

INTERVIEW

-Interview/Review: Kyle Christen

The title of this one made me wonder a little bit, but here's a release that will just knock you out. Long-time Bluesman Mick Kolassa has been putting out recordings for about ten years, but his latest "Wooden Music", which was just released a couple weeks ago, hits home with nary an electric guitar involved. It's not the first all acoustic album he's done, and hopefully there's more to come. "Michississippi Mick" earned his moniker as though he now lives in Memphis, he was born in Michigan, and also lived in Mississippi for three decades. No acoustic instruments were harmed in the making of this CD! Mick has assembled a familiar crew of musicians to help out, plus a couple curve balls to keep you on the edge. Out of 11 tunes, only one is a cover, so stand up, sit down, or get in your car and enjoy it. First up is "Educated By The Blues," about a guy who was expected to go to college, since he was told it's the only way to get ahead in life. But nothing taught him like that sweet "devil sound," and he's learning new things every day! Producer/guitarist Jeff Jensen plus Rick Steff on piano make this a fun shuffle. Guest stars here are Doug McLeod on slide, and Beale Street star Vince Johnson on the harp. Mick name drops that Wolf "taught him to howl," but also mentions Sonny Boy, Jr. Kimbrough, Muddy, and Robert Johnson. That's enough to grab your interest. Some real low down guitars adorn "You Gotta Pay The Price." This is a tune about working men and women like you and me. More of Doug McLeod, and Rick, who doubles on accordion, laying it down in the background. Two songs in, and I'm hooked on this "Wooden Music."



BMM was honored to speak with Mick by phone, and, while abbreviated due to space constrictions, here it is. As usual, I love it, you'll love it, but what does Mick think of it ?
"I'm especially proud of this one for a number of reasons. In putting it together, we wanted people to know that a totally acoustic album can still have a full sound. You think "acoustic album," and in between you and me, most folks think just an old white guy playing a Resonator guitar, right? I've done 3) other acoustic albums, and we wanted to show how full and rich this music can be. There were some really fun challenges with this one. On the song "Hurt People, I'd put a B3 on it in a minute, but have yet to find an acoustic B3. That's why we brought in Reba Russell and Susan Marshall to do the "ooohhss" and aaahhss" to cover that sound." Next one you'll like is "Sugar In Your Grits," which Mick starts off "Traditions get trampled when new folks come around, they might not know where something fits, maybe it's progress, or maybe it's wrong, to put sugar in your grits." (Mick informed me that's a common mistake made by visiting Northerners). The secret weapon on this one is Bob Corritore on the Harp, who has over two dozen of his own releases, and upwards of a hundred appearances on recordings by other blues performers. When artists ask you to play with them that many times, you, the listener can't go wrong! More of Mick's poetry....." Muddy never played a 20 minute solo, Wolf didn't use a pedal board, Willie Dixon told a story with everyone of his songs, do lyrics even matter any more?" The excellent section of Carl Casperson on upright bass and drummer Tom Lonardo got the backing through this one and also every other cut.

"Hurt People" starts off as more traditional acoustic blues, a story about a gal who was sad, lonely, and had no

