



L to R: Mark Stutso, Johnny Castle, Mark Wenner, Paul Bell



THE NIGHTHAWKS

LEGENDS OF BLUES AND ROOTS ROCK

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THE NIGHTHAWKS

The current line up for the Nighthawks includes:

Mark Wenner: Harmonica and Vocals

Johnny Castle: Bass Guitar and Vocals

Paul Bell: Lead Guitar and Vocals

Mark Stutso: Drums and Vocals

What sustains a band for more than four decades? Not a hit radio band, but a roll-up-your-sleeves/drive to the next gig overnight/carry your own gear up the steps and night after night make people happy kind of band. One that makes them dance; sends them home to come back again—and again. What makes that kind band stay together through relatively few personnel changes? Answer: A good idea; a universal yet somehow unique good idea.

The Nighthawks sought not so much to reinvent rock and roll, but simply to have it reinvent itself by taking the original ingredients and following—if somewhat loosely—the original recipe. And like good cooks, the individual personalities involved ultimately affected the outcome. The band was over 10 years old and had baffled the mainstream industry before the term “roots rock” was coined to explain the likes of West Coasters like Los Lobos and The Blasters. By then, the affiliation with many of the living blues greats seemed to brand The Nighthawks a “blues band,” despite the fact that they played with **Carl Perkins** as well as **Muddy Waters**.

The Nighthawks had its genesis when lead singer-harmonica player extraordinaire **Mark Wenner** returned to his native Washington, D.C., after six years in New York City, lured back by the success of his friend Bobby Radcliff’s local acclaim with a blues band. Mark joined forces with a very young **Jimmy Thackery** and formed The Nighthawks in 1972. They spent a couple of years building The Nighthawks’ reputation with a revolving cast of characters until, in 1974, they decided to get the best rhythm section the area had to offer: **Jan Zukowski** on bass and **Pete Ragusa** on drums.

The Nighthawks set off on a musical mystery tour that took them to 49 states and a dozen countries. They played with nearly all the living blues legends as well as a new generation of bands sometimes called “the Blue Wave,” and released several important albums, including the best-selling **Jacks and Kings** with **Pinetop Perkins**, **Luther “Guitar Junior” Johnson**, **Calvin Jones** and **Bob Margolin**.

In 1986, Jimmy Thackery left to launch a solo career. The band meandered briefly, backing up **John Lee Hooker** and **Pinetop Perkins** and touring the East Coast with **Elvin Bishop**. A series of shows with guest-star guitarists including **Steuart Smith**, **Warren Haynes**, **James Solberg** and Bob Margolin led to a multiyear collaboration with **Jimmy Hall (Wet Willie)** and **Jimmy Nalls (Sea Level)**. After their departure in 1989, a young **Danny Morris** joined as guitarist; his fine work can be heard on the albums **Trouble** and **Rock This House**. Danny’s pursuit of a solo career allowed **Pete Kanaras** a nine-year run with the band, leaving a recorded history of **Pain and Paradise**, **Still Wild** and a DVD performance with blues legend **Hubert Sumlin**.

In early 2004, after 30 years as a Nighthawk, Jan Zukowski decided it was time to move on. Pete Kanaras had left by then as well. As luck would have it, **Paul Bell** and **Johnny Castle** were ready, willing and able to join up and have since helped to reinvent the group. Paul Bell first sat in with the band in 1975. He paid his dues in a guitar town where he became known for his versatility and taste. As a true D.C. player, he plays a Fender Telecaster (The Rhodes Tavern Troubadours sing it: “D.C.’s a Telecaster town”). Sure, there are some Strat cats and Gibson guys, and Paul Reed Smith is from D.C., but after Roy Buchanan, Danny Gatton and Steuart Smith, the canoe paddle is the choice of the D.C. faithful. And Paul, like his predecessors, knows a D.C. picker must be at home with country cluckin’ and soul chuck-chuck-chuckin’ to be “ignant” in the low-down blues or raw rockabilly, and then slip through the augmented and diminished chords of some serious jazz. Paul has brought great vitality and attitude to the performing stage and a vast wealth of recording experience to the mix. It was, in fact, after a recording session where Mark Wenner and Paul, playing slide on a beautiful steel Dobro, sat improvising on some blues licks that Mark asked Paul to join the band. Quite a few great guitarists have played extended years in The Nighthawks, and Paul stands tall among them.

Then there’s Johnny Castle. Not John: Johnny, like the guy in “The Wild One.” Johnny and his bass are one. He has crossed every genre in the D.C. world of genre crossing. Johnny made a name playing in Crank, D.C. early hard rockers that even opened for Hendrix. He was the first electric bass player on the new grass bluegrass circuit, mixing it up with Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley and clogging his way past the purists. He did a stint with the soul rockers Spatz, through Tex Rabinow-



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itz's Bad Boys as they morphed from pure rockabilly to the psycho/punkabilly of Switchblade, and on to a decade with Bill Kirchen. Somewhere in there, Johnny also managed a couple of tours subbing for Jan Zukowski with The Nighthawks. And stylistically, it has been observed that if Jan played much like Paul McCartney, Johnny is totally Bill Wyman. Yet unlike Wyman, Johnny has a huge presence onstage, thundering around like an unleashed pro football linebacker. No stranger to the studio, Johnny has penned many a tune, and he sings real good, too!

After a frenzied couple of years with Paul and Johnny on board, the first move was to record a live show. **Blue Moon in Your Eye**, a CD and DVD package, was recorded at the Barns at Wolf Trap in 2006 and released later that same year. It gave people a taste of the new band and a glimpse of things to come. While keeping up the touring pace, the band in 2008 began to sort through the material that would become 2009's **American Landscape**. Including two of Johnny's originals, the songs were road-tested and found to run extremely well and handle in the turns.

The start of 2010 brought a milestone: Pete Ragusa announced his decision to pursue other projects. Again, exceptional talent was on deck. The fabulously versatile **Mark Stutso**, who spent nearly two decades with Jimmy Thackery and the Drivers, jumped in without missing a beat. The West Virginia native says he experienced his "magic moment" in second grade when he first tapped on a real drum, a blue sparkle snare from Sears. From 1966 to 1977, he played steadily in his home state and in neighboring Southwest Virginia and Kentucky before joining Tricks, a rock band from Virginia Beach. After what he calls "10 fantastic years," he moved to D.C. and played with Mike Melchione's Smut Brothers, then joined the Drivers in 1991. "Mark Stutso was our very first choice to replace the otherwise-irreplaceable Pete Ragusa," Mark Wenner says. "He can handle any groove and any style with ease, and he's a world-class lead vocalist and brilliant harmony singer."

