruce Fram



Tommy Castro by Peggy DeRose

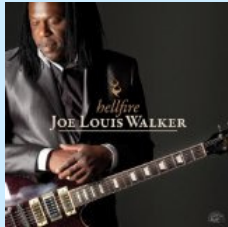


Chris Cain by Deb Lubin

CD REVIEWS

Joe Louis Walker, *Hellfire*

by Dorothy L. Hill



This CD is a good omen for blues in the New Year – a Joe Louis Walker (JLW) release on Alligator Records – a splendid match. Walker's prolific career has yielded some genuinely strong material among his previous

23 CDs, culminating with *Between a Rock and the Blues* winning the 2010 Blues Music Award (BMA) for Album of the Year. *Hellfire* will officially be released on January 31, 2012, and will surely be the hit of the year.

Grammy-award winning producer/songwriter/drummer Tom Hambridge has had an accomplished career in rock, country, and blues, most recently as producer of Buddy Guy's two Grammy-winning CDs, *Skin Deep* and *Living Proof*. Hambridge cowrote 5 of the tunes on this CD, while JLW wrote or cowrote 7 of the 11 selections. Hambridge plays drums and percussion on this excursion with fellow Nashville-based musicians Reese Wynans (SRV and Double Trouble, 1985-1990) playing piano and B3 organ, Rob McNelley (Delbert McClinton's band) on electric guitar and Tommy MacDonald (Johnny Winter's Grammy-nominated *I'm A Bluesman* album) holding down the bass. JLW handles the vocals, lead guitars, slide guitar, and harmonica. This massive production includes five additional musicians plus The Jordanares (who gained fame for backing Elvis Presley on his recordings for 14 years) on various selections. So, you have a perfect blues storm comprised of JLW, San Francisco born and bred bluesman, and some of the most illustrious Nashville-based country/rock players creating a masterpiece for a prestigious Chicago blues label.

The title track leads off with JLW vocally emotional on a rock-infused "Hellfire...it's my curse, that's my church." Shifting gears on "I Won't Do That," JLW's vocals are fervent on a slow tempo blues shuffle and then he heats it up big time on "Ride All Night," a flashy rock frenzy that is intoxicating with intensity. "I'm On To You" is a mischievous piece showcasing JLW's bluesy swinging vocals and interspersing harmonica playing; I love the line "...I'm gonna send you back to Oakland where you belong..." The haunting "What's It Worth" seethes to a boil and then crashes with a jarring cascade of abstract vocals and melody. "Soldier For Jesus" features vocal

harmonies from The Jordanares and JLW puts all his gospel force into this tune. He unveils a dreamy ballad approach on "I Know Why" to good effect. The bluesy rockish "Too Drunk To Drive Drunk" will get you out of that chair with danceable abandonment and "Black Girls" carries the theme into the stratosphere with a soul stirring tribute to Aretha, Shemekia, and Tina. The mid-tempo "Don't Cry" is a soulful gospel offering with The Jordanares harmonizing, and the CD concludes with a joyfully rollicking "Movin' On." JLW is not only movin' on, but he has moved way up with this new release.

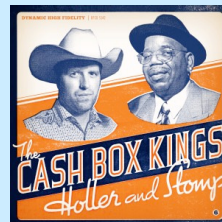
Renowned for his captivating carnage of searing guitar work, JLW turbocharges it with raw passion and innovative urgency on this release. *Hellfire* captures the essence of Joe Louis Walker to perfection—it is a magnum opus of his inventive contemporary approach to the blues idiom.

Alligator Records, 2012

Check out: www.alligator.com and www.joelouiswalker.com

The Cash Box Kings, *Holler and Stomp*

by Joseph Jordan



What's going on with Chicago blues these days? Check out The Cash Box Kings. Oh yeah, they got a sound, but where to categorize it? Somewhere between and in the middle of hillbilly-meets-rockabilly-meets-Chicago blues

and more in a stew that's surely got something for most blues lovers in the house.

Producer/harmonica-player Joe Nosek and his group have several recordings behind them, and this, their first from the San Francisco/Chicago-based Blind Pig Records, continues in their unique feel for the music inspired by that of close to 50-to-60 years ago. Not to say their music doesn't have a fresh feel to it. Slap upright bass, stellar guitar, and dynamic harmonica-playing combine on most all tracks, creating the ensemble sound that was key to early electrified blues and country music.

The Kings cover the Rolling Stones' little-known "Off the Hook" with fidelity to the original from the Brit invasion band of the '60s, while the CD's title track has an insistent beat and a vocal drawl that could peel paint



from a crusty Cadillac. Oscar Wilson's vocal take on Muddy's "Feel Like Going Home" is an album standout, where the Kings' backup more than pays tribute to this country-blues meets electric, with its killer slide and authentic Delta-style approach. "Hayseed Strut" brings forth an instrumental jug-band groove and delightful mandolin solo from Billy Flynn, while Barrelhouse Chuck also shines on piano. The Kings also do justice to Lightnin' Hopkins' heartfelt "Katie Mae."

