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MAPLEBLUES

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RIP Ellen McIlwaine
Mako Funasaka
Coping with Covid

Loose Blues News
Album Reviews
Top Blues

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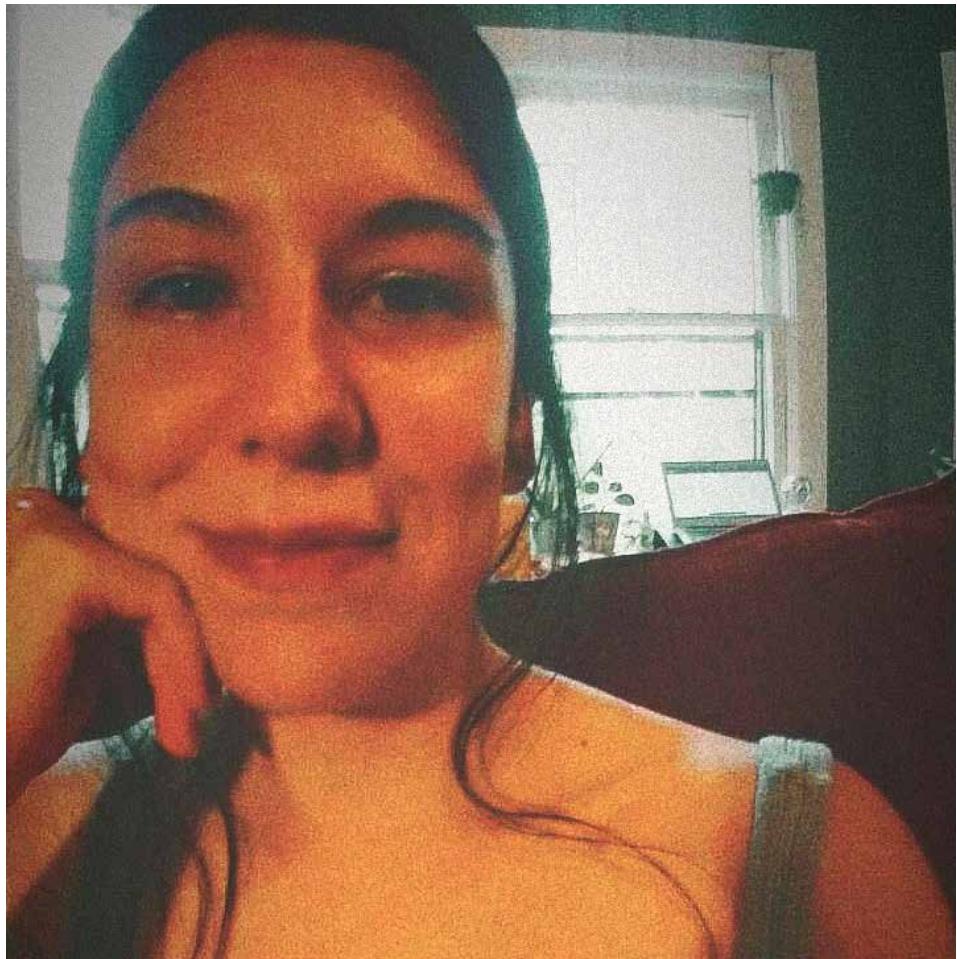
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Office Staff. Hüma Üster is moving on to a new gig in the cultural sector and leaving a huge hole on the TBS team after many years of dedicated and inspiring support. Hüma chose to study in Canada and after gigs in Istanbul and France came to steer the good ship Toronto blues after training at Humber College. We will certainly miss her steady hand, attention to detail and quiet passion for music, of all kinds! Incoming to the job is veteran organizer and advocate **Glenn Smith** who has a background from the other end of the education spectrum, teaching marketing part time at McMaster. We welcome Glenn to help us prepare for the “post covid” era!

Post covid-19. With double vaccine thresholds becoming our summer 2021 story, the notion of “herd immunity” and the return of live music seems to be on the horizon. Later this summer we will see some local venues fire up patio concerts while backyard and street action is getting eaten up by hungry music fans. In Quebec and Calgary we salute the valiant vanguard of festival presenters in **Sherbrooke, Trois-Rivières** and Blues Booster Queen of Calgary **Cindy McLeod**. Locally we see **Southside Shuffle** figuring out their plan, with a “physical” gathering in Port Credit that will refresh ears over the **September 10-12** weekend and Lighthouse Blues Festival in Kincardine has announced an all-star lineup of Canadian blues greats on the same week-end. TBS will continue our virtual strategy but we are hopeful for the future.

Women’s Blues Revue. In this edition we are announcing the “on sale” of seats at **Roy Thomson Hall** for the 34th edition of the Women’s Blues Revue and thank the hundreds of loyal folks who have hung in waiting for the opportunity to gather safely. Our partners at the hall have announced many Massey Hall shows including **Buddy Guy, Digging Roots** and more, a good sign that live music can happen in Toronto. We similarly plan to work through plans with **Mervon Mehta** at Koerner Hall for a **January 31** edition of the Maple Blues Awards, surrounded by the four day gathering **Blues Summit Ten, January 28-31**.

Ontario Creates. TBS core funding comes from the **Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council, the Department of Canadian Heritage** and a variety of additional sources like **FACTOR, SOCAN Foundation** and the provincial agency Ontario Creates. The latter assisted with the staging of education programs featuring **Guillermo Subauste** (live streaming) and **Quammie Williams** (career development), while Brian Blain has worked with Ottawa tech guru **Ryan Brinkhurst** to upgrade our concert capture software. Quammie will also begin work on strategic planning with the first



Outgoing Office Manager Hüma Üster is moving from Blues To Ballet (that's a leap!). Thank you Hüma for all your great work and dedication at the TBS. Welcome to new Managing Director Glenn Smith

phase of research around the community's make up, identity and matters related to **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**.

