

Pop Talk: Clapton is older, happier and presumably wiser

by *George_Varga*

It's been 39 years since Eric Clapton and his pioneering power-trio Cream recorded "Sitting on Top of the World," a 1920s blues chestnut by Sam Chatmon. But it's only been in this decade that the song's title has really started to ring true for this legendary English musician and three-time Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee.

ERIC CLAPTON - Guitarist and singer Eric Clapton says he recently realized a long-held musical dream by recording 'The Road to Escondido' with J.J. Cale. CNS Photo. Since marrying Melia McEnery, 30, an American graphic artist, in early 2002, Clapton, 61, has become the father of three girls: Julie Rose, 5; Ella Mae, 4; and Sophie, 2. He has also become calm, happy and settled after years of serial womanizing and potentially fatal drug and alcohol abuse.

"I've finally landed on my feet in a situation where there is no greener grass," Clapton affirmed in a late-2005 interview. "I always found myself on the lookout for something else. Wherever I was, the better party was always down the road; I didn't know what was going on, but I knew it wasn't this.

"I finally found the party - I'm actually at the party - so even at its most quiet and dire moments, it's still the best place to be."

More recently, the guitarist and singer realized a long-held musical dream by recording "The Road to Escondido," his first album with J.J. Cale.

Released last year, "Escondido" represents the long overdue culmination of a mutual admiration society between these two veteran musicians. Its roots date back to 1970, when Clapton scored a Top 20 hit with his reverent version of Cale's "After Midnight." But the two only performed together twice before joining forces to make "Escondido" in 2005.

"The object of most of my work has been to raise it above my standard. And so, you know, I never think I'll be as good as the people I look up to. J.J. is pretty close to the ideal focus for that," Clapton noted.

Clapton's current world tour, which finds him playing new and old songs and revisiting the classic 1970 album he made as a member of Derek & The Dominos, has been hailed as one of his best ever. And his profile, on records and DVDs, seems higher than ever.

Last year, Clapton performed on new albums by Jerry Lee Lewis, Sam Moore, Tony Joe White, Robert Randolph and Japan's Hiroshi Fujiwara. He was also featured on reissues and compilation releases by Buddy Guy, Chuck Berry, John Lee Hooker, George Harrison, John Mayall and Blind Faith (the rock supergroup that teamed him with Steve Winwood, Ginger Baker and Rick Grech for one album and an ill-fated tour in 1969).

On his current tour, Clapton is accompanied by an all-star sextet featuring young Allman Brothers guitar ace Derek Trucks, bassist Willie Weeks and drummer Steve Jordan. Asked what qualities he seeks in his bandmates, Clapton said:

"What I need to find in a player is humility above all, the ability to listen. All the great players I've ever been with, and have wanted to play with for any length of time, have had that.

"I think it's acquired, I think it's a learned quality. I think it's quite possible to go through life just thinking that you're the only person there. I'm constantly shocked by how many people don't really study music, who are in the (music) business. I think we all ought to be musicologists, to a certain extent, just to know the history of the music."

Clapton made his recording debut with The Yardbirds in early 1964, after playing in the obscure British R&B bands The Roosters and Casey Jones & The Engineers. Dismayed by The Yardbirds' decision to pursue a more pop-oriented direction, he quit in 1965 and joined John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. It was then that his impassioned guitar work - which he modeled after the work of such icons as B.B. King and Buddy Guy - led his rabid fans to paint graffiti all over London proclaiming "Clapton is God."

International stardom came after he co-founded Cream in 1966, a band whose extended improvisations and bold approach to fusing blues and rock set a new standard.

Yet, while he has been one of the most popular, acclaimed and prolific musicians in contemporary music for the past 40 years, Clapton is perhaps his own toughest critic.

"It's never good enough for me," he said of his music. "I don't think I've ever walked away from anything and said: 'That's as good as it can be.' I much prefer listening to (my) work in retrospect, 10 years later. ...

"When I'm making a record, we're trying to preserve the perspective of the piece - that's the most important prerogative. On stage I have a much more open approach to it; it can go anywhere and I think it needs to go anywhere. When the audience is sitting in front of you, it doesn't show any respect to them to confine it like the record. And that's the point, on stage, where we become musicians, when we learn to play off the songs and off each other."

Copley News Service

Banded together

You may not recognize all the names of Eric Clapton's band members, but you've probably heard them before. Here's a look at who's who in his group:

Derek Trucks: The guitar-playing nephew of Allman Brothers' drummer Butch Trucks, Derek Trucks was 19 when he joined the Allman Brothers in 1999 after playing with Bob Dylan and Buddy Guy. His virtuosity and musical maturity are rare in musicians of any age.