Recorded mainly live, in-studio, with minimal overdubbing, the 10 members listed as the Cash Box Kings sway, swirl, and stomp through the 12-track, 41-minute recording. With lead vocals handled primarily by Oscar Wilson and Nosek, and lead guitar throughout all but one track by co-producer Joel Paterson, this core group of the Kings is held down and lifted up by Kenny "Beedy Eyes" Smith (blues royalty here.)

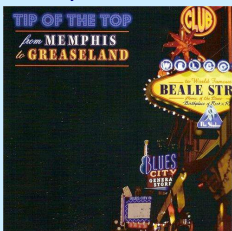
Together over 10 years, this band might now, with the release of *Holler and Stomp* enjoy celebrity way beyond their normal Chicago haunts. For the listening public, let's hope so.

Blind Pig Records, 2011

Check out: www.cashboxkings.com and www.blindpigrecords.com

Tip of the Top, *From Memphis to Greaseland* by Joseph Jordan

Take four Northern California musicians with an obvious affinity for authentic American roots music, combine



them with a stellar ability to sell a song, and you've got Tip of the Top's third terrific CD, "From Memphis to Greaseland."

Producer and the group's outstanding bass player Frank DeRose and cohorts insist on

getting to the true heart of their songs, 13 tracks that make this 55-minute recording a thrilling addition to their already impressive repertoire.

The four hip cats of TOTT [as they're referred to locally] have turned the greater Bay Area on its musical ear, bursting onto the scene just 3 years ago, and bringing with them a love for original-sounding music, and a superb feel for the '50s blues and roots music that inspires them. As much juke joint heroics as classic blues ("The Sportin' Life" and "One Way Out") with more than a little rock and roll (DeRose's "The Night Is Young").

Energetic harpist Akarsha "Aki" Kumar and guitarist "Little" Jonny Lawton take the lead vocals throughout, with a separate strength that combines into a powerful whole. They are both accomplished musicians and play off each other well, whether it be with several call-and-responses heard throughout the album, or in sheer ability. Recording the CD live in the studio helped maintain the intrinsic feel for the music the group abundantly displays.

Lawton jumps on his tunes with abandon, traversing a mean slide as well as showing his dexterity in single-note playing prowess.

Kumar can take props for tackling Little Walter's instrumental "Rocker" with not only reverence for Jacobs' jumping composition, but a genuine feel for early Chicago Blues harmonica. His vocals are also wonderfully expressive, such on the groover, "She's Fine." Drummer Carlos Velasco holds down the beat with a very minimal kit and is just right for this band's sound.

Engineered by creative blues mastermind, and head honcho of Greaseland Studios in Campbell, California, Chris "Kid" Andersen, the CD just bursts out of the speakers good for bawlin', braggin', or boogieing. Bay Area pianist Sid Morris and guitarist Johnny "Cat" Soubrand, as well as Andersen, contribute instrumentation to several tracks. Seven of the cuts are originals and the other six are well chosen for the band's musical sensitivities.

Charting all over the place as of this writing, the men have nowhere to go but national at this point, they're that good. (They were TGGBS' entry in The Blues Foundation's 2011 International Blues Challenge, where they reached the semifinals.)

Delta King Records, 2011

Produced by Frank DeRose

Engineered by Chris "Kid" Andersen

Check out: www.tipofthetopmusic.com



Sista Monica Parker, *Living In The Danger Zone* by Dorothy L. Hill



More than likely, one will find a Sista Monica Parker CD in the soul section. After all, The Blues Foundation has nominated her five times for a Blues Music Award in the category Soul Blues Female Artist. But, as one who has been an avid fan for many

years and enjoyed her previous nine releases, I beg to differ. Her range is far-reaching into blues, gospel, and old-fashioned R&B all done with a lot of soul. *Living In The Danger Zone* is just that and in the 14 cuts on this October 2011 release, Sista puts her creative energy into all the genres.

Vocalist Sista Monica assembled some of northern California's finest players with a sprinkling of nationally recognized special guests for this effort. The band consists of Danny "B" Beconcini on piano and Hammond B3, Don Caruth on guitar and background vocals, Leon Joyce Jr. on drums, Artis "AJ" Joyce on bass, and Danny Sandoval on tenor saxophone. Guest musicians include Andy Just on harmonica; Kelley Hunt on piano; Ruth Davies on acoustic bass; Mike Schermer, Vasti Jackson, Larry Attanasio, Danny Caron, and Terry Hiatt on guitars; Ron E. Beck, David Tucker, and Jeff Minniweather on drums; Carolyn Brandy on percussion; Joel Smith on bass; Abdul Hamid on Hammond B3; Doug Rowan on saxophone; Chris Marquis on trumpet; and background vocalists including Jeannine Anderson and Will Russ, Jr. Most of the tunes are originals written by Sista and Beconcini.