In early 2009, Sirius XM Radio blues guru Bill Wax heard that the Nighthawks were doing some acoustic shows and suggested the band come in and cut some live tracks. The last time the Hawks had done a Bluesville Live Homemade Jam Session, Pete Kanaras and Jan Zukowski were still in the band, and Hawks' hero and occasional partner in crime Hubert Sumlin was included. So early one weekday morning, the band showed up at the incredible Sirius XM facilities in downtown D.C. After a short sound check with engineer Michael Taylor and a lot of coffee and bagels, Michael hit the record button and in a couple of hours, the Nighthawks proceeded to knock out all the songs on what became **Last Train to Bluesville**. In 2011 they garnered a "Best Acoustic Album of the Year" award from the Blues Music Association for this release, first ever for the group.

In the following years the Hawks have toured the world, including their first Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise, and produced a steady stream of great recordings. **Damn Good Time** on Severn Records in 2012, **444** on Ellersoul Records in 2014, **Back Porch Party** on Ellersoul Records in 2015 which includes their version of *Down In The Hole*, better known as the theme from the acclaimed HBO series **The Wire**; the acclaimed documentary **Nighthawks-On The Blue Highway** screened at theaters nationwide and released on DVD in 2017 by Ellersoul Records, **All You Gotta Do** released on Ellersoul Records in 2017.





Mark Pucci Media

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Blues Music Award-Winning Band, The Nighthawks, Display Their Versatility on New CD, *All You Gotta Do*, on EllerSoul Records

The band is also enjoying critical acclaim for Michael Streissguth's award-winning documentary film about their history, *The Nighthawks – On the Blue Highway*, which is now available on DVD from the group's website, as well as Amazon.com.

Eclectic? All over the map? The material on *All You Gotta Do*, The Nighthawks' latest release, can certainly be described in these terms. Yet, throughout the nearly five decades of its career, the band has sourced songs from everywhere and anywhere. The prototype recording, *Rock and Roll*, although it had no originals, established this template in 1974. Three years later, *Sidepocket Shot*, showed the band capable of nearly all original material and spanning an even wider range of genres, this time in an array of production styles à la the Beatles' *Revolver*. *All You Gotta Do* does not have any outside players, only the band itself, with a minimum of overdubs. Yet the band still sounds like a hard Chicago Blues band from the mid-1950s, adding the vocal harmonies that Miss Honey Piazza once dubbed "the Doo Wop Blues."

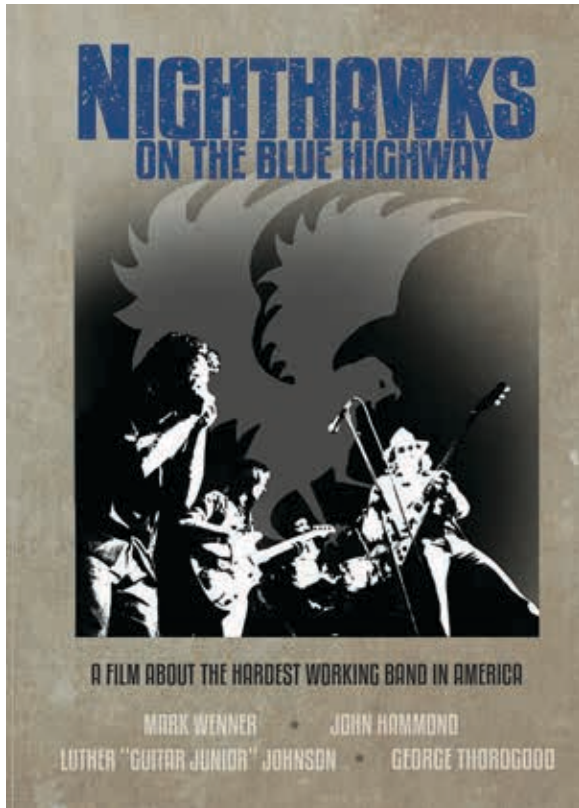
The new disc opens with Mark Wenner's rocking version of Brenda Lee's title track, the kind of pop rockabilly that was in full swing at the end of the '50s. Mark Stutso proceeds to give a moving interpretation of Levon Helm's personal farewell, "When I Go Away." Wenner follows with the always mandatory Muddy Waters song, with no attempt to be anything other than the Chicago Blues.

Randy Newman's "Burn Down the Cornfield" was learned by the band for a D.C. multi-band performance of his songs for band house gigs. Johnny Castle steps into the fray with "Another Day" that can only be described as a modern day protest piece from his own pen, and Stutso follows with his own tale of the tortures of love with "Voo Doo Doll." Wenner gives a thumping take on the Sonny Boy Williamson rocker, "Ninety Nine," using the big C 12 hole Marine Band harmonica honking in the lower register. The heart-wrenching ballad, "Three Times Your Fool," gleaned from his solo CD and written with his Pittsburgh collaborator, Norman Nardini, is sung as only Mark Stutso can.

Mark Wenner got a chance to sit in on Jesse Winchester's "Isn't That So" at a casual jam. Remembering almost all the lyrics, he tried singing it. At the next Hawks' sound check, the harmonies fell right into place and it became a part of the repertoire. The band takes a fun romp of R.L. Burnside's "Snake Drive," changing the groove from Hill Country Mississippi to D.C. Go Go, followed by a funny take on "Frere Jacques," titled "Blues for Brother John." This melody is one that Wenner uses to teach precise note bending in cross harp position. The final track shows off Johnny Castle, for all the styles he has played, to be the true King of Garage Rock in his salute to Washington D.C. on "Dirty Water."

Although he sings no lead, Paul Bell is a major voice in the harmonies and shows off his ability to function freely in any of style of picking, from the snazzy jazzy licks on "Brother John" to the screaming slide on "Cornfield."

But before we take any of this too seriously, in the famous words of Hound Dog Taylor, "Let's have some fun!"



Acclaimed Nighthawks Documentary Film now available on DVD!

"Nighthawks - On The Blue Highway" is the first documentary film about the hardest working band in America, the result of two years of production, countless days on the road with the band and interviews with those who know the members and their music best.

Directed by Johnny Cash
biographer Michael Streissguth.