Board of Directors / MAC. After consultations with authorities, TBS has chosen to morph the structure of the **Musicians Advisory Council** from being “ex officio” members of the Board to full voting members. The distinction changes nothing but the right to vote, which had been perceived to be an issue when musicians could benefit financially if on board. The revision is based on the notion that TBS will not allow anyone to vote on matters where they could benefit, as is the case with other not for profits. This shifts the role of all musicians, a handful appointed in 2020 to better reflect the cultural make up of the community, a task we plan to continue in the coming months and years.

Indigenous Standing. As the nation absorbs the dreadful news of residential school behaviour, the TBS is thankful for the insights of new TBS Board Member and respected organizer **Elaine Bomberry**. Elaine's contribution to TBS planning and the immensely successful **Rez Bluz** live stream sessions reflect how important the education and awareness are current affairs on the mind of TBS members. TBS stands with those who

work for change and I will quote **Digging Roots** co-leader **ShoShona Kish**, “*It is easy to fall into silence and inertia. This is a time for action, listening, compassion, and learning. We ask you to make space for Indigenous voices. Make space for change.*”

Member Survey. As Huma wrapped up her gig she was able to guide us through the rough waters of covid and stay active against formidable odds. Recently we polled members on a variety of topics including the return of the **Maple Blues** hard copy where 60% want it in hand, 20% can go either digital or physical, while another 20% want to save their postal worker from trekking to their doorway. We received many useful suggestions and plan to implement them in the coming months and move forward with two new committees, one to capture insights via a **Musicians Advisory Committee** and a committee dedicated to **Advocacy**.

On behalf of our members, volunteers and board we thank Huma for her incredible talents and also thank the community for supporting the TBS in turbulent times.

- Derek Andrews, Board of Directors President.

Mako Funasaka

When thinking about their favourite Blues artists, people rarely consider who is behind bringing that artistry to a place where fans can discover more. In some cases, the platform where the information is found is that origin of discovery for new fans. Regardless, that forum and process of discovery requires someone who delves into an artist's world and music, and perhaps provides answers to questions that fans never thought to ask, but welcome the answers. In this edition of Notes & Quotes, one of the most competent interviewers on the Blues scene – and the driving force behind Talkin' Blues Productions – Mako Funasaka, is in conversation. Notes & Quotes offers a rarity for readers this month, as the interviewer himself becomes the interviewee, as Funasaka discusses what he thinks makes for a good interview, touches on some of his most memorable interviews, the impact of a changing technological landscape, and what motivates him to continue interviewing artists.

To provide some background to both those who already enjoy Talkin' Blues, and those who are getting a first introduction via this article, Mako Funasaka is not only the driving force behind Talkin' Blues Productions, he is also the founder. For over fifteen years, Funasaka and Talkin' Blues has featured broadcasts, videos, photography (and more), and most recently a podcast. The theme remains consistent throughout all forms of delivery, however; informing listeners and inquisitive minds on the creative processes and providing truths that are behind the music and the artists. Funasaka pulls back the curtain and provides insight for interested parties. He has garnered interviews with some of the most recognizable artists throughout his post as an interviewer – names such as B.B. King, Hubert Sumlin, Derek Trucks, Walter Trout, and countless others grace his resume. It is also worth noting that Funasaka's work within the Blues world has not gone unrecognized; he's been commended with a Maple Blues Award from the Toronto Blues Society (2006, Blues Booster), as well as been recognized by the Blues Foundation (Memphis, TN) with a Keeping The Blues Alive (2011) award.



Mako Funasaka relaxing with Shakura S'Aida after an interview session

As the conversation began, it was appropriate to ask about Funasaka's decision to start Talkin' Blues Productions. It became evident that his passion for music has been the driving force since its inception. In part, he offered this;

"I was fortunate to have been able to interview four Blues artists (at Harbourfront Festival) when I first started, one of which was John Jackson (Alligator Records), and it was a great interview. At the end of the interview, I was told that I ask great questions, and I thought to myself 'hey maybe I could keep doing this.'. From there, it was decided that there would be a television series about the Blues – which was just really amazing – and it went from there."

As the conversation continued, the natural progression led to a question that any interviewer would want answered by someone with Mako Funasaka's record: As an interviewer, what makes for a great interview?

"What makes a great interview is making that connection. Having an artist reveal something about themselves because they trust you and are comfortable always makes a good interview. It also makes a difference on whether the interview will be a good one based on what the artist has in mind too. It does happen where an artist has a predetermined set of things they want to tell you, and it doesn't go beyond what they had already decided they were going to talk about. The artist is what really does make an interview one that can go to

that special place where they can reveal something new, or tell me something that they have never said before. Making that connection – *That* makes an interview successful to me."

The conversation advanced at that natural pace that likely leads to that same comfort Funasaka details as a hallmark for success, and the discussion landed in a natural place; asking him to recount some of his most memorable interviews. He reinforces his belief that the artists who are willing to reveal themselves beyond the predetermined are the ones who remain notable in his mind. His response is humble, as he awards credit to the people he interviews above his skill as the person conducting the interview:

"It wasn't that I did a great job interviewing – it's that the artist provided a great interview. There are so many favourites, and I am grateful for each and every one of them, but when I get to interview musicians I grew up with, like Alex Lifeson, Gino Vannelli, Rick Emmett and connect with them, it's pretty special. If I can get a decent documentation of someone's life beyond the standard 'what's going on right now', that means a lot to me."