The opening cut "Hug Me Like You Love Me" is an up-tempo jaunt that was inspired by a remark B.B. King made to Sista when she approached him backstage requesting a photo with him. The title cut has an instrumental funk approach and Sista explores the theme of the complexities one encounters in a relationship. The highlight is "Tears," a slow blues ballad with perfectly sparse support by the band highlighting Mike Schermer's guitar expression and Sista's earthy lush vocals. Another gem is "Unstoppable," which has a snappy rhythmic underlay and Sista gives it a sultry treatment. Sista gets convincingly breathy on "Let Me Moan" with Andy Just adding a nice harmonica touch in the background. She warns her significant other to get off that phone, pay her some attention, and stop being so cheap on a bouncy delivery of "Worn Out Your Welcome" featuring Danny B

on keyboards. "The Forecast Calls For Pain" is a wonderful cover of Robert Cray's tune with Sista exhibiting a fluid dexterity that, at times, is reminiscent of Etta. The gospel influenced Sista closes it out with "Glory Hallelujah," a contemporary joyful number featuring Kelley Hunt on piano and sharing lead vocals.

This is one fine CD and probably the best yet from Sista Monica. It is stylishly diverse and has something to love on every spin and with 14 tracks, there is a lot to love!

Mo Muscle Records & Ent., 2011

Check out: www.sistamonica.com

Diunna Greenleaf, *Trying To Hold On* by Dorothy L. Hill



Houston native Diunna Greenleaf's newest CD, released in October 2011, has already received a nomination for a Blues Music Award for Traditional Blues Album of the year and she is also in the running for the Koko Taylor Award: Traditional Blues Female,

to be awarded in May 2012 in Memphis. This CD is Diunna's second studio recording and she picked a star-studded cast of musicians with a like sensibility for traditional blues. Of the total 14 tunes, she wrote all but 3 and cowrote another with her longtime cohort, guitarist Jonn Del Toro Richardson.

The first cut, "Be For Me," is a beautiful arrangement with Diunna's silky delivery; she even hums along with the sweet shuffle laid down by Bob Corritore on harmonica, Bob Margolin on guitar, Chuck Cotton on drums, and Mookie Brill on upright bass. "Sunny Day Friends" is a swinging number featuring Anson Funderburgh on guitar, Ron Jones on saxophone, John Street on the B-3, and Johnny Bradley on bass—she warns about so-called friends... "those are the folks on whom you cannot depend" in one of the notable selections. The pace is dramatically changed on "Growing Up and Growing Old," with Diunna locking into vocals celebrating the inevitability of time moving on with haunting simplicity. "Beautiful Hat," to which Rich DelGrosso's mandolin adds a sweet bluegrass sound is another winner. "I Can't Wait"... "to hear the blues tonight"... is an upbeat tune dominated by Bob Corritore's dazzling harmonica phrasing. "Taking Chances" features Smokin' Joe Kubek on tasteful guitar; Diunna's vocal presentation is superbly textured on this gem. "You Don't Feel That Way About Me" has a soul-



infused melody and Diunna mines the emotional depth of the vocals with an undercurrent of ache.

The title cut is my favorite—Bob Margolin and Chris James on guitars are simply magnificent and Diunna breathes life into the vocals with playful phrasing. Her cover of the Betty James tune “I’m A Little Mixed Up” is absolutely delightful; Diunna nails the brisk swing tempo with gusto. She tells it like it is on Jimmy McCracklin’s “Double Dealing” with passionate clarity telling us... “they need to treat me right like they should...” as Jonn Del Toro Richardson skillfully interprets the bluesy shuffle on guitar. The most poignant episode is the cut of Diunna’s 102 year old grandmother Sylvie Travis singing a segment of a hymn, “He Is Everything,” followed by Diunna doing an a cappella of the tune. “I Got A Notion To Leave” has a conspicuous dance beat and Diunna’s soaring phrasing is splendid. The closing track, “Cause I’m a Soldier” was cowritten by Diunna, who found inspiration for the tune at the funeral of her older brother who was a serviceman...and it is a cadence vocally modulated with reverence embellished by a graceful harmonica accompaniment by Billy Branch.

This is a CD of monumental impact and should be on every blues lover’s play list. Diunna Greenleaf leaves no doubt in her abilities as a songwriter of mammoth proportions and her vocal depth is matchless. Her steadfast commitment to traditional blues may be a hard sell these days, but she gives it new life with this treasure.

Blue Mercy Records, 2011

Check out: www.diunna.com

David Landon, *I Like It Too Much*

by Joseph Jordan



A bit of rock, a tad of funk, a touch of jazz, a smattering of pop and a bunch of blues is what you'll get when you pick up David Landon's new one, *I Like It Too Much*.