Website:

<https://www.nighthawksbluehighway.com>

View a trailer on youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoNObmF5EN8>

Purchase the DVD:

<http://thenighthawks.info/merch.html>

ALBUM REVIEWS

The Nighthawks All You Gotta Do Ellersoul Records July 21, 2017



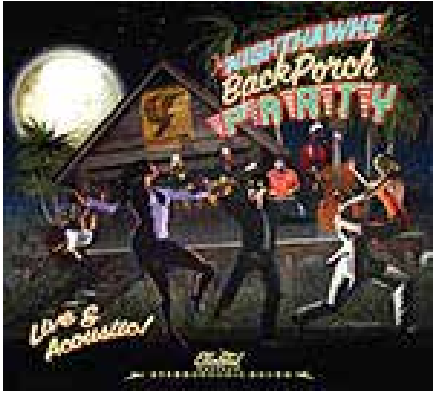
This venerable band is marking its 43rd year with vocalist/harmonicist Mark Wenner as its only remaining original member. Back in 1983, they headlined a blues festival I promoted in their hometown of Washington D.C. At that time guitarist Jimmy Thackeray was fronting the band and they centered on hardcore blues—lots of Muddy Waters tunes. While every Nighthawks album in their storied history nods at least once to Muddy, we've seen the band become widely eclectic. Now they are equally comfortable with doo wop, soul, rockabilly, and, of course rock 'n' roll. All four members share vocals and the harmonies are quite

good. Check out one of their acoustic shows to really appreciate these talents. This album is a great representation too, as it features just the band, no guests. It's mostly still a throwback sound, harkening back to the '50s when R&B and rock 'n' roll were converging.

Mark Wenner opens with a rocking version of Brenda Lee's title track. Drummer Mark Stutso renders a soulful cover of the Larry Campbell-penned personal farewell for Levon Helm, "*When I Go Away*." Wenner still seems to be the most hardened blues guy in the band and appropriately, he takes hold of the Willie Dixon classic, "*Baby, I Want to Be Loved*." Later, Wenner nods to mentor Muddy in Sonny Boy Williamson's "*Ninety Nine*." Stutso is gifted soul singer, as evidenced by his emotive crooning on the ballad, "*Three Times Your Fool*," the album's best track. Bassist Johnny Castle weighs in with his original, the topically current protest tune, "*Another Day*," and his twist on the classic "*Dirty Water*," transforming the association with Boston's Charles River to D.C.'s Potomac. Along the way you'll hear another transformation, taking R.L. Burnside's Hill Country Mississippi blues to D.C Go Go, in "*Snake Drive*." Covers of classic writers like Randy Newman ("*Let's Burn Down the Cornfield*") and Jesse Winchester ("*isn't That So*") are yet more indication of how the band has embraced genres beyond blues. Guitarist Paul Bell takes no lead vocals but his harmonies and jazzy licks and soaring slide are all over this recording.

Noting the band's subhead to their logo, "legendary blues and roots band," this is yet another solid effort that bolsters that claim.

—Jim Hynes



Mark Pucci Media

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The Nighthawks Invite You to a *Back Porch Party* with their New CD Release, Coming April 21 on EllerSoul Records

America's Seminal Roots Music Band Continues to Deliver the Goods

WASHINGTON, DC – The Nighthawks, America's seminal roots music band, are throwing a ***Back Porch Party*** on their new EllerSoul Records CD, coming April 21, and everyone's invited. Following up the critical success of their 2014 label debut CD, ***444***, the Washington, DC-based quartet of Mark Wenner (harmonica/vocals), Paul Bell (guitar/vocals), Johnny Castle (bass/vocals) and Mark Stutso (drums/vocals) once again show that they can deliver the goods on a disc that's destined to become a perennial favorite all around the world.

Recorded "Live and Acoustic" at Montrose Studio in Richmond, Virginia, the Blues Music Award-winning Nighthawks showcase an even-dozen set list of songs that run the gamut of roots music, touching all bases with excursions into blues, soul, rock 'n' roll, roadhouse country and rhythm and blues, all the while demonstrating that you don't have to plug in to get electrified!

Along with five original songs from the band's members, ***Back Porch Party*** includes scintillating covers of compositions by Muddy Waters (a band tradition), Lightnin' Slim, Willie Dixon, Ike Turner and Jimmy Rogers, among others. Bandstand favorite "Down in the Hole" (the theme from the acclaimed TV series, "The Wire") and "Walkin' after Midnight," a song immortalized by country great Patsy Cline, are just two tracks that demonstrate the breadth of The Nighthawks college of American musical knowledge, both live and in the studio.

"It started with a memorial service," recalls founding member Mark Wenner about the genesis of the band doing acoustic recordings. "Thirty years after the robbery/murder of Daniel 'Duke' Hope, an old friend of the early band, the victim's mother asked the boys to play graveside. At first, it appeared to be a complicated situation: How to get electricity to the site. However, since the participants were few in number, it was decided to play with a single snare drum, an upright bass, an acoustic guitar and harmonica, and the vocals would be straight into the air. It worked. After watching a video of the service, the band decided to try this format in smaller venues with tiny stages with minimal amplification. It worked. People even danced."

Wenner goes on to explain how that unplugged path would lead The Nighthawks to some glorious results. "When Bill Wax, then head honcho at Sirius/XM's Bluesville Channel, heard about the occasional acoustic Nighthawks, he invited the band into their D.C. studios to record a couple of tunes for their homemade blues jam segments. With very sympathetic engineering, The Nighthawks knocked out an album's worth of mostly traditional blues in a couple of hours. A week later, Bill presented the band with a wonderfully mixed digital master with permission to use. ***Last Train to Bluesville*** was born. It went on to garner a surprising amount of national airplay and win the band's first Blues Music Award in Memphis in May 2011. It also helped put the band back into the national spotlight, and they followed with their first Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise performances and two successful subsequent releases, ***Damn Good Time*** and ***444***."

After two solid, critically acclaimed electric recordings, The Nighthawks decided to go back to the unplugged route on their new CD. "Although the band mostly continues its amplified style, they are quick to take advantage of situations that warrant the acoustic format," says Wenner. "Having enjoyed both the sound and father/son team of engineers in Montrose Studio in Richmond, Virginia, and mixing some acoustic numbers into the material on our *444* album, it seemed like the perfect place for another unplugged recording. The band and EllerSoul execs also invited a small group of sympathetic listeners in for the recording session. The resulting totally live performance was captured by Bruce and Adrian Olsen and quickly mixed into this presentation of a truly fun event, a ***BACK PORCH PARTY***."

True "road warriors," The Nighthawks are booked by Blue Mountain Artists (www.bmatours.com). The band plans to continue their endless touring throughout the spring, summer, fall and winter in support of ***Back Porch Party***.

The Nighthawks Enjoy a New Lease on Life



The Nighthawks enter their fifth decade on a roll after winning acoustic blues album of the year in Memphis. (Courtesy)

© March 22, 2012

By Cathy Carter, Virginian-Pilot Correspondent

It was late afternoon in Charlottesville when Mark Wenner of The Nighthawks heard a knock on his dressing-room door. The D.C.-based roots rock band was touring with blues great Muddy Waters, and Wenner, the group's lead singer and harmonica player, was kicking back before showtime.