Suggested album: The Allman Brothers, "Hitting the Note" (Sanctuary, 2003)

Willie Weeks: A top bassist since the 1960s, Weeks first gained attention working with R&B vocal great Donny Hathaway. He has since collaborated with David Bowie, the Rolling Stones, George Harrison, Alicia Keys and many more. Clapton ranks him as one of the world's "top three" bassists.

Suggested album: "Donny Hathaway Live" (1972, Atlantic)

Steve Jordan: This ace drummer was still a teenager when he joined Stevie Wonder's band. After touring with the Blues Brothers, he became the house drummer on TV's "Late Night With David Letterman." He has played with everyone from Keith Richards and John Mayer to jazz greats Sonny Rollins and John Scofield.

Suggested album: John Scofield, "Who's to Know?" (1979, Arista/Novus)

Doyle Bramhall II: The son of ex-Stevie Ray Vaughan drummer Doyle Bramhall, this Texas guitar-slinger counts B.B. King, Roger Waters and Meshell Ndegocello among his former employers. He joined Clapton's studio band in 2000 and toured as his opening act a year later.

Suggested album: Doyle Bramhall II & Smokestack "Welcome" (RCA, 2001)

Chris Stainton: As an original member of Joe Cocker's Grease Band, this English keyboardist performed at the Woodstock Festival in 1969. His other credits include albums with The Who, Spooky Tooth, Marianne Faithfull and jazz organ great Jimmy Smith.

Suggested album: Joe Cocker, "With a Little Help From My Friends" (A&M, 1969)

Tim Carmon: A graduate of Washington, D.C.'s Duke Ellington School of the Arts, this versatile keyboardist has worked with Mary J. Blige, Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan and Herbie Hancock. He is featured on the recent "Dreamgirls" soundtrack album.

Suggested album: B.B. King & Eric Clapton, "Riding With the King" (Reprise, 2000)

Backing tracks from the master

Many rock fans are familiar with Eric Clapton's epic solos on his recordings of "Crossroads," "Sunshine of Your Love," "White Room," "Sea of Joy," "Layla" and other classic songs. Many guitarists have learned those same solos note-for-note.

But what about Clapton's work on his less-known recordings, or on albums by other artists? Here are some standout examples of his guitar prowess that are well worth seeking out:

"Steppin' Out": A choice cut from his first album with English blues king John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers, which Clapton first recorded with the band Powerhouse and later reprised with Cream.

Find it on: "What's Shakin'" (Elektra, 1966); "John Mayall Bluesbreakers With Eric Clapton" (Polydor, 1966); "Live Cream, Vol. 2" (Polydor, 1972)

"Good to Me As I Am to You": Aretha Franklin soars on this slow blues, accented by Clapton's six-string filigrees.

Find it on: "Lady Soul" (Atlantic, 1968)

"Go Back Home": Clapton plays rough and dirty on this song with Stephen Stills.

Find it on: "Stephen Stills" (Atlantic, 1970)

"Rockin' Daddy": By backing blues giant Howlin' Wolf, Clapton assumed the role of one of his guitar idols, Hubert Sumlin.

Find it on: "The London Howlin' Wolf Sessions" (Chess, 1971)

"Teasin'": R&B sax great King Curtis was a monster player, but Clapton holds his own on this rollicking tune from Curtis' "Get Ready" album.

Find it on: "The History of Eric Clapton" (Atco, 1972)

"I'm Your Spiritual Breadman": Clapton is credited as "Sir Cedric Clayton" on this upbeat song by the bluesy English cult band Ashton, Gardner & Dyke.

Find it on: "The Worst of Ashton, Gardner & Dyke" (Repertoire, 1994)

"Couldn't Love You More": This beguiling ballad by top Scottish singer-songwriter John Martyn features Clapton playing at his most sensitive.

Find it on: "Glorious Fool" (WEA, 1981)

"'Cause We've Ended As Lovers": On which former Yardbirds' guitarists Clapton and Jeff Beck duet with breathtaking results on Stevie Wonder's luminous ballad at a London benefit concert.

Find it on: "The Secret Policeman's Other Ball" (WEA/Rhino, 1982)

"Hall Light": Clapton is a longtime friend of San Diego-bred singer-songwriter Stephen Bishop, whose new album, "Saudade," he guests on. But this earlier song about Bishop's childhood here is their finest collaboration.

Find it on: "Bowling in Paris" (Atlantic, 1989)

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