According to the liner notes, Landon has "written, arranged, produced, recorded, mixed, and mastered" this brand new effort. He's lead guitarist and lead vocalist, played some keyboard, written horn arrangements, and produced "other sounds." Whew! He's obviously all over this album, and his exemplary attention to musical detail shines throughout the 59-minute affair.

On this, Landon's fifth CD, he's been privileged with the guest artistry of a true "who's who" of Bay Area musicians (several of them world class), a few of whom include impeccable bassist Steve Evans, steady Randy Hayes on drums, Charles McNeal on superb sax, the first-rate Tony Stead on Hammond B-3, Melvin Seals on same, Tom Poole and Mike Rinta on horns, and the singing talents of Alexandra Kaprelian on backup vocals.

Of the cuts, the ballad "Our Last Goodbye" conjures British soul artist George Michael with its pop-sensibilities and anguished guitar work. The title track is a standout of the record in its tale of a man's indulgences and nasty habits ("it ain't good for me, but it's just what I want to do").

Positively outstanding is guest artist's Michael Peloquin's sax and harmonica playing on "A Little Bit Better" (without you). The interplay between Landon and his good buddy Alvon Johnson (guitar/vocals) just blues-rocks in the playful "That's What Friends Are For," an album highlight. One of the album's tracks, "Frictitious," has a funky feel and an Average White Band groove.

Landon's horn arrangements are outstanding throughout. Kelly Park takes on those same duties with aplomb on "Well Alright."

The CD contains, among its 11 songs, three instrumentals, which in most any other album would be about two too many, but Landon makes the most of them through his clever, compelling, and sometimes incendiary guitar work and chart composition.

You want to buy this one 'cause of Landon's tremendous guitar work. He can be a monster on his chosen instrument. His singing voice is not going to win him any major awards, but he never tries to stretch it beyond his abilities. On the other hand, his voice can be playful and soulful and, thankfully, never reaches the overwrought.

Ultimately, this album comprises yet another fine and impressive effort by this Berkeley-based musician of dazzling talent.

Whip Records, 2012

Check out: www.davidlandon.com



Scott T. Miller, *Songs of Love and Porkchops* by Dorothy L. Hill



Guitarist/vocalist Scott Thomas Miller released this CD in 2011, his first after getting back into performing in the San Francisco Bay Area in the last few years. His first performances were with what he describes as the legendary lost band from Aptos "Harold Honey and the Cabbage Heads" and then he went on hiatus for 27 years to raise a family. Scott participated in The Golden Gate Blues Society's International Blues Challenge in 2011 in the solo/duo category as a solo act. He is a frequent jammer at Club Fox in Redwood City, California on Wednesday evenings.

This CD comprises 14 cuts, all of them written by Miller with quirky titles. It was mixed and mastered at Chris "Kid" Andersen's Greaseland Studios in Campbell, California. It was recorded with just Miller and his acoustic guitar...enhanced with some overdubbing of vocals using what he describes as "a variety of ratty old Harmony archtops, an Ovation flattop, a ukulele, an Epiphone Broadway, a little 'ol Danelectro Longhorn bass, and various percussion things, including snare drum, bass drum, China ride cymbal, vinyl lunchpail, and vacuum-cleaner hose."

The first cut is a pleasant blues shuffle, "Porkchops On My Mind," and Miller's vocals are expressively mirthful. "My Righteous Remedy" has a gripping melody and Miller's use of the drum beat contributes to an interesting slow and grinding shuffle with lyrics related to the remedy of Robitussin to cure his tiredness of all the cussin' and fussin'. His guitar playing is very satisfying on "Cadenzas Gone Wild," which shows just how good Miller can play. "Little Queen Bee" is Delta-influenced with a hill country instrumentation and melancholy vocals. "I Just Got the News" is given interest with inventive vocal overdubbing. On "I Can See You Through Your Window," Miller's confession is upbeat, using voicing to good effect to tell the story. On "Midnight At the Duck Pond," there is a background of duck calls behind Miller's laid-back guitar styling, which extends to a total of 7 minutes and 33 seconds. "Six Sweet Potatoes" closes out the CD with a chugging bass drum beat and half-spoken vocals with impassioned guitar swoops and soarings.

Although this is mostly a backporch country blues excursion, it maintains an aggressive energy and captures

Miller's musicianship and ability to make ordinary events into something that conveys a story.