love, as all she'd ever learned to do was hate. Rick is at his best on the 88's, while the Memphis legends mentioned earlier, Susan Marshall and Reba Russell provide soulful, mournful backing vocals. Mick and Jeff continue to lay down the wooden guitars. The lyrics teach a lesson learned, and this song is good stuff. Slowing it down, just a little, is "Memphis Wood." Great guitars (again), and more of Rick's accordion. Maybe my favorite track? Why? Because I know we have some Tas Cru fans out there, and he's worked with Mick many times before, here adding his guitar to a song about guitars made out of wood, and from where else? Memphis! Very cool tune. I asked Mick to talk about it. *"You can tell from this one that I'm really fond of the sound of an acoustic guitar. I started playing around with that term, and the 1st line is the 1st phrase from 'Norwegian Wood.' I didn't pattern this one after the Beatles, but it starts, 'I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me.' During the last IBC here in Memphis, Tas showed up and was going to stay with me for a few days. I played him a rough demo, and he reached over for my guitar, and started playing this beautiful solo. I said 'You are now going to be on the record! To have someone like Tas, who just loves music.....a lot of musicians, it's their job, but I'm so thankful to play with people like him. This is my love song to acoustic guitars.' Just the basic band on 'If Life Was Fair,' which includes some nice honky-tonk blues piano from Rick. This would be a great one to see live. It'll make you feel like you're sitting in some side street blues dive with your friends, on a rainy night, enjoying the music and a few Old Style's. 'Over My Shoulder' is upbeat, 'I can't live in the yesterday with tomorrow just waiting for me. You can spend your time looking at the past, complaining it's not here no more.' A real forward looking kind of guy. The acoustic guitars sound damn near electric, and more terrific input from the core band. Really nice groove that compliments the words.*

On the press release, Mick mentioned he wanted to really craft the songs, and not just play them. I asked him to expand on that. *"By putting a limit on myself, like only acoustic, you have to be more creative. Jeff and I spent hours and hours finding the right instruments, going through the songs, and deciding what keys, what sound, and what tempo I wanted on each cut. I wanted every tune to sound as big as it could be. There's more drums on this one from Tom Lonardo. Tom was with me on my last release, but he was restrained. This time, we just let him play. Like the song 'If I Told You,' it opens with his drums, which you're not expecting. The sheer pleasure of sharing Vince Johnson on harmonica. He's a national treasure, and plays 5 nights a week on Beale Street. I'm lucky to have friends like this. I want to be true to the blues, and not what older white guys want it to be."*

The guitar chords leading in to "One Hit Wonder" are then joined by the whole cookin' band is really good stuff. And the lyrics are worth the price of admission alone. I'll leave this one for you to check out on your own, and you'll love it. I'm purely guessing, of course, that there's a number of BMM readers (and maybe a couple writers) who are "One Hit Wonders" in their own right. Check it out! To finish up is the country/blues infused southern "Mississippi style fun of "Gas Station Sushi." "Girl you remind me of gas station sushi, you sure seemed like a good idea at the time, but it didn't take me long to find out I was wrong." Any of you remember being in elementary school during the mid 1960's? The instrument that any of us could play instantly? Well, just for you, on this final cut, Mick whips out the Kazoo! What a great end to this excellent disc.

I asked Mick what is next for him? *"I'll be playing in Three Rivers, Michigan on August 6th, the Sean Costello fundraiser in Peoria the night before the Blues Blast Awards (Sept. 22), and the Oxford, Miss. Blues Fest (Oct. 14th). I did a show here with Doug MacLeod and Jeff Jensen in June called 'Blues Free For All.' We'd like to do those quarterly in Memphis, and add some other artists. I also put out 3) CD's last year, which is great except when it's 'Hey Mick! Let's talk about your new album' and I'm like 'Great! Which one?' I also want to get back playing live in Europe, which I miss, and at some point, start on the next album, which will be my 15th."*

For being a real-deal bluesman, Mick has quite the background, including a Ph.D in Pharmaceutical Marketing from Ole Miss University, is the former CEO of Medical Marketing Economics, and also authored a book titled "The Strategic Pricing Of Pharmaceuticals." But that's maybe for another time. His albums are a true labor of love, as 100% of the net proceeds from all his releases go to the Blues Foundation, split between the HART Fund and Generation Blues, both very worthy causes. The way Mick has put these songs together, along with Jeff's production, have come together to form a huge sound. It's full, certainly not skinny, and it's hard to believe that there were no electric instruments used at all, because on many cuts, you'd swear there were. And a bunch of friends adding in their musicianship, so precise and skilled, you'd think they've been playing together for years. Make no mistake "Wooden Music"? Yes.....and the Blues? Hell, yes. Highly recommended that you get this one.