Knowing that Mako Funasaka has adapted to the changing technology throughout the years of Talkin' Blues, it is worth mentioning that his latest edition of the podcast (Talkin' Blues podcast 270 – with Kenny Passarelli, known for his work alongside Joe Walsh, Stephen Stills, and

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Ellen McIlwaine -Goddess of Slide

Ellen McIlwaine was the epitome of an adventurous spirit: fierce and independent, the flame-haired artist took her musical gifts in surprising directions, defying expectations at every turn. As a virtuoso slide guitarist with a seismic voice, she excelled in a male-dominated field, leading her bands with a bold musical style that transcended genre and culture.

"There is a deep well of the music spirit that lives in me and comes out when I play," Ms. McIlwaine told interviewer Paul Corby in 2019, when she was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Toronto Blues Society. "I think a lot of people play with me and through me, and sing with me and through me. It's really a mystical experience." One of those she channelled was Jimi Hendrix, a friend from their Greenwich Village days whom Ms. McIlwaine credited with teaching her that what she had to express was unique. Another was Johnny Winter, from whom she learned to create her own unconventional open tunings.

Her musical expression wasn't restricted to blues, rock or funk but drew from a strong affinity for jazz, folk, country and what came to be called world music, developed while attending an international school in Japan and growing up with families from around the world. Ms. McIlwaine, who became fluent in Japanese, absorbed all those cultural influences and incorporated them into her recordings. Her most recent album, 2006's *Mystic Bridge*, was a collaboration with Canadian tabla player Cassius Khan.

Loud, powerful and flamboyant onstage, Ms. McIlwaine was kind, gentle and open-hearted offstage, and made friends easily wherever she went. After getting sober in 1982, she moved to Canada, living in Montreal and Toronto before settling in Calgary a decade later. There, while pursuing her career and teaching guitar and voice (including Arabic scales and yodelling), Ms. McIlwaine volunteered at the Alberta Children's Hospital. For the last eight years, she drove a school bus – as much for her love of children as the steady income. When she died at 75 in a Calgary hospice of esophageal cancer on June 23, following a diagnosis only six weeks earlier, many mourned the loss of a revolutionary artist and generous soul.

Blues and world music legend Taj Mahal told The Globe and Mail that witnessing Ms. McIlwaine perform was, for him, a revelation. "She was the first contemporary female musician that I heard play it all, sing



it all, slide and do it solo on top of all that talent," said Mr. Mahal, who appeared on Ms. McIlwaine's *Spontaneous Combustion* album in 2000. "Many a night I watched would-be guitar slingers sneak out the door of a club, coffeehouse or concert hall where she was playing because they couldn't take the heat!"

"Ellen was way ahead of her time," said blues guitarist and singer Sue Foley, who toured with Ms. McIlwaine and interviewed her for her forthcoming book on female guitarists. "Everything she did musically was by her own design, her slide technique, open tunings and the whole thing she was doing with world music and semi-tones. She could play her ass off and sing really well with a multi-octave range. She blazed a trail for me and other women. I owe her a huge debt."

Grammy-winning producer-guitarist Colin Linden calls her an inspirational artist: "Ellen was a pioneer who combined acoustic and electric sounds in a way no one had done before. And her singing was the perfect companion to her playing, capable of great tenderness, joy, anger and empathy."

Meanwhile friends of Ms. McIlwaine tell of her other qualities. "Ellen was always a strong person and personality," Sharron Toews said. "She was completely non-judgmental of everybody. It didn't matter whether you were young or old, black or white, transgender or had no arms and legs. To her, everybody was a person – she saw through all façades."

Ms. McIlwaine's death came just as her career seemed to be undergoing a renaissance. She was working on her autobiography and planned to record a new album this fall. *Mojo*, the prestigious U.K. music magazine, just published a feature article on her titled "Still Blazing Up the Bottleneck Blues." And Montreal filmmaker

Alfonso Maiorana, co-director of the award-winning *Rumble: Indians Who Rocked the World*, is developing a documentary on her titled *Goddess of Slide*.

The only adopted child of Southern Presbyterians, Frances Ellen McIlwaine was born in Nashville, Tenn., on Oct. 1, 1945. When she was two, her missionary parents, William and Aurine, took her to Kobe, Japan, where she lived for the next 15 years, attending the Canadian Academy international school. She started playing piano at the age of five and later snare drum in the marching band while singing in the school choir. Ms. McIlwaine credited listening to the American Forces Network radio with her discovery of Ray Charles, Fats Domino and Professor Longhair.

When Ms. McIlwaine was 11, her father, who'd been born in Japan in 1893 to missionary parents himself, took her to a performance of Kabuki, the highly stylized classical form of Japanese dance-drama. "I will never forget it," she wrote on Facebook. "It was a great privilege to be taught so many things about Old Japan."

Returning to the U.S. in 1963, Ms. McIlwaine studied history at a Christian school in Tennessee but dropped out to take art classes in Atlanta. There, she discovered guitar and began performing at local coffeehouses; in 1966, folk singer Patrick Sky urged her to move to Greenwich Village. Ms. McIlwaine landed work at the Café Au Go Go six nights a week, opening for blues artists like Muddy Waters and John Hammond. It was there she met Mr. Hendrix, who jammed with Ms. McIlwaine during her sets; she later painted his portrait on one of her albums and covered his *Up From the Skies*.