Waxmoth Records, 2011

Check out: www.waxmoth.com

Burton Winn, *First Light* by Ron Purser



Any San Francisco Bay Area blues aficionado worth his/her weight in gold will know Burton Winn. Playing bass for over 40 years, Burton was a member of Johnny Nitro's band, The Doorslammers, for 15 years. He has played with

James Cotton, Steve Freund, Jan Fanucchi, Mark Hummel, Eugene Huggins, Kenny "Blue" Ray, Wendy DeWitt, Angela Strehli, and many others. *First Light* is his first CD, consisting of seven tracks—five of which are bluesy, while the last two are aligned with the album's title—a unique expression of his multifaceted talents—not only his top-notch musicianship as a stalwart bass player, but also his lesser known vocal skills. But before we talk music, the cover art is worth mentioning. *First Light* is visually depicted as a lunar sequence—from full to crescent moons—beautifully designed by Sangeetha Kowsik, a senior designer at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The music follows the lunar phases, with Burton taking the lead vocals on all tracks. The first track, "Sick and Tired," is a full blast of an old, upbeat, Fats Domino shuffle, with some excellent slide guitar work by Joe Lococo. The next track, "Because She's Gone," features more San Francisco Bay Area blues talent: Steve Freund on guitar and Kathy Tejcka on keys and harmonies. Okay, I'm biased. I love the beautiful guitar work Steve Freund lays down on this track. But, now, I'm taken in by Burt's multitasking talent: smooth vocals, while keeping the deep pocket groove. Usually we tend to stereotype blues bass players: those slim, tall guys who sort of hide expressionless in the background. Burton's CD shatters this myth. His formal music education includes training in piano and voice—bass playing didn't come to him until after his college years. "She Put The Hurt On Me" (by Otis Redding) is a cool rhythmic track—with Robin Roth doing some nice drum work—uniting Blakely, Lococo, and Tejcka. The next song is a lyrical substitution of the old hand jive vamp, a tune called "Not Fade Away." This is sort of the jam song on the CD; executed well, but a little too predictable for my taste. And the next track is similar—a Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy" facsimile co-



written by Leslie Johnson (aka Lazy Lester) called "I'm Gonna Leave You Baby." Steve Freund makes up for the lack of originality on this track. I love Chicago Blues, so please don't get me wrong—the song is great.

So what's unique about *First Light* besides the great musicians that Burton Winn has rounded up, along with the vocal prowess of one of the San Francisco Bay Area's beloved bass players on the blues scene? Listen. *First Light* unveils Burton's bold fusion of electric bass with his spiritual devotional vocals expressed on the last two tracks, "Bala Gopala Krishna" and "Sri Pate." The first of the Indian Carnatic (Southern Indian) classical songs begins with a beautiful sitar intro, which transitions into a rock version—with Winn singing in Sanskrit, Blakely doing some interesting guitar work, and Robin Roth keeping it moving. "Sri Pate" is Burton Winn's interpretation of a classic 200-year-old Carnatic song. On this track, Winn uses the wizardry of Garth Webber's Red Rooster Studios, mixing multiple vocal tracks that emulate the Carnatic vocal tradition.

Carnatic music is one of the world's oldest and richest musical traditions, composed as a devotional musical expression to seek the ultimate Brahman or God. In Hinduism, Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of heartfelt devotion, is expressed through devotional singing, hymns, chants, and praises. Winn's CD, *First Light*, goes off the beaten path—embracing the gut-bucket world of down-and-out street suffering with the spiritually evolved artistry of Indian classical traditions.

Recorded and Mixed at Red Rooster Studios (Garth Webber), 2011

Conceived and Produced by Burton Winn
Check out: burtonwinn.com

Country Blues Revue, *Blues For Too Long* by David McGee



Blues listeners will find themselves drawn to a new recording *Blues For Too Long* by Country Blues Revue for a number of reasons. We hear in *Blues For Too Long* the intimacy of blues: its hard, angry feelings; its jubilations; its regrets; its

busting out laughing over nothing particular...the whole gamut of emotions that makes the blues a long-beloved musical form. For instance, there's the tight shuffle rhythm of "Hey Baby," written and sung by co-leader

Michael Handler, and reminiscent of Stax Records in its heyday. Yet, Country Blues Revue, from Santa Fe, pays homage to a primal blues style, the great incubator of the modern blues styles of Buddy Guy, Eric Clapton, Muddy Waters, and B. B. King that followed country blues. The recording includes covers of M. Travis's "Cannonball Rag" and W. Brown's "Mississippi Blues." Marc Malin, Country Blues Revue's other lead vocalist and guitarist, contributes six original songs, one of which is co-written. His "Jasmine and Gold" evokes classic country blues images: "Way down on the Mississippi where the air is thick and slow. Well, I can hear my baby calling, but I just can't seem to go...she goes to my head just like cherry wine."

Handler and Malin began Country Blues Revue as a duo and have added support musicians who are quite capable of setting up the groove for the two vocalists. *Blues For Too Long* excels because the musicians are all willing to share the limelight. It's clearly a group effort, and the ensemble supports one another as they take chances in their solos.

The joyful vibe of "Funny Feeling" features Cozy Ralston drumming a Charleston rhythm along with Larry Diaz's bass setting up the groove on Handler's song. Throughout *Blues For Too Long*, Handler has matured as a blues harp soloist compared to his previous recordings. He's tighter on the groove and matches the other soloists and vocalists superbly in the emotions they evoke.