"The old man wants to talk to you," was the message from Bob Margolin, a guitarist in Waters' band. The legendary bluesman had just flown in from Chicago, one step ahead of a massive snowstorm. Waters' harmonica player, Jerry Portnoy, meanwhile, was scheduled to fly in from Boston.

"Muddy said, 'Mark, you've got to do me a favor. Jerry can't make it, I need you to play with my band tonight,'" Wenner recalled. The Great Northeast Blizzard of 1978 had Portnoy stuck at Boston's Logan International Airport for several days.

"For three nights, I'd do a Nighthawks set, then run upstairs, wipe my face, comb my hair and come back down as part of the Muddy Waters band," said Wenner, who founded The Nighthawks in 1972.

With a career that has spanned 40 years, you're bound to have a few good stories.

"I was a very lucky boy to have been at the right place at the right time," Wenner said by phone from his home in Kensington, Md. "We got to play with all of our heroes. We opened for B.B. King a bunch of times, traveled with James Cotton and did a lot of work with Pinetop Perkins."

Good fortune, perhaps - but The Nighthawks have worked hard to earn their reputation. The band, which will play The Jewish Mother in Virginia Beach on Friday, helped establish the flourishing blues-rock scene of the late '70s and early '80s.

"We were a part of making some of that happen," Wenner acknowledged. "We busted a lot of ground open for this type of music. We went into the Southeast when most of the bands wore cowboy hats and did Marshall Tucker songs."

At the height of their popularity, The Nighthawks were performing with Stevie Ray Vaughn and Delbert McClinton in Austin and opening for Professor Longhair and The Radiators in New Orleans. "Those were incredible scenes," Wenner said.

Closer to home, the band hosted an infamous music series called "Blue Monday" at the now-defunct Bayou nightclub in D.C. "We were flying in all these blues guys and backing them up," Wenner said. "We went through our record collection and wrote down everybody we ever dreamed of playing with. Word got out that it was a sweet gig, and by the end of two years we had played with everybody on our list."

As with any long-term endeavor, The Nighthawks have had their share of ups and downs. By the late '80s, the band began fading from the public eye. "Things kind of floundered for us," said Wenner, who attributes the decline to a combination of shifting musical tastes and bad luck.

For 11 years, The Nighthawks had played in New Orleans for a full week around Mardi Gras, playing the legendary Tipitina's nightclub and the Riverboat President, a 1924 vintage cruise ship and iconic New Orleans music institution docked on the Mississippi River.

But when the vessel moved to St. Louis in 1985 there would be no more rollin' on the river. "Once we lost that boat we couldn't afford to go to New Orleans," Wenner said. "When that was gone it also meant that The Neville Brothers and Dr. John crowded into Tipitina's on the weekend, which pushed us out."

Gigs in Texas were also drying up. "It got to where I just had to eliminate large chunks of geography from my map," Wenner said. "Things changed dramatically not just for us but for that whole scene."

Now, however, circumstances have improved for The Nighthawks as they enter their fifth decade. Last year, their CD "Last Train to Bluesville" won the trophy for acoustic blues album of the year at the annual Blues Awards in Memphis. The album gave The Nighthawks a new lease on life. "It got all kinds of airplay and a really positive response," Wenner said.

The band's follow-up CD, "Damn Good Time," is slated for release in May. "It's got a nice mixed bag of stuff," says Wenner, 63. "It's got soul, swing and lots of harmony."

The musician has seen a few personnel changes in the band over the years, but says the current lineup, which includes Johnny Castle on bass and vocals, guitarist Paul Bell and drummer/vocalist Mark Stutso, is the best one yet.

"I feel like I put in 38 years to get a band this good," Wenner confided. "I'm able to do all the things that I've ever wanted with people who really seem to enjoy what they do. It seems pretty simple, but it's awfully hard to get."

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SELECT QUOTES ON "LAST TRAIN TO BLUESVILLE"

"While these songs have been staples of The Nighthawks set list for decades, the sparkling acoustic arrangements provide them, and the band, with a new lease on life...accurately captures the dynamics of one of roots music's long lasting, dependable and often unsung, outfits. Long may they fly." – *Blues Revue*

"After nearly forty years toiling in the blues music trenches, The Nighthawks know how to play this stuff in their sleep. You won't find them sleepwalking through these performances, though, the band infusing each song with a joyful energy. Don't let the acoustic studio setting fool you, 'cause it's obvious that the guys were having a lot of fun revisiting these oldies-but-goodies, and they tear into them with the same zeal as they would any of their electric performances." – *About.com*

"Sound throughout is exemplary, with each instrument superbly defined. There's a palpable presence to Paul Bell's guitar – one can almost feel the strings vibrating the air, and real bite to Mark Wenner's acoustic harp. And with everything captured in a single take at the Sirius/XM Studios in Washington, this is a superb document of the intuitive interplay between seasoned veterans who still find sheer, unbridled joy in making music together. It simply doesn't get much better than this!" – *Blog Critics*

"Jump the blind, juble joo, or drag onto a Johnny O'Brien, but get on this train to Bluesville and ride it with the fury of the crossroad weary!" – *JazzReview.com*

"The Nighthawks show no sign of slowing down as they enter their fifth decade as a viable force on the contemporary blues scene. All Aboard the Last Train To Bluesville and be sure to enjoy the ride!" – *Nashville Blues Society*

"...in the end things are as they should be--Wenner sets the mood and the attitude, and literally and figuratively is the voice of the Nighthawks. His harp playing throughout is as impressive for its succinct

statements as it is for its expressiveness, and as assured as he is vocally on the strutting numbers, he turns in two exceptionally deep ballad performances here, with an evocative appeal on Slim Harpo's 'Rainin' In My Heart' and an affectingly weary rendition of Sonny Boy Williamson's 'Mighty Long Time.' Don't take the album title too seriously. If history has taught us anything about the Nighthawks, it's that the band is always coming back to bluesville. The train may be carrying different freight on some trips, but it's always running, and it's always right on time." – *The Bluegrass Special*

"When it comes to the blues, things don't get much more pure than Last Train to Bluesville." – *The Post & Courier*

"On Last Train to Bluesville, the fiery blues-rockin' Nighthawks prove one doesn't have to have to plug in to create musical sparks...this is one rollicking night train no one should miss." – *Virginian-Pilot*

"I keep coming back to The Nighthawks. This acoustic session will cause you to come back to them often." – *BluesWax*

"A dexterous, colorful detour, this record proves that the Nighthawks are just as comfortable on the back porch as they are in the bars." – *Living Blues*

"You might think an acoustic version of James Brown's 'I Go Crazy' wouldn't work well, but you'd be wrong; Bell's guitar and Wenner's harp are perfect vehicles for this interpretation." – *Vintage Guitar*