After fronting the blues rock band Fear Itself, Ms. McIlwaine went solo, garnering

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acclaim for her recordings. Her 1972 album *Honky Tonk Angel* showcased her dazzling style and featured a mesmerizing version of Blind Faith's *Can't Find My Way Home* that many critics call definitive. The following year, she released *We the People*, which included her song *Underground River* about Mr. Hendrix and the explosive title track, an Indian raga-style workout recorded live at Carnegie Hall with Ms. McIlwaine scat-singing – in Japanese, no less.

At a time when radio had freer formats, Ms. McIlwaine built on airplay and toured widely – including several dates with an unknown Tom Waits opening – and attracted a strong following. When *The Guitar Album* appeared in 1974, she was the only female guitarist on a compilation that included the likes of Eric Clapton, John McLaughlin, T-Bone Walker, Link Wray and Roy Buchanan. But, as Alan Niester wrote in *The Globe and Mail*, “with the advent of structured playlists and few risk-taking disc jockeys, she seemed to disappear from the spotlight.” Ms. McIlwaine recently told *Mojo*: “It’s always been a hindrance as well as an asset to be completely original.”

Ms. McIlwaine was always aware of the gender bias. When she was volunteering at the children’s hospital in Calgary, often in the cancer ward, she met Paul Brandt, who was working there. They bonded as guitarists. She told the future Canadian country star: “Well, I get called a female guitar player and I bet you get called a male nurse.”

Ms. McIlwaine decamped to Montreal in 1975. There, she recorded *The Real Ellen McIlwaine* with the Ville Émard Blues Band and made her next album, *Everybody Needs It*, with one of her biggest heroes, legendary Cream bassist Jack Bruce. One night, while appearing at the Rising Sun in Montreal, Ms. McIlwaine reconnected with an old friend, singer Lisa Hartt. “I was at a low point in my life,” Ms. Hartt recalls, “and just wanted to go out and get drunk with Ellen. But the minute I saw her I knew that wasn’t going to happen. She was absolutely glowing. Turns out, she’d gotten clean and sober. Ellen saved my life that night by introducing me to Alcoholics Anonymous.”

During the 1980s, Ms. McIlwaine settled in Toronto, befriending guitarist Jeff Healey. She performed with local musicians Terry Wilkins and Bucky Berger, embracing reggae music. For her next album, *Looking for Trouble*, she recruited and toured with bassist Kit Johnson, drummer Michelle Josef and percussionist Quammie Williams. Mr. Williams remembers her as a force of nature, always one with the music and comfortable in her own skin. “Ellen was an imposing figure,” he recalls. “She looked like a mother of 15 kids, but embraced being a woman, with eyelashes, makeup and



Ellen McIlwaine at her "day job" - driving a schoolbus

long, painted fingernails, very frilly – even her amplifier had a lace covering she’d made. She absolutely slayed on the slide guitar. She was the real deal.”

In the early 2000s, Ms. McIlwaine’s music was discovered by a new generation. Deejays sampled her work, including England’s Fatboy Slim and Japan’s Kenichi Yanai, with whom she toured Japanese dance clubs in 2002 and '05. Meanwhile, young female artists from Suzie Vinnick and Jackie Venson to acclaimed guitarists Susan Tedeschi and Jennifer Batten have begun citing her as a major influence. Bebe Buckskin, a Nêhiyaw singer-songwriter from Northern Alberta, calls her simply “the original bad-ass mama.”

Ms. Toews says that her close friend will be remembered as much for her huge heart as her immense talent. “Ellen was someone who immediately related to people from other

cultures,” Ms. Toews said. “She could talk to anyone, whether they were from Nigeria or Afghanistan – she was a bridge.” Added Ms. Toews (Ms. McIlwaine is godmother to her son, Max Austin, now a DJ in Nelson, B.C.): “Children loved Ellen and she loved them. She would have had 12 kids if she hadn’t chosen music and had the money.”

Holger Petersen, who released Ms. McIlwaine’s albums on his Stony Plain record label, spoke to her the week before she died. “She was so appreciative of the life she’d led,” Mr. Petersen said. “She was in a great place, really positive.”

With no surviving family, Ms. McIlwaine leaves behind a large circle of friends.

- Nicholas Jennings

Originally published in The Globe and Mail 30 June 2021

Sir Elton John) will be followed up with the July edition (Rudy Sarzo – who worked alongside Ozzy Osbourne, Quiet Riot, and Whitesnake) shortly after. Another point of mention is that Funasaka intentionally keeps his podcast sponsorship and ad-free with the firm belief that maintaining the creative freedom to interview artists without additional considerations is key to the show's integrity.

When asked to reveal one of the greatest changes he has observed amidst the ever-evolving technological landscape, Funasaka offered this;

"Back in the early 2000's, before everyone could simply take out their cell phones and record anything at any time, there was still a lot of apprehension or mistrust when you would turn the camera on and film an artist – getting over that was difficult. Another thing that has been great is the podcast, because in many ways, it affords more opportunity to continue interviewing artists on an ongoing basis. The challenge with that now is that there are two million podcasts out there, and I am only one of them. That really creates a whole new challenge of trying to get something new on the podcast that hasn't ever been done before – asking the questions that haven't been asked or getting an artist to open up in a way that they haven't before and keeping it unique is the challenge."

When the conversation neared its end, Mako Funasaka drove home the thread that peeked through the entire discussion with his last sentiments, saying;

"When I decided I wanted to document the Blues years ago, that was the easy part. I feel lucky to have had the support of the people I work with and my wife. I am grateful that this idea I had was met with support, and I am also thankful that the Toronto Blues Society has taken the time to show some of my past videos."