Malin's title song "Blues For Too Long" starts off with a reminiscent feeling accompanied by Handler's plaintive and wistful harmonica playing. The song refers to the harmonic structures of Willie Nelson's "Nightlife" and Ray Charles's "Hard Times." "When you first...said goodbye, I was alone, I couldn't understand why. Even in my heart, I knew was wrong.... I've had those blues for too long."

Country Blues Revue delivers a good traveling song with "Goin' to Taos," another Handler original on which the band reveals its harder, rocking side. "Now baby," Handler sings, "don't turn that love lamp low....cause I'm heading down the highway baby, to Taos, New Mexico." "Taos" features Malin's tasty country guitar licks. A "Taos" highlight is the versatile Vinnie Kelley's lyrical fiddle playing. In the stop-time chorus, Handler shouts: "There's thunder on the left of me, lightning on the right, you know I'll be lucky if I make it home tonight!" It makes you want to hit the road too, Jack! Handler seems fond of Taos, Santa Fe, and the Southwest he now calls home, as opposed to his former city, Oakland, California, with its



hard street life: "violence, rape, and murder everywhere," he laments in "Taos."

Asked why he plays the blues, "How can I not?" Handler responds. "It's all about inspiration that's either there or it's not.... Anyway, I learned finger-picking guitar years ago. Jerry Garcia was one of my teachers, so why let it go to waste?" *Blues For Too Long's* title song rejoices: "So to these blue notes, I say goodbye. You had me down, well

you sure didn't have me tied. I'm going to leave here with a happy song, yeah 'cause I've had those blues for too long." No doubt, listeners will find in *Blues For Too Long* the happy songs they're longing for.

Marc & Mike Music, 2011

Check out Marc and Mike's Country Blues Revue on Facebook

REMEMBERING THE LEGENDS

Howard Tate, Hubert Sumlin, Johnny Otis, and Etta James

HOWARD TATE (8/13/1939 - 12/2/2011)

By Austin de Lone (Band Leader/Keys)

Working with Howard Tate was a dream come true. Ever since I first heard his plaintive wail when I was a college boy dreaming of becoming a musician, he had been one of my favorite singers. Howard was an icon, a man with a magic voice, a high water mark of sophisticated soul and sassiness. It wasn't just Howard, but also his producer/songwriter/arranger Jerry Ragavoy, who gave him the songs, told him what to sing, and coaxed the greatness out of Howard that he had hidden inside. When I first met Jerry, who was interested in producing my first band, Eggs Over Easy, he wanted us to sing "Ain't Nobody Home." I was flattered to think that he wanted us to do the same song that Howard had killed so mercilessly.

Many years later, John Goddard (Village Music) asked me to help find Howard for one of his legendary Sweetwater parties. We looked high and low. I called Jerry, and he said "If you find him, let me know." I even called all the cab companies in Philadelphia, where rumor had it that Howard was working, but he was nowhere to be found. Then, all of a sudden, he reappeared, and one day I found myself playing keyboards at The Site with Howard and Jerry both in the same room, rehearsing for one of John's parties at the Sweetwater and an appearance at the San Francisco Blues Festival. At long last, Howard was coming back from a journey to hell and back - 8 years homeless and a crack addict on the streets of Camden, New Jersey. Howard Tate was an amazingly soulful and complicated person, with the voice of an angel, the passion of a preacher, and, yet, one hand reaching out to the devil. It was a privilege, an honor, and sometimes a terror to lead Howard and the great band of Bay Area musicians that we put together around the country and the world over the next few years. For the first time, Howard travelled to Europe and Asia, and got the

recognition he so deserved. I like to picture Howard now driving around heaven in his Cadillac Escalade EXT, preaching to the choir, and singing to all those good souls like himself who had to go through hell right here on earth.

By Tim Wagar (Bass)

Howard Tate back singing after 30 years of silence, now that was an event. And for me to play bass behind a guy like that was a genuine treat.

The gig was playing the greatest songs (all with fantastic bass lines), a solid eight-piece band of guys who were good musicians as well as great people to be around, and one of the world's great singers with a gem of a voice still intact. When we landed on stage, it was a good, strong presentation.

There were lots of trips to Europe and around the States. We worked festival dates, theaters, and clubs, and it was always a pleasure to see how people loved Howard and valued him being there. It seemed like everywhere we went, people showed up and politely asked Howard to autograph a treasured copy of his first rare album.

Howard's wasn't a "high-energy" show (he basically just stood there and sang), but he always went over well and I do clearly remember looking out at a theater gig in Japan and watching what looked like electricity rippling through everyone's bodies. Wherever we went, he got a warm response.

He had hopes of us all working and traveling a lot, and he wanted to make enough money to set up a shelter for the homeless. That never quite came together, but it's good to have a dream like that, and the homeless issue was always close to his heart.