"The entire session feels like an after-hours jam among old friends at some long-lost blues bar." – *Barry Alfonso, iTunes*

"...Nighthawks' founder Mark Wenner carries the load, with rich, personable harp work and deep, grainy vocals - his evocative appeal on Slim Harpo's 'Rainin' In My Heart' is especially affecting - as guitarist Paul Bell complements him with deft, discursive, idiomatically impeccable soloing...the sonics are doubly impressive: live in their immediacy and expressiveness, but with clean studio-style distinctions that give these workouts musical heft." – *The Absolute Sound*

THE NIGHTHAWKS: Soaring Into Their 40th Year as the Region's Premier Blues & Roots Band

by James Eppard, Photography by John Keith

It was Jimmy Reed's "Hush Hush" that coaxed a handful of middle-aged bar patrons to set down their longnecks and get off their stools. As the floor filled with couples in jeans and tank tops swaying to their own versions of the shag, Betsy Kelley stayed in her seat nearest the tiny bandstand, her eyes trained on The Nighthawks' wiry, tattooed frontman with the gray hair and the harmonica sprouting from his palm.

"I have followed The Nighthawks since 1975," says Kelley, 57, of Rockville, who traveled to a tiny honky-tonk bar in Annandale, Va., on a Wednesday night in July to catch her favorite blues and roots rock band. "I had all their records."

For almost 40 years, The Nighthawks have been playing the area's bars, nightclubs, music halls and festivals, forever honing and rearranging a prodigious repertoire of Chicago blues, soul, roots and rockabilly tunes to consistent cheers from fans and critics. The venerable group, founded in 1972 by frontman harpist Mark Wenner and former guitarist Jimmy Thackery, has been affectionately called the "world's best bar band." And earlier this year, following the 2010 release of the critically acclaimed acoustic set "Last Train to Bluesville," their stature rose even higher. The Memphis-based Blues Foundation bestowed "Acoustic Album of the Year" honors on The Nighthawks in May at the annual Blues

Music Awards.

For Wenner, 62, of Kensington, the award affirms nearly four decades of stubbornly purposeful effort to keep alive the soulful grooves and bluesy riffs that inspired him to start a band in the first place, even before he could sing.

"I've been able to go from something I imagined in my mind, for two or three years, to today and what the band sounds like," says Wenner, reflecting on the band's implausibly long run. "That's almost 40 years, with an assortment of people."

Of the early Nighthawks, Wenner is the only original. The cast that made the band of road warriors a fixture on the region's thriving blues circuit in the early '70s included co-founder and guitarist Jimmy Thackery, who left in 1986, bass player Jan Zukowski, who left in 2004 after 30 years, and drummer Pete Ragusa, who left early last year. Within the blues community, each of those players was a giant in their own right, as were some of the others who sat in with the band for years-long stretches—Jimmy Hall, Jimmy Nalls, Danny Morris and Pete Kanares.

Wenner says his current lineup of Paul Bell (guitar), Johnny Castle (bass), and Mark Stutso (drums) is perhaps his best team yet. That may be in part because each of the players arrived with an already extensive history of either sitting in as sidemen for The Nighthawks, or playing in bands with former Nighthawks. Stutso, for example, played with Thackery for 18 years before joining last year. Bell and Castle, who both joined seven years ago, played together in Bob "Catfish" Hodge's blues band with former Nighthawks drummer Ragusa. Bell has lent his Fender Telecaster to Nighthawks sets since 1975. And Castle used to sub for former bassist Zukowski.

"Things are better now than they've ever been," says Wenner. "Individually, the playing is superb. The singing is probably better than it's ever been. But the thing that really makes the difference is the fact that these guys are all comfortable working as a team."

It was evident on that balmy Wednesday in July at the gritty Sunset Grille in Annandale, the first stop on a five-day swing through Virginia and Maryland, including



two daytime sets in 100-degree temps at the Outlaw Jam music festival in Frederick. The band played three sets of staples that included sing-along Carolina beach music classics like "A Pretty Girl (A Cadillac and Some Money)," along with a few arrangements they developed on stage, tweaking here and there to evolve their sound. The bar crowd seemed to like it, if the beer pitcher-turned-tip jar was a reliable measure.

"We sort of trust each other to come up with things," says Bell, of Rileyville, Va. "We're good at doing things on the fly."

In 2009, a blues DJ on SiriusXM in Washington, D.C., asked The Nighthawks to record a set of their new acoustic arrangements in his studio. The band showed up and played practically straight through. What emerged was a collection that became the award-winning "Last Train to Bluesville."

"We were ready that day," Bell recalls. "We didn't even know it, but we were ready."

Rising to the occasion is nothing new to the band members, each having played with their fair share of blues legends—Muddy Waters, Pinetop Perkins, Elvin Bishop, John Lee Hooker—and rockers as well.

For Wenner, the striving started early, teaching himself harmonica as the musically inclined son of doctor and lawyer parents in Bethesda. He graduated Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in 1966 and went to Columbia University in New York City, where he fell in with fellow blues travelers in his freshman dorm. At Homecoming that first semester, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band played, shaking loose one of Wenner's puritan beliefs about authentic Chicago blues music.

"I didn't think white boys could play this kind of music," he says. "I was in a bit of a schizophrenic quandary because I was trying to play a little bit myself."

It changed everything. "He was sort of the guy who gave me license to fly," Wenner says. "Here comes Paul Butterfield and he's doing things differently. It felt honest. He was doing it his own way. It pretty well put that nail in the coffin as far as me thinking this is what I want to do and this is how I want to try and do it."

Montgomery Magazine cont'd

New York's club scene was a tough egg to crack, with all the gigs being major venues and few places to build up chops. Wenner saw how one of his friends, Bobby Radcliffe, was carving himself a bluesy niche back in D.C., so Wenner moved back into his parents' basement and hustled, jamming with Radcliffe and other bands, booking gigs and even roading if it might place him on a stage where he could play his harp.

"I started a band and said I was the singer," Wenner recalls, laughing at the absurdity, since he wasn't much of a singer yet. "In those days, the [PA systems] were so pitiful and the bands played so loud you couldn't really hear anything I was doing singingwise. Things were primitive enough that I kind of learned on the job. And by the time you could actually hear me, I guess I had sort of figured out how to do certain things."

One of those things was creating bands, which unfortunately went something like this: Hire a lead singer, wrap a band around him and then watch as the singer steered the band off in a different direction.

"Being in a band with somebody else, you're sharing a little dream," Wenner says. "But when you have somebody like me that has a very strong concept of what songs to do and how to do them, then you've got to get other people to go along with you."

