

Y'know Presley, Perkins, Orbison, Jerry Lee? Then give this man a thought

Mike Flood Page

Offstage Dr Ross is a casual, easygoing guy. He has lived and played the blues for most of his 48 years. His style is the product of his wanderings, from his early association with Willie Love's Silver Kings down South in Mississippi to the urban blues of Detroit and Chicago. White music owes a great debt to him. The Cream made one of his compositions, 'Badge', famous. But more importantly, it was his hits on Sam Phillips' Sun label that enabled Phillips to launch Presley, Perkins, Orbison and Jerry Lee Lewis. He knew B. B. King when the latter was still a disc jockey and he picked up many of his songs first hand from such great performers as the original Sonny Boy Williamson. These days he is a family man, gigging two or three nights a week around his home of Flint Michigan, and working the day shift at General Motors. Thanks to Jim Simpson's Big Bear Blues, who are responsible for many of the bluesmen currently reaching these shores, British audiences have had ample opportunity over the past twelve months to hear the good Doctor live presenting the blues in his own pungent style.

On a grisly day early in December last year I dropped in to Vic Keary's Chalk Farm Studios to hear the Doc lay down tracks for his second album for Big Bear. Jim Simpson was supervising thru a flu-induced haze. Vic Keary wasn't looking much better, having been up till 3 a.m. working with a reggae band, and then in again at 9 a.m. to bleep out some of the more suggestive parts on some Prince Buster tapes. Chalk Farm Studios, the home of British Reggae, is where Trojan record most of their stuff, where Dandy Livingstone used to be an engineer, where Jim Simpson currently records much of his Big Bear Blues.

In the studio, the lengthy raps and reminiscences the Doc delivers on stage are absent, from the moment that the tapes begin to roll his casual manner drops away as his voice assumes a compelling urgency and bites into a fresh interpretation of: 'Baby Please Don't Go.' The majority of his material is familiar: 'Trouble in Mind', 'My Mama Done Told Me', 'It seems like a dream to me'. But the Doc refashions them in his own peculiar style. During the course of a ten hour session he knocked out several solo numbers with voice and harp at a brisk pace, his little box of harmonicas, a scribbled playlist, and a double scotch on the chair in front of him. He followed these by some one man band tracks in which he displays an unexpected versatility on guitar and percussion. One of the best pieces of the day was a stunning bottleneck solo that finished off the session at 11 p.m.

Late in the afternoon he was joined by the Sunflower Blues Band, comprising, on this occasion, Pat Grover guitar, John Hunt drums, and the old firm of Bob Hall and Bob Brunning on piano and Bass for some hard rocking blues with more of a boogie flavour. Like many a good bluesman the Doc is not one to be bound by the rigid formula of a twelve bar, he likes to mess it around a little. At one point Bob Brunning came into the control booth to complain with an exasperated look on his face: "He's a killer to follow, he plays the chorus different each time!" Bob Hall on the other hand seemed to strike up a rapport with the Doc that produced some of the finest moments of the day.

The evening saw a small crowd of friends, press and people from the record company squeeze themselves into the cramped studio to get a little of the Doctor healing the disease. The booze flowed freely and the Doc soon won over an initially sceptical crowd with a powerful version of Arthur Crudup's 'Alright Mama', Getting into the party spirit the Doc was soon treating the audience to his thoughts, interspersing his numbers with shouts of "Dr Ross, Right on!" In the back room sat Vic wrapped around some strong drink and getting it all on tape.

By this time Jim Simpson was visibly the worse for the flu and looked to be the only person not enjoying himself, This wouldn't do for Doctor Isiah Ross, no sir! He announced that he was going to cure that sickly bear, right now! and proceeded to deliver a rambling off the cuff talking blues about Big Jim's illness, Polydor Records and the train journey that morning. It was the hit of the evening and proved once again that the blues as she is spoke is no preserve for the antiquarians and archivists but a living and growing tradition. By the time the last number was over, we'd sunk £30 worth of booze, clocked up ten hours of studio time, and heard more good music than would fill two good albums. Who said the blues was dead?

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