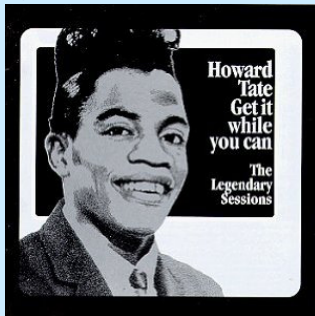
I've still got a "Howard Tate Band" luggage tag on one of my suitcases. It's a nice reminder, when I pack for a trip, of being lucky enough to work with a guy who sang with one of the great soul voices of our time.

By Paul Revelli (Drums)

I first became aware of Howard Tate and his music sometime in the mid-'80s when my good friend and mentor, Anthony Paule, made me a mix tape (remember those?) of some fantastic soul singers he had in his record collection. On board were people like Joe Tex, Don Covay, Garnett Mimms, O.V. Wright, James Carr, and Gene Chandler. I still have it, by the way.

In the midst of it all came Howard Tate. To say he stood out among the already spectacular singers I'd heard on this tape would be an understatement. The pleading in his voice, his phrasing, and those high falsetto stabs with which he drove his point home stopped me dead in my tracks. At that time (admittedly coming to the R&B party a little late in life), I hadn't even heard of many of the people on Anthony's mix tape. But how was it that I'd never heard of Howard Tate? Oddly, I'd heard a number of other people cover songs originally done by Howard, but this was a true revelation. I had to have more.

Time passed. Howard Tate's records were hard to come by, but amidst the takeover of the LP by the CD, I waited



patiently until Howard's "Get It While You Can" album on Verve finally arrived intact. From start to finish, it is required listening. From then on, I have always considered it one of my "desert island" discs, should push ever come to shove. And I

would still have to sneak his Atlantic album in somehow!

In July 2006, shortly after Howard made his remarkable comeback, I was asked to accompany him on a short one-week tour of Italy and Sardinia. Needless to say, I jumped at the chance, as one would do when asked to work with any of one's idols. I am so glad I did. Despite the length of his absence, Howard Tate still had that amazing voice. The shows had the air of a church revival meeting, but even grander in scope, taking into account all the material and life experience Howard now had in his bag. I was literally pinching myself at being in the presence of this man, playing in front of some very worshipping audiences and hitting on the same Jerry Ragavoy arrangements. Tim Wagar, the great bass player

who was also on the tour, once told me that Howard turned to him at one of the rehearsals and said "I haven't heard those bass parts played like that since we cut those records!" Howard seemed really humbled by it all, and yet he was humbling to be around.

My only regret is that we didn't get to do more. The records Howard made once he was "rediscovered" were, in my opinion, a mixed bag combining songwriting contributions from many of his admirers with production that seemed intent on taking Howard down more modern territory. It didn't have anything to do with the singing though. Undeniably great singing. And who knows? Maybe there is a Howard Tate gospel record lying around in a vault somewhere. If not, then he is surely singing in the celestial choir of angels with all the other singers who once practiced this dying art of true soul singing. Like everyone else, I'll have to wait my turn to hear him again. My eternal thanks to Howard Tate and may he rest in peace.



Howard Tate (and a partial Austin de Lone) at the 2003 Santa Cruz Blues Festival by Lesley de Lone

HUBERT SUMLIN (11/16/31 - 12/4/11)

By Steve Freund

"Be yourself, man. Don't try to be like nobody else. Ain't nobody like you." These words of advice have carried me these past 35 years, ever since I met Hubert Sumlin one sweltering June afternoon on Chicago's west side. Coming from such a unique individual as Hubert, they mean that much more. You see, Hubert Sumlin was truly inimitable, not only as a musician, which is obvious, but as a human with a big personality. He was the most welcoming and magnanimous person I had met up to that point, and that is saying a lot coming from the inner city of New York. I had met all kinds of people, from all over the world, but none quite like Hubert Sumlin.

So here is the opening scene: two Jewish kids drive from NYC to Chicago to get a taste of the real blues. I had borrowed my parents car, and a long with my pal Paul Cooper, who had met the Howling Wolf Band a few times before, we set out on our great adventure. By the time we hit Chicago in June of 1976, just a couple of weeks after the Wolf himself had passed away, the temperature was in the 100's, and very humid, making it as uncomfortable as I had ever been. Our first stop in Illinois, literally, was at Eddie Shaw's 1815 Club on W. Roosevelt Road. It was around 3 PM and the band was there for rehearsal. Wolf had made it clear that he wanted the band to stay together after he was gone, under the leadership of Eddie. We rang the bell and Eddie came to the door. Paul reintroduced himself and we came on in. They hadn't quite started rehearsing yet-Detroit Jr. was still setting up his piano and Chico Chism was messing with his drum kit. Shorty Gilbert was all ready to pump his bass. I saw a lean figure over in the corner, napping on top of the pool table. "Hubert," Eddie shouted. "We got some boys from New York who came out to see us." And so my friendship with Hubert was born.