When he met Jimmy Thackery they hit it off, then added the rhythm section of Jan Zukowski and Pete Ragusa, becoming The Nighthawks.

"From '76 to '86 we did 300 days a year on the road," Wenner says. "We played with everybody." In the first couple years the band toured the Beltway, then in 1976 started working clubs up and down the East Coast. In 1978 The Nighthawks pushed west to Chicago, and in 1980 played the West Coast, from Seattle to San Diego.

Fans still remember the early shows. On The Nighthawks comment page on Pandora Internet Radio, a fan last July wrote, "I will never forget the Cellar Door shows with Muddy Waters in '75 and '76. The best shows I have ever seen."

Wenner certainly remembers the period. During a three night stand, Muddy's harp player, Jerry Portnoy, was absent, so the legendary blues guitarist asked Wenner to sit in.

"Un-toppable," Wenner says of the surreal experience. "That was the ultimate job and I had it for three days."

Bob Margolin, one of Muddy's sidemen who has also played guitar occasionally with The Nighthawks, recalled the moment. "I distinctly remember that Mark was completely prepared to do the Muddy gigs well, and that was the best harp playing I'd ever heard him do up to that point," Margolin says.

Drummer Mark Stutso also saw first-hand the reach of The Nighthawks well before he ever became one. Traveling the countryside with Jimmy Thackery and the Drivers for 18 years, Nighthawks fans everywhere would show up to hear the band's former guitarist.

"I could be in, I don't know, Chicken Neck, North Dakota, playing a club that's got maybe 30 people in it, and I'm telling you somewhere in the back of the room somebody had a Nighthawks shirt on," says Stutso, who travels down from his home in Pittsburgh, Pa., for gigs. "It never failed. Go out West and you'll see Nighthawks shirts everywhere."

With band members all over 50, they still pull in a wide audience, even if family, mortgages and general responsibilities limit road time. In some cases, the children of parents who followed The Nighthawks are joining the legion. "My daughters were

Nighthawks fans before those guys even considered mentioning my name," Stutso says. "They appeal to a broad range."

"The difference is that the original band was in their mid-20s and brought their youthful energy, while today's Nighthawks are still exciting on stage but bring decades of experience to their performances," says Margolin, himself a legend in blues circles. "Mark and the current players walk the line of staying true to The Nighthawks' roots while bringing forward new songs and more experienced entertainment and musicianship."

One day The Nighthawks are playing the Outlaw Jam wit heavy-metal rockers Mötley Crüe and Kix, another gig they're laying down a jitter-bug for a room full of blue-collars, and another night they're setting feet-a-tapping at an intimate music hall in Damascus. The latter show at the Music Café in early July featured their new acoustic set.

"The comments that we kept getting back from the people who heard them play, but had never heard them play acoustic, was they were wowed and hoping they would come back," says Michelle Wilson, the café's promotional manager.

That's a tribute to the band's showmanship—leave them wanting more. And sometimes clubs are left wanting for a long time. "One real positive of playing a club not too often is, if we come back to a place once or twice a year, chances are they're really glad to see us," says Bell. "The Hawks don't go through people's towns very often, and when we do, we try and really

deliver. So I think people look forward to us coming back."

The three-plus hour session in Annandale was one of those times. As the band played the crowd's favorites and a hostess carved a path through the tiny bar, collecting \$5 cover charges and drawing smiley faces on patrons' hands, someone from behind the bar yelled, "Welcome back, Nighthawks!"

The music rose as Stutso and Castle set down a rhythm and Bell lit in to tee up Wenner's head-shaking harmonica solo. The frontman closed his eyes and blew, enveloping the room in a sound so rich and timeless the whole bar just stood watching, as though movement might break the spell and send Muddy back to his grave. This was what Betsy Kelley had come to see.

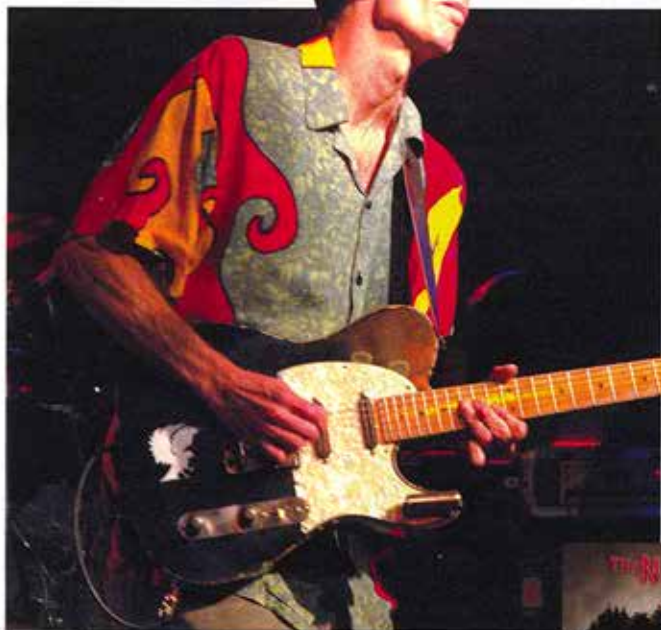
"He's just so sincere, and the people he has with him are so sincere and dedicated to the blues," she says. "It's like something was in his soul and it had to get out. It's like a calling."



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First Fleet



Paul Bell

The Nighthawks Soar on Sirius

Washington, D.C.'s The Nighthawks have been purveying their raucous, sweat-drenched style of blues for more than three decades. Since 2003, the lead guitar slot has been occupied by Paul Bell, and its most recent release, *Last Train to Bluesville*, is an "unplugged," live-in-the-studio effort.

As a young player in D.C., Bell was familiar with the Nighthawks, and loved Chicago blues.

"I moved to D.C. in '71, and the first band I saw was the Nighthawks at one

of their first gigs," he said. He played in a few bands, doing soul, rock, pop and R&B, then toured with Nils Lofgren. His two primary blues-guitar influences are Albert King and Mike Bloomfield, and naturally, he absorbed the stylings of other players in the area, including Roy Buchanan, Danny Gatton, and Tom Principato.

"They played authoritative rockabilly, blues, jazz, and country," he said. "And I was impressed by their work ethic and abilities."

Bell got a call from Nighthawks co-founder Mark Wennert to play a recording session for a movie soundtrack, which led to joining the band. By then ensconced in a musical genre he loved, he nonetheless had to adjust to the Nighthawks' guitar/bass/drums/harp format – sans horns or keyboards.

"I was accustomed to the Steve Cropper style of rhythm playing – tight, simple parts," he said. "The Chicago style required me to learn to play melodic, semi-improvised counterparts under the harp rather than a simple soul or R&B rhythm."