For those who would like to learn more about Talkin' Blues Productions, or to investigate videos - or the comprehensive list of people Mako has interviewed - visit www.talkinblues.com. For those who would like to learn more about the artists behind a long list of favourite Blues artists, head to that same website and follow the link to the Talkin' Blues podcast – you'll likely find both new and familiar interviews of interest there.

*-Erin McCallum – singer,
songwriter, bandleader,
instrumentalist*

Dan McKinnon

It's hard to imagine that the pandemic has only lasted the better part of the last year and a half, as it has felt closer to a decade and a half than anything. The absence of live music, and the connections with the community as a whole, has been something that I have missed more than anything since March 2020.

Since the first wave, my wife and I have been doing our best to stay busy at home, which has included marathoning a number of Netflix series and sampling some of the best takeout in our neighbourhood. But the pandemic has also provided a great opportunity to hit pause and to focus on some of the things that really matter.

Like some, I have picked up some new hobbies since the start of the pandemic. One has been meditation, with my Headspace app being something that I use daily. With our many lockdowns testing the best of us, taking care of my mental health has been a top priority, and daily meditation has been something that has helped me in a number of ways. Similarly, the other hobby I have picked up has been yoga. With gyms being closed and as someone who has always enjoyed staying active, maintaining some sort of fitness routine has been one of the things that has helped make this experience much more tolerable, especially with the absence of any gigging opportunities.

Another big project that I have been working on is my new guitar teaching business, Resonance Guitar Studio. Music education has long been a passion of mine, especially when it comes to working with youth. With Resonance Guitar Studio, I am looking forward to working with people based in East Toronto that are looking to up their game on guitar, whether it's learning how to play their favourite songs or to run their own band.

The pandemic has also given me the opportunity to write for my next project. My group is headed to the studio to record this new music in August, which will be released in early 2022. Inspired by some personal events I experienced earlier this year, the music on this recording is something that I am tremendously excited about. That's all I can say about it for now.

As hard as the last year has been, the pandemic has been a great opportunity to build resiliency in what has been a crippling time for many of us in the arts. I am hopeful that the return will not just be epic, but something that will have made this unplanned break worth it.

- Dan McKinnon





Miss Emily will be headlining the Lighthouse Blues Festival alongside Jack de Keyzer, Samantha Martin and Delta Sugar; Crystal Shawanda and lots of other great Canadian blues talent. September 10, 11, 12 in Kincardine



The Women's Blues Revue at Roy Thomson Hall has been rescheduled to Friday, November 26, 2021 and boy are we happy to share that news. Check out the new artwork from Barbara Klunder on page 2.

Tickets purchased for the original date will be honoured at the rescheduled event. RTH advises, "While connecting audiences and artists is what drives us, the health and safety of every fan, every musician, and every member of our team is profoundly our priority. We will continue to follow the advice and guidance of our public health experts and review all safety measures at the venue. Please check back before your visit in case any of the guidance has changed."

Live Music coming back: FaceBook is starting to get peppered with posts from musicians who are so happy to announce they have a real live gig, with a real live audience! Our beloved Mississippi Queen, Connie Rouble, is serving her legendary "Southern Suppers" in Hamilton, albeit outdoors with limited capacity. Harrison

cont'd on page 9



SOUTHSIDE CAFÉ
HOSTED BY CHUCK JACKSON
WITH SPECIAL GUEST CONNIE ROUBLE
THE MISSISSIPPI QUEEN



#ShuffleOn

SUNDAY JULY 4TH - 8:00PM
RAMBLE ON THE REZ'
MARK LAFORME & JOEL JOHNSON

SUNDAY JULY 11TH - 8:00PM
LADIES SING THE BLUES
SUZIE VINNICK & MISS EMILY

SUNDAY JULY 18TH - 8:00PM
PIANORAMA - A TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL FONFARA
LANCE ANDERSON & JENIE THAI

SUNDAY JULY 25TH - 8:00PM
MANNISH BOYS
JIMMY BOWSKILL & STEVE MARRINER

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*CIUT FM has moved their new blues show to the more listener-friendly **Saturday noon** slot. Calling All Blues has a rotating crew of very knowledgeable blues hosts, (left to right) **Sugar Brown** (aka Ken Kawashima, a popular performer, U of T professor and expert on pre-war blues), **Andrew Galloway**, founder and President of Electro-Fi Records, celebrating their 25th Anniversary with well over 100 releases, 6 of them Juno Award winners, **The "Blues Doctor" Julie Hill**, a popular radio host who has been a fixture in the blues community working with the TBS and the Juno Awards over the years, and **Brooke Blackburn**, guitarist for the Blackburn Brothers as well as performing in his new solo project, **The Bentley Collective**, and backing up such blues greats as Shakura S'Aida*

LOOSE BLUES NEWS *cont'd from p8*

Kennedy plays July 17. Castros in the Beaches, with Anthony Greene back at the helm after a tortuous battle with City Hall, has announced shows with Fraser Daley (July 30 5:30-7:30) and Danny Marks (July 9 & 23 5:30-7:30). The Moonshine Cafe in Oakville has announced the Durham County Poets for August 28 and Danny Brooks for September 2. Alchemy on College is featuring live jazz on their patio and the Elmo has launched a patio and menu that is worth noting. TBS board member Julian Taylor has seen his July 24 livestream from the

Horseshoe upgraded to an "actual" live show with very limited socially-distanced seating.