Paul and I spent our first night sitting in with Homesick James, which was a huge thrill in itself, and the next night we went back to Eddie's club. The band and staff were



real nice to us, but the way we were treated by Hubert was totally unexpected. When Eddie called me up to the bandstand, Hubert took his guitar off and placed it over my shoulders as if I was someone important. He did the same for Paul a bit later on. We were

just a couple of kids in our twenties, and we were being treated like royalty. That was just the way Hubert was. He always treated people with love and affection.

Hubert also got me my very first paying gig in Chicago, with Taildragger. The gig was in the roughest part of town, on Lake and Pulaski, the thick of the west side. The place was called David and Thelma's Lounge, and it paid \$10. Hubert played the first couple of gigs with me, then dropped out completely. I was left all alone in a hardcore Chicago blues band, doing mostly Howlin' Wolf tunes, which I really didn't know too well at that time. I stuck with it for a month or two until Sunnyland Slim started hiring me. Hubert later confided in me that he was scared of playing there because the place got shot up a few times. I completely understood.

In my first year of Chicago I would run into Hubert quite a bit, mostly on Sunnyland's gigs. I would show up in the hope of playing somehow, but I understood that I was basically just an apprentice to either Hubert or Eddie Taylor. There were a couple of times when neither of these blues giants showed up, and I got to play all night and make a few bucks. Plus, when they were there they were very free with their knowledge. Hubert always was willing to let me see and hear his personal best. He truly was a genius, and it was spontaneous. He played as he felt, moment to moment. The essence of the blues.



As the years passed, we would play together or just hang out together at clubs. Once I got to be Slim's regular guitar player, Hubert

would come and sit in with us, and I got to place MY guitar around HIS shoulders. We were kind of like a little family, the band and Hubert. He eventually married Sunnyland's cousin Bea, and moved to Milwaukee and bought a house. He came down to Chicago occasionally, but not as often as we wished. We did a couple of tours in Europe together, and the Chicago Blues Festival, but his club appearances were rare. He was starting to get his just recognition and some great gigs, well deserved.

Later on Hubert hooked up with Toni Ann, who managed his career and took care of him until the end. He seemed very happy the last time I saw him, back in June 2010. We shared a van to the airport and had a great time reliving some of the past years. He was still the humble,

gregarious person I had always known. Just a great person. I relish all the stories he told me, like the time an ex-wife boarded up a favorite guitar behind some dry-wall, the time Eric Clapton told him to take a guitar from his collection, (any guitar, just not that one), or the time Sunnyland and Wolf swung it out in a Buffalo motel.

Hubert Sumlin, as a musician, was, in my opinion, a true genius. He played as he felt, in the moment. He did not use a pick, so he got a meaty tone all the time. He also was quite percussive, adding to the overall rhythm of the band. Even if I sat and tried over and over to copy his stuff, I don't think I could do it. I never even tried as I knew he would only laugh at me. Plus, I never would even come close. He was his own man. and his guitar was an extension of that man. When people ask me about his playing, and what especially stands out to me, I point them to 300 Pounds of Joy. His guitar work is amazing and sets a high bar for those of us who want to play contemporary blues guitar. He says so much with so few notes. As Sunnyland used to say, "you gotta get in and get out."

The following are some quotes of mine included in the book *Incurable Blues* by Will Romano:

"Hubert's playing on 300 Pounds of Joy completely kills me," says Freund. "Some guys are able to craft a solo and they can play it the same way again and again. You can

almost memorize it. With Hubert, he plays it spontaneously, but it comes out crafted."

"There were times when he was feeling lowdown and he was being overlooked and he was just a waste," Freund says. "I'd say, 'Hubert, there is nobody like you. You are the most individual musician I have ever heard.' That made him feel good. Truly, there is no way you could copy Hubert Sumlin's style. It is so individual and it is a dialect all his own. I have been there and witnessed up close his absolute sheer brilliance and creativity."

Hubert was one of the greatest and most expressive musicians to ever pick up an instrument. We are all lucky to have known him and to hear him up close. Don't just take my word for it-listen for yourself.

There are many references to Hubert online. Here is one that will provide excellent information. I recommend any Howlin' Wolf recording that has Hubert on it.

Check out: <http://allmusic.com/artist/hubert-sumlin-p537/biography>

Photos courtesy of Steve Freund.

Page 19, column 1: Steve Freund and Hubert Sumlin, early 1980s

Page 19, column 2: Hubert and Sunnyland Slim, late 1980s.

JOHNNY OTIS (12/28/21 - 1/17/12)

Photo by Joe Rosen at a Rhythm and Blues Foundation function in the mid-1990s



Check out:
[Johnny Otis in JazzWax](#)

ETTA JAMES (1/25/38 - 1/20/12)

Photos by Bob Cosman on The Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise, October 2008