Bell's primary electric guitar is a Vintique with three Joe Barden pickups. "It's made from parts of instruments I've owned over the years," he said. "The hardware is made by Jay Montrose and it has a fat Telecaster neck."

Another is an ESP with EMG pickups, which he uses for several songs where slide is required, and he tunes it to Open D. Both electrics are set up for seven different pickup combinations, manipulated via a mini-toggle.

Bell counts on a Top Hat Super Deluxe and late-'60s/early-'70s Fender Deluxe Reverb amplifiers, and his pedals include a Barber Tone Press booster/compressor, a Keeley-modified Boss Blues Driver, an '82 Ibanez analog delay, and Boss reverb, tremolo, and digital delay pedals.

The sessions that began *Last Train to Bluesville* were recorded at the Sirius/XM studios in D.C. Bell cited the help of Bill Wax, who hosts "B.B. King's Bluesville" on Sirius/XM. "He's a good friend and we've had a great relationship with him for a long time."

The Nighthawks' unplugged effort may surprise longtime fans, but the band carries off its unamplified assignment with the expected aplomb. For the sessions, Bell used a '93 Dobro resonator with a Barcus-Berry pickup. It had standard tuning and was plugged straight into the mixing console, though an engineer also placed a condenser mic in front of the guitar. Bassist Johnny Castle plunked a Clevinger upright, and drummer Pete Ragusa played a marching-band snare with brushes. The performances weren't originally intended to be released, according to Bell.

"We did not know we were making an album," he recounted. "We thought we were going to just play a few songs, and didn't even know what tunes we were going to do. I didn't know if we were going to play one song, or play for an hour!"

The 10 covers by such artists and writers as Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Lieber and Stoller, and Sonny Boy Williamson include a footstompin' version of James Brown's "I'll Go Crazy," and not surprisingly, three Muddy Waters songs receive the unplugged treatment.

"We'd covered some of the songs before, electric," Bell clarified. "But whenever we've done this acoustic thing, we've never discussed what we were going to do differently. It's been more like 'Let's start playing and see what happens.' There's plenty of differences in the sound, of course – the drummer's just got a trap drum, and since (the session) is not electric, there's no worrying about foot pedals, amplifiers, or sustain. But there was no advance planning for the songs, either, because we never use a set list."

Last Train to Bluesville is a no-frills and highly listenable alternative to typical Nighthawks fare, and Bell and the rest of the band were pleased with the efficient manner in which it was recorded.

"It was done so fast!" the guitarist emphasized. "Less than an hour from getting levels and tones, to being done! I wish it was always that easy." – **Willie G. Moseley**



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BEYOND THE BLUE



LAST TRAIN TO BLUESVILLE

The Nighthawks

Rip Bang Records

Dating back to 1972, when they emerged from a robust roots music scene centered on the Washington, D.C. area, the Nighthawks have undergone the usual comings and goings of personnel common to most bands of long standing, especially in the blues field. Even since the release of this spirited new album, drummer Pete Ragusa has flown the coop for other projects and been replaced by Mark Stutso. Guitarist Paul Bell and bass man Johnny Castle have now

been on board since 2005, providing some stability along with impeccable instrumental credentials. But the Nighthawks would be the Nighthawks in name only without group founder Mark Wenner, and it may well be that *Last Train to Bluesville* contains his most affecting performances on harp and vocals in the group's proud history. He is nothing short of sensational from the start, complementing his band's drive with a swaggering vocal take on Big Joe Turner's (by way of Leiber and Stoller) "The Chicken and the Hawk" that is redolent with style, attitude and wry disposition, all elements serving as the ideal setup for swinging, top strings workout by Bell when his solo comes around. From Big Joe's urban R&B the band heads south, to the Mississippi Delta, to divest themselves of a grinding take on Muddy Waters's "Nineteen Years Old," a pitiless indictment of a gal who ages from 19 to 49 over the course of the song and still can't be satisfied. Punctuating Wenner's lowdown vocal and low, moaning harp with stinging, moody ruminations of resonator guitar, Bell moves Wenner to cry out, "Aaahhh, Paul, tell the truth, the whole truth and nothin' but the truth, man!" Muddy, Wenner and Bell prove themselves a titanic trio at album's end, too, when the band tears into shambling take on "Rollin' and Tumblin'," with sizzling, breathtaking fervor, its assault centered on Wenner's rollin' harp and Bell's tumblin' guitar figures ahead of Wenner growling a positively doom-laden lead vocal set against a spooky, roiling soundscape. Ragusa makes his final Nighthawks appearance memorable, first with his tasty application of brushes on ballads and bruisers alike, and not least of all with a fabulous, crying lead vocal on the early, obscure, James Brown R&B pleading, "I'll Go Crazy"; Castle provides his usual bulwark bass, but also leads the way on Chuck Berry's "Thirty Days" with a lively vocal reading to which guitarist Bell adds an interesting variation on the trademark Berry instrumental signature. But in the end things are as they should be—Wenner sets the mood and the attitude, and literally and figuratively is the voice of the Nighthawks. His harp playing throughout is as impressive for its succinct statements as it is for its expressiveness, and as assured as he is vocally on the strutting numbers, he turns in two exceptionally deep ballad performances here, with an evocative appeal on Slim Harpo's "Rainin' In My Heart" and an affectingly weary rendition of Sonny Boy Williamson's "Mighty Long Time." Don't take the album title too seriously. If history has taught us anything about the Nighthawks, it's that the band is always coming back to bluesville. The train may be carrying different freight on some trips, but it's always running, and it's always right on time. —David McGee



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Genre: Blues
Label: RipBang Records

Tracks

1. The Chicken and the Hawk
2. Nineteen Years Old
3. I'll Go Crazy
4. You Don't Love Me
5. Rainin' in My Heart
6. Can't Be Satisfied
7. Thirty Days
8. Mighty Long Time
9. High Temperature
10. Rollin' and Tumblin'

The Nighthawks

Last Train to Bluesville

Okay, the title *Last Train to Bluesville* may be a bit corny as far as titles go, but The Nighthawks certainly seem like a group of guys that I'd want to jam with in the yard on a hot summer day.

The Nighthawks are a D.C. based blues band currently comprised of Mark Wenner (harmonica/vocals), Pete Ragusa (drums/vocals), Paul Bell (guitar/vocals), and Johnny Castle (bass/vocals). The band has existed in some form since 1972, so these boys have been at it for quite a while. Don't be fooled though, there is still a nice youthfulness in the performance of these songs.

Last Train to Bluesville is a collection of 10 acoustic versions of blues classics. You get Nighthawks versions of Muddy Waters' "Nineteen Years Old", James Brown's "I'll Go Crazy", "Thirty Days" by Chuck Berry, amongst others. It is a nice a diverse sampling of tunes.