Festivals are popping up in Quebec and Alberta but so far the only action in Ontario is the Southside Shuffle and the Lighthouse Blues Festival, both on the week-end of September 11-13 (see our listing of Festivals on page 11)

Advocates for Ontario's live music and performing arts industries say a lack of clarity in the provincial reopening plan puts their futures at risk. Some venues have chosen a somewhat arbitrary date of Oct.1 as their

reopening target, and are booking bands and selling tickets for shows in the fall that may or may not happen. To complicate matters, apparently insurance rates have quadrupled for music venues and advocates such as the Canadian Live Music Association and the Canadian Independent Venue Coalition are trying to soften the blow.

Downchild back on the road with new players: When Downchild kicked off their 50th Anniversary Tour in Canada on June 22, 2019 at the Toronto Jazz Festival the band had no idea the world would be hit by a pandemic

cont'd on p 10

SWEET RELIEF
A TRIBUTE TO
JOEY SPAMPINATO

featuring previously
unreleased tracks by
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stepping out front
with his solo album.
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the wait.

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and their tour would come to a grinding halt mid-tour for over a year and a half.

Then, Downchild's keyboard player for over 25 years and former Lou Reed bandleader, Michael Fonfara, passed away in January 2021, which hit the band hard and left them wondering what the future held. With the long break from touring, drummer and 20-year Downchild veteran, Mike Fitzpatrick decided to retire from music to spend more time at home with family. But they're bouncing back with Jim Casson replacing Fitz and Tyler Yarema filling the very large shoes of Michael Fonfara. Casson played with Downchild from 1996 - 2001, and Tyler has been Chuck Jackson's first-call piano man for his side gigs.

Casson wrote, "It's been 20 years since my first stint in Downchild and I'm really looking forward to it" and Tyler Yarema states, "I have been a fan of the Downchild Blues Band since I was a little boy growing up in Thunder Bay, Ontario. This music has been the soundtrack of my life and the main reason I play music today. It is with this that I accept, from the incredible Jane Vasey, the great Gene Taylor, and the Master Michael Fonfara, the torch that has now been passed to me. Downchild resumes their "Never-Ending 50th Anniversary Tour" with an appearance at the Sherblues festival in July. For their full itinerary see www.downchild.com



Buddy Guy will be back for his (mostly) annual Massey Hall appearance on April 9. Tickets are now on sale at masseyhall.com. It will be a treat to see a show in the newly renovated Massey Hall. Other blues-friendly shows announced are Molly Johnson (December 17), Blackie and the Rodeo Kings with Digging Roots (Mar 2), Whitehorse (Mar 3) and Mavis Staples (May 28). The "revitalized" Massey Hall added retractable seating, new music rooms and studios, restored 100 original stained glass windows and a display of archives and exhibits.



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Drummer **Jim Casson** and keyboardist **Tyler Yarema** are the newest members of Downchild.

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- July 7-11. SherBlues and Folk, Sherbrooke. <https://sherblues.ca>
- July 9-13. Grassroots Festival, Ithaca. <https://www.grassrootsfest.org/>
- July 10-18. Harrison Festival of the Arts. <https://harrisonfestival.com/>
- July 16-August 8. Edmonton Folk Festival, Taking it to the Streets. <https://edmontonfolkfest.org>
- July 22-28. Calgary Folk Fest / Summer Serendaes. <https://www.calgaryfolkfest.com/>
- July 29-August 1. Calgary Blues Festival. <https://calgarybluesfest.com/>
- July 30-August 1, Blues et Gin, Ville de Bécancour
- August 4-8. Festival du Bout du Monde, Gaspe. <https://musiqueduboutdumonde.com>
- August 20-22. Trois Riviere Blues Festival. <http://3renblues.com/en/>
- August 20-22. Summerfolk, Owen Sound. <https://summerfolk.org/>
- September 9-12. Southside Shuffle, Port Credit. <https://www.southsideshuffle.ca/>
- Sept. 10-12. Lighthouse Blues Festival, Kincardine. <https://www.lighthousebluesfestival.com/>
- Sept. 15-19. Montreal International Jazz Festival. <https://www.montrealjazzfest.com/>
- October 8-17. New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. <https://www.nojazzfest.com/>



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ALBUM REVIEWS



Steve Marriner *Hope Dies Last* Stony Plain

On first glance at the front cover of *Hope Dies Last*, one could be excused for wondering if Steve Marriner's new solo album might be a complete departure from the raucous and righteous sounds he's been whipping up with his MonkeyJunk bandmates for more than a decade now.

Before the shrink wrap is even peeled back and discarded, the cover photo of Marriner perched on stool with an acoustic guitar on his lap suggest that he's gone full folkie or acoustic Americana for this session.

And given that Marriner did perform a few select dates playing acoustic guitars and rack harp a couple of summers ago, it could lead a few fans to believe *Hope Dies Last* is an extension of that pre-pandemic solo swing.

Not so, and not even close.

This ten-song set is a Roots-Rock recording through and through. Material, the majority of which is original, drills deeply into territory that sonically is driven by hard hitting rhythms for a couple of turns, before sliding to more melodically layered and instrumentally coloured pieces that expand the canvas on which he has previously worked.

On *Take Me To The City*, the album opener, Marriner and crew hammer home a firm percussive groove that provides a comfort zone and musical continuity for any follower and fan of MonkeyJunk.

Next up is Tom Petty's *Honey Bee*, one of two songs from outside the Marriner canon. It is a terrific choice for an intense yet controlled vocal that sits on top of an

edgy instrumental gumbo that sizzles and spits with its direct simplicity.

But with repeated listens, it is the songs with nuance and a variety of colours that begin to take ownership of this set.

Enlisting his long-time friend Samantha Martin on the heartbreak ballad *Enough* was a great call. Tattered and tired emotions are doubled down on thanks to knock out vocals by Martin who nails her portion of the lead vocal in every facet of the performance.

