

MIKE VERNON OF BLUE HORIZON RECORDS, NOW IN THE USA ON A BLUES HUNTING EXPEDITION, WRITES ABOUT THE FIRST LEG OF HIS TRIP

Blueshound on my trail - part one (Melody Maker, 2 August 1969, p.12)

THE first ten days of my visit to the States were, I admit, most frustrating.

After fighting with the elements — and nearly losing — I was met by the problem of how to get to Newport, Rhode Island, under my own steam. Fortunately, I managed to catch a lift with Chris Wright and Jethro Tull.

Thousands flocked to the New England port to witness fine jazz, some blues and too much heavy underground. The exponents of the latter fared poorly, while B.B King and Johnny Winter were popular.

B.B., who jammed with Winter and proved who was boss, has reorganised his band though it is still under the leadership of drummer Sonny Freeman. If King's performance suffered it was because of the lack of rehearsal time with the new outfit.

Back in New York, having caught a ride in the back of King's coach I called Sid Selby, alias Guitar Crusher, on the Monday morning to organise his record sessions. I then had to call "Smokey Hogg" (the real Hogg died some years ago) to trace Benny Ferguson and Washboard Willie.

Dear old Smokey said Willie was dead and he hadn't seen Benny in ten years. In fact Ferguson had played guitar for me in person six months earlier in my New York office, and had also spoken to Willie' then on the 'phone.

But, as I had to leave for Los Angeles the next morning, I left it to Sid and Jimmy Spurill (another guitarist living in Brooklyn) to get the musicians together

That Monday night I went to Steve Paul's Scene to see Dr John (Mac Rebennack). It was a remarkable show, and Mac proved to be a finer blues guitarist than I had guessed—and he also plays piano and organ.

Arriving in Los Angeles I found most of the people that I wanted to speak to were out of town, I managed to talk with T-Bone Walker, however, and also to tenorist/arranger Maxwell Davis who for many years worked for Joe and Saul Bihari at Modern Records.

Maxwell told me things were pretty quiet in LA nowadays. The Ash Grove a coffee bar which regularly booked blues acts, burned down; and that was it, save for a few small outfits working in the Watts area.

Then I met blues buff Frank Scott, now resident in the city. He was able to furnish me with many an interesting address and phone number, as did Pete Welding and David Evans with whom I spent a whole day ploughing through tapes and discs.

In this way, I am now in touch with Slim Green, Pee Wee Crayton, Elmon Mickle (Drifting Slim) and John Hogg, cousin of the real Andrew "Smokey " Hogg. I am hoping to rehearse Slim Green's band this week down on South Broadway, and expect to hear some good things from it.

But as I close this first newsletter, my visions of meeting, hearing, and perhaps recording the great Johnny Heartsman fade. Some months ago, as I hear it, from these parts to Northern Texas.

Blueshound on my trail - part two Blues at the Golden Bear (Melody Maker, 9 August 1969, p.10)

A SMALL but enthusiastic audience came to see Charley Musselwhite and George Smith, and their respective bands, on the opening night of their week's stint at the Golden Bear,. Huntingdon Beach, Los Angeles.

Both artists scored well, though Charley's outfit suffered from lack of rehearsal. They had been together only ten days, and on the road for most of that time.

The line-up is Louis Myers (lead gtr), Fred Roulet (steel gtr), Skip Rose (pno), Jack Myers (bass), Fred Below (drs) and Charley on harmonica and doing most of the vocals

Naturally enough, much of their material was of a traditional nature: " Little By Little," "Sweet Little Angel" (Louis Myers singing), and a number of instrumentals in Little Walter vein.

Louis Myers, playing both rhythm and lead parts, brought back flashing memories of those .Checker sides he made with the late Walter Jacobs. He played many familiar licks with authority and, considering that he's basically a rhythm player, his solo work reached a high standard.

On the Chicago scene I'd say that Eddie Taylor must be his greatest rival. And Roulet can have but a handful of competitors.

He may find himself at odds with this outfit in the future. But for now his imaginative phrasing on slide steel (it sits on his lap) lends much bite to the group.

He is, for want of a fuller description, a percussive player (Roulet's work can best be heard on "Puppy Howl Blues" by Big Moose John Walker on the Chicago-based Blues label),

Jack Myers, late Buddy Guy band and Freddie Below handle things well—Freddie being still one of the all-time "greats." As for Musselwhite, his styling has been helped by the recent transition from a white back-up band to a Negro one.

He is still strongly rooted in the Chicago traditions, but with further working experience a distinctive style should evolve. He was always a good harpman — and he's better now.

There are plans for Musselwhite to cut a new all um soon, and he says he v ants to visit Britain. His band, headed by Rose, the only other white member, is undoubtedly one of the finest on the road today.

Imagine my surprise when, returning to my seat to catch George Smith's set, my eyes rested on a bunch of youthful white musicians (all locals, it transpired) who were laying it down unlike any British band I've ever heard.