Uptown Lockdown is a funky and slippery instrumental with a foundation provided by a New Orleans groove that gives a joyful and inspired nod to The Meters. The core crew of Marriner, drummer Glenn Milchem, keyboard ace Jesse O'Brien, guitarist Jim Bowskill and the bass playing Darcy Yates dig a masterful deep trench of a groove while giving the piece ample room to breathe and shimmer.

Petite Danse, again Louisiana inspired, is built on the Francophone lyrics that gave Roxanne Potvin a co-write credit. Somebody get this cool groove number to the new edition of Little Feat as this takes aim at that great group's wheelhouse, while coming up with a bullseye.

Tasty pedal steel and cool shadow vocals on *Somethin' Somethin'*, Chris Caddell's slide guitar and Marriner's gritty harp on *Hear My Heart* are a few more examples of colouring that perfectly accent a turn of a phrase or put an exclamation point on a chorus.

Only on the last number, the Kelly Prescott penned *Long Way Down*, does Marriner sit on that stool with his acoustic guitar and rack harp. He settles into a stark, image laden story song of angst, loneliness, and addiction coated with empathy, all bound by what may be Marriner's finest vocal on the set. (Peter North)

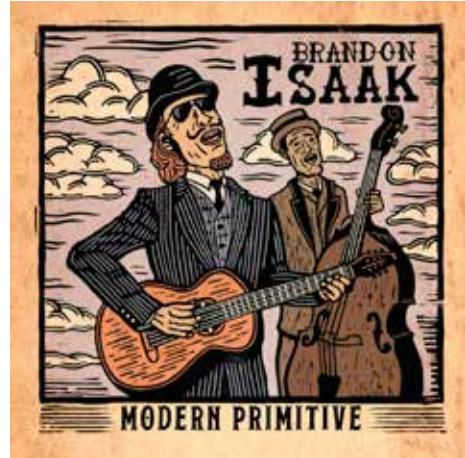
Brandon Isaak *Modern Primitive*

Brandon Isaak's new release, *Modern Primitive*, is a highly listenable, highly air-playable album of gems. The ultra talented songwriter and musician has outdone himself with 11 songs that are honest, genuine and distinctly different from one another.

The album is well titled, for this truly is a contemporary take on songs that have a sound reminiscent of the past, particularly the 1920-30s. This is enhanced by the location of the recording, captured live in one session at the penthouse suite of the Georgia Hotel in Vancouver. Reputed to be haunted, the suite was occupied by such greats as Sinatra, Nat, Bing and Elvis, and was also home to CKWX radio in the 1930s.

Aside from Isaak's impressive writing talents, he also lays down the guitar, lap steel, banjo, harmonica, and drum tracks, along with some mighty fine vocals. Joining him is his long time musical partner, upright bassist, Keith Picot, who lends his solid, masterful sound to the bottom end. Somehow the two of them sound like a full ensemble, their blended sound tight, honed and hand in glove.

The songs are short and to the point, with the odd solo adding sparkle but not missed in tracks sans solos. Clean, honest

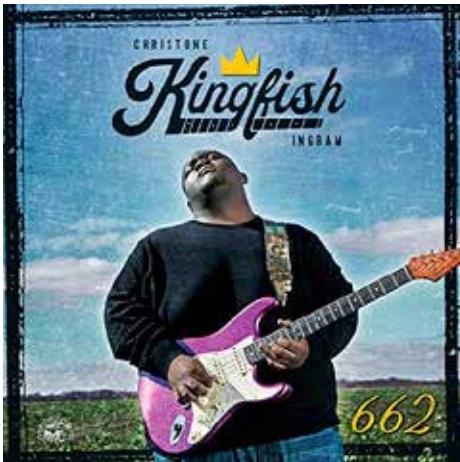


and deeply musical, each track satisfies, with different tempos and feels holding the listener's attention.

"Lost Love and Loose Women" features a lazy, relaxed groove, sitting in the pocket just behind the beat, Isaak's brushes gently moving the time. Piano and guitar lay down the rhythm while the lap steel sings. "Valentine's Blues" swings hard, with the vocal copying the terrific guitar solo lines for a few bars on this melancholy but not sad track. It would be so easy to imitate vocally, but there's no affectation anywhere on this album, just true blue, understated beauty.

"Six Little Letters" shines with a bright tempo shuffle, a catchy melody and guitar solo creating an earworm and the six little letters, L O V E Y O U, bringing a smile. "Walk That Road Alone", a rolling, Gospel take, features one of the few vocal harmonies and a sublime lap slide solo and the reminder, "you gonna reap what you sow."

This is an album you'll want on your car stereo, playing in the background while entertaining dinner guests, while sitting on your sofa sipping a beverage, or on the stereo on Sunday morning to greet the day... in other words, any time, all the time. Recommended. (Cindy McLeod)



Christone "Kingfish" Ingram 662
Alligator Records

There's a new guitar hero on the horizon — Christone "Kingfish" Ingram. His first album, *Kingfish*, held at number one on the *Billboard Blues Chart* for 91 weeks and was nominated for a Grammy Award. *Rolling Stone* wrote, "Kingfish is one of the most exciting young guitarists in years, with a sound that encompasses B.B. King, Jimi Hendrix and Prince." *GuitarWorld* declared him "the future of the blues." All this for a twenty-two-year-old from Clarksdale, Mississippi, the cradle where so much of that music was born.