The exceptional drummer is named Dick Innes, and the rest of Smith's personnel is Jerry Smith (bass), Buddy Reed and Greg Schaeffer (gtrs) and Rod Piazza (vocals and harmonica).

Piazza worked a little too zealously for my liking but certainly showed a masterful technique on harp, his chromatic work was a highlight of the evening. But so was George Smith's own performance on a whole range of harps—all keys and sizes.

He spent some five minutes rapping the audience about nothing in particular and then jumped into an instrumental reminiscent of his "Blues In The Dark."

Both guitarists took solos; both know just where they're at. This proved to be the format for the remainder of Smith's all-too-short act. His rendition of "Summertime" as an instrumental was a crowd-winner. It is scheduled for release soon as a BluesWay single.

George Smith, born in Cary, Illinois fifty-odd years ago, assumes the status of benefactor and guardian to his whole band.

Wearing a plaid shirt and brimmed hat, "Little George" (he's over six feet tall!) shuffles across stage and into the audience, he pulls his band up to level with a hand-gesture and then down to almost a whisper, and they obey instinctively.

All praise to his musicians and especially to Schaeffer who at fourteen years of age, must be one of the brightest blues hopes for a long while

I'll close this week by saying thank you to Charley and George for keeping the music and so many memories alive.

Blueshound on my trail - part three Down In Memphis (Melody Maker, 23 August 1969, p.10)

MY VISIT to Memphis proved to be a wet one. With only a three-day stay in the city I had little chance to visit outlying areas in Mississippi and Arkansas as I had hoped.

But Joe Coughi, head of Hi Records, was celebrating his tenth year of association with London Records of New York, and I was lucky enough to be one of his guests.

A cabaret featuring some of his leading artists proved entertaining, although naturally there was little of real blues interest. However lengthy discussions with Willie Mitchell and Bowlegs Miller turned up many names that appear in Blues Records 1945-68, also some that don't.

Big Amos Patton is living on the outskirts of the city but there were no plans to record him again that I -know of. He has had two singles out on Hi, " He Won't Bite Me Twice " and "Going To Vietnam" - one of the relatively few modern war-time blues on record. Coughi has another interesting artist in Big Lucky, who sounds not unlike Jimmy Reed.

Mitchell and I talked of the prospects of making some downhome albums around the end of the year: they look good. Patton and Lucky would be recorded; others mentioned included Don Hines, Ironing board Sam, Woodrow Adams and Willie Cobbs — all local musicians (Cobbs is from Stuttgart, Arkansas). These albums would eventually be released on Hi and, in this country, London American.

We all took an evening boat ride down the Mississippi. Unfortunately, the elderly jug band we had been promised was replaced by a white Dixieland group. I returned to Los Angeles having achieved a little, but less than I'd hoped.

My trip to Jackson, Miss. had to be postponed as I could get neither the transport nor the guide assistance I'd hoped for. So I went looking in California.

Working at Sunset Sound Studios with Johnny Almond and Leonard Feather, I met engineer Bill Lazerus who, it transpired was at Modern Records for many years supplying the Biharis with most of B.B. King's and Lowell Fulson's records.

Not only did Bill work in the control room there he also played drums on many of the dates. A really remarkable and genuine character, Bill seems to know most of the musicians in town.

We agreed it was a pity that performers like Johnny Otis, Willie Garland, Mary Love, Jackie Day, Vernon Garrett, Pee Wee Crayton Z.Z. Hill and a host o; others were not being recorded. We vowed to try and rectify the situation.

One other meeting I had there was with Shakey Jake (James Harris). We talked in his apartment for some hours about his work and hopes for the future. He played me some interesting dubs, too, that he had made with Eddie Taylor a few years ago—titles not listed in any publication.

Jake is a great person and we parted with a good understanding. Much should be forthcoming over the next 12 months as a result of the meeting.

In closing this account of my U.S. trip I find it hard to assess just what was achieved this time. I was unable to meet many artists I'd wanted to talk to or record — and this was disappointing.

There are plenty of blues enthusiasts in the Los Angeles area, but few have any idea of who is living or working locally. And they don't seem keen on doing anything about it, either.

It's no wonder there are so few blues records being made and marketed in California — in the commercial market that is because there are still some small Negro concerns active in this field.

Kent are no longer in the running. But they do, incidentally, have available a superb album of Johnny Otis, featuring his 14-year old son, Shuggie. Only Arhoolie, World Pacific and Blue Thumb are active.

The artists are there though, and I made enough contacts on this trip to make another possible. I'll probably go back in late November and cut four or five albums.

In addition, Blue Horizon may lease material from Johnny Vincent's Ace catalogue, just reactivated and Skippy White's Boston-based Bluestown label. The latter has such excellent country artists as Guitar Nubbitt and Alabama Watson.

To finish, then, I must say a huge "thank you" to Gerry Hoff out there in LA — I could have done nothing without his help — and also thank the MM and its readers for coming along with me.