After a slew of awards and a hectic touring schedule, Ingram was kept close to home by the covid pandemic, where he used the time to co-write his next album, *662*, with award-winning producer, songwriter and musician Tom Hambridge, the producer and drummer for this CD. This time out, with more experience under his belt, Kingfish looks inward to deliver a recording that's more personal, more autobiographical than his last. In fact, 662 is the area code for the Clarksdale region, Ingram's recognition of the culture that nurtured him.

This album is a tour de force of transcendent guitar and soul-drenched vocals, combined with Ingram's songwriting skill. He rocks out in the title track, leaving no doubt of this young man's musical maturity as the lyrics introduce us to his growing up in the Delta. Then just when we think the ride is over, he rips into a breathtaking, red-hot guitar solo. He reins in the pace but maintains the voltage for "She Calls Me Kingfish," another self-portrayal dispatched with beefy vocals and searing guitar that swelter like the Mississippi heat. "Long Distance Woman" struts in with a heavy rhythm punctuated with blazing guitar solos.

Kingfish lingers awhile as he flaunts his jazz artistry in "Another Life Goes By," his introspective take on an environment of neglect and violence. He then resumes

a full-on onslaught with the hard-driving "Not Gonna Lie," professing his responsibility for perpetuating the blues, accentuating it with a savage, distorted-guitar solo. "Too Young to Remember" is a funk-ed-up number channeling into the old-time blues scene of moonshine and juke joints, paying tribute to the older generations of blues artists he emulates.

Kingfish strikes a melancholy tone with exquisite acoustic guitar and sorrow-laced vocals in the ethereal "You're Already Gone." "My Bad" erupts with wailing guitar, as he laments past thoughtlessness. With a nod to Booker T. & the MGs, Joe Simon and Sam Cooke, accompanied by horns, "That's All It Takes" drips with soul through Ingram's luminous guitar and heartrending voice. That's contrasted with the following "I Got to See You," a peppy jive number that grandstands his rock 'n' roll chops.

Kingfish transitions to a gorgeous, slow-simmering blues with "Your Time Is Gonna Come," fueled with ravishing guitar and embellished by Marty Sammon's fine piano backing. "That's What You Do" gets personal again as Ingram reflects on his travails as a devoted blues musician. In "Something in the Dirt," he ponders the legacy of the music that germinates in the Delta earth, as he stands on the shoulders of those greats who came before him. His guitar is incandescent here as he trades solos with Sammon's tasteful piano. *662* concludes with a bonus track, "Rock & Roll," an impassioned eulogy to his mother, Princess Latrell "Pride" Ingram, who passed away in late 2019. Through his voice and instrument, Kingfish eloquently expresses gratitude to the person who sacrificed for his future. It's a profound tribute, concluding with one perfect, elegant note on his guitar.

Christone "Kingfish" Ingram made a pledge to his mentor Buddy Guy to keep the blues alive, and he masterfully demonstrates he's up to the task. *662* is an album not to be missed. (Sandra B. Tooze)

Alligator Records – 50 Years of Genuine Houserockin' Blues Various Artists Alligator Records

When Bruce Iglauer started Alligator records in a neighbourhood on the south side of Chicago back in 1970, little did he realize the giant impact his tiny label would have on the world of blues. In the years since, the label would release a compilation called *Genuine Houserockin' Music* every 5 years, that I would snap

up as soon as I could get my hot little hands on it. It all started when Bruce used his savings to finance a recording by his favorite windy city blues band, Hound Dog Taylor & The Houserockers. It was that album that created the necessity of the label, so it is only fitting that the first cut on this 50th anniversary compilation is from that classic band.

This new collection, 50 years in the making, is a powerful and lasting tribute to all the artists who have graced the label over the last five decades. But this collection is more than just a set of songs by various artists. It is a labour of love showcasing a who's who of blues, past, present and future. Many of the artists featured are gone now, lost to the mists of time, and yet their music lives on. Past legends like Koko Taylor, James Cotton, Big Walter Horton, Johnny Winter and Luther Allison all recorded under the Alligator banner and left a legacy



of music unlike any other. It is only fitting that they are all part of this release, respect paid for music that shook the world.

Present artists are well represented on this album with cuts from Marcia Ball, Tommy Castro & The Painkillers, Elvin Bishop & Charlie Musselwhite, Coco Montoya, Rick Estrin & The Nightcats, JJ Grey & Mofro and Tinsley Ellis. They are a telling line up of power players in modern blues, all of whom have been part of the Alligator family. The future is bright with artists like Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, Shemekia Copeland, Curtis Salgado, Selwyn Birchwood and Toronzo Cannon, all breaking new ground as part of the Alligator family. They are the vanguard, standing on the shoulders of giants, bringing the blues into the 21st century.

If you are new to the blues, and are looking for a guide, a sign post to brilliant blues from the last 50 years, I highly recommend this collection. Bring it home, put it on the player, and let your soul run free through 50 years of Genuine Houserockin' Music. (Terry Parsons)



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Blues Bands Stay Tuned! The TBS Talent Search will be taking place this summer one way or another so it's time to start planning to take part in this launchpad event that has been a great leg up for many blues artists over the years. Deadlines and details to be announced shortly.

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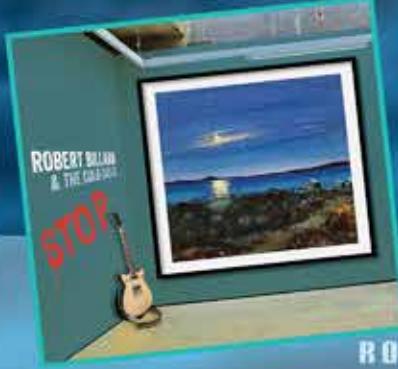
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