I have to say, I have listened to this a few times since I got it. The first time I wasn't too into it, but I really enjoyed it a lot more the last couple times. With the uncharacteristically warm weather we've had in the Northeast these last few days, this album just fit that hot sticky weather. In fact I think I will need to get a nice summery brew to chase this review with.

What really puts it together for me is Mark Wenner's harmonica, it's fantastic. Looking over the list of tracks, I generally prefer the one's with his vocals on them as well. I guess he deserves this as the lone original Nighthawk. Still, some of the songs are better than others, and a few of the one's I enjoyed most are listed below. Personally I'd prefer Wenner on lead vocals the whole time, but we'd have less of his harmonica if he did this I suppose. Either way, I think everyone will get more enjoyment out of this album the warmer it gets.

HOT TRACKS: Nineteen Years Old, Can't Be Satisfied, Mighty Long Time

★★★★



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Blues Bytes

What's New

April 2010



Last Train to Bluesville is a change of pace for **The Nighthawks**. Recorded live at Sirius/XM Studios in Washington D.C., it's an all-acoustic set of blues standards that rates as one of the best recordings in their long and storied history. It's also the last recording with longtime drummer Pete Ragusa, who left the band shortly afterward to pursue other projects.

The band rips through ten blues standards, including three Muddy Waters tunes ("Nineteen Years Old," "Can't Be Satisfied," and "Rollin' and Tumblin'"). Founder Mark Wenner blows some mean harp throughout and handles vocals on the three Waters tracks as well as Slim Harpo's "Rainin' In My Heart," and the Sonny Boy Williamson classic, "Mighty Long Time." Bass player Johnny Castle provides vocals for "You Don't Love Me" and "Thirty Days."

The band also ventures into R&B territory for an acoustic version of the James Brown hit, "I'll Go Crazy" and a doo-wop incarnation of Little Walter's "High Temperature." A rousing version of "Rollin' and Tumblin'" closes the disc.

While some fans might be a bit put off by the set list.....most of these songs have been done to death.....what really makes this disc stand out is the sheer exuberance and camaraderie that shows through every note. This atmosphere breathes new life into these old tracks. The acoustic setting works really well and hopefully, they will revisit this format in the future.

— Graham Clarke

CROSSROADS BLUES SOCIETY OF NORTHERN ILLINOIS



Last Train to Bluesville

The Nighthawks
Rip Bang Records
www.thenighthawks.com
10 tracks/40:28

The latest from the Nighthawks is an acoustic recording done in 2009 at the Sirius/XM Studios and features founding members Mark Wenner on harp and Pete Ragusa on snare drum. They are joined by Paul Bell on guitar and Johnny Castle on bass. Both are veteran Washington D.C. musicians who have been in the band for the last four years. All four members contribute vocals to the project.

The stripped-down format works exceptionally well for the band, every track brimming with energy and superb musicianship. Opening with "The Chicken and the Hawk (Up Up and Away)", Ragusa and Castle lay down a tight, swinging beat for Wenner's enthusiastic vocal while Bell picks an intricate solo passage on his acoustic guitar. The rest of the setlist finds the band revisiting tracks from previous releases or covering classic songs like "Nineteen Years Old" with Wenner's harp lines playing off Bell's slide guitar. Their version of "Rollin' and Tumblin'" harks back to Leroy Foster's original



with the moaning vocal chorus and insistent rhythm from Ragusa using a tambourine as a drum.

Another highlight is "I'll Go Crazy", with Ragusa taking the lead vocal on the James Brown tune and the rest of the band supplying a doo-wop vocal chorus. Wenner gets the chance to show off his skill on the harp and makes the most of the opportunity. The band shows they can rock unplugged with Castle on lead vocal for a rousing run-through of Chuck Berry's "Thirty Days". Bell contributes some more excellent slide work on "I Can't Be Satisfied". And Wenner blows his heart out on "Mighty Long Time", adding an equally strong vocal.

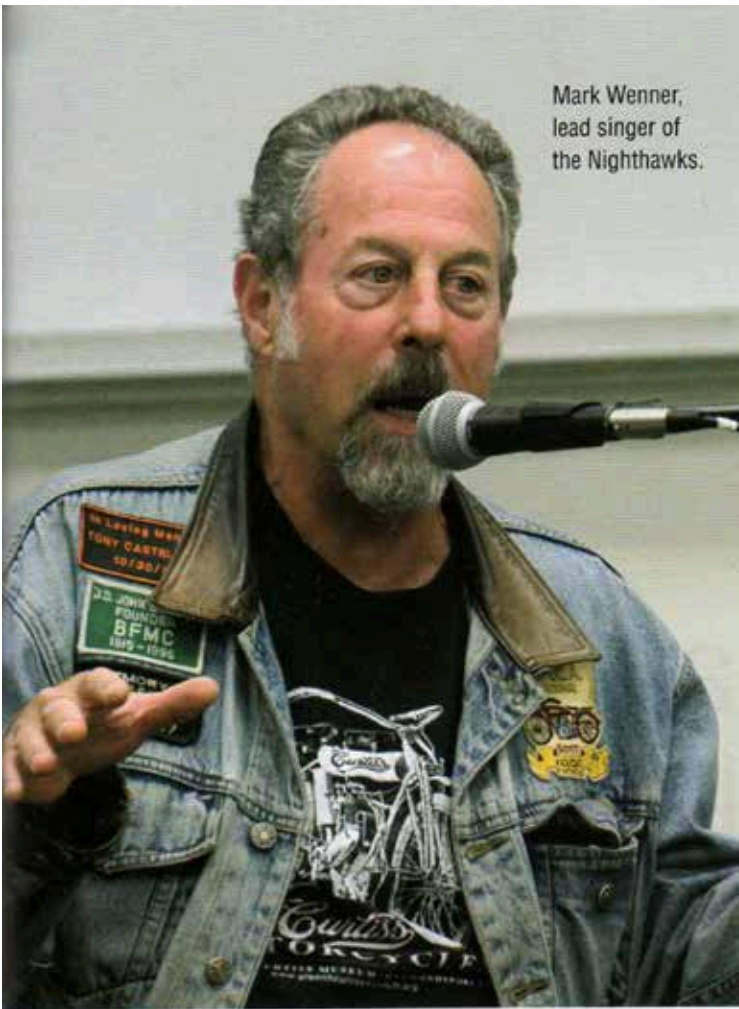
The sound on this disc is superb, with the vocals having warmth and immediacy while the instruments are clearly defined. The band is inspired throughout and the members clearly revel in the acoustic format. After hearing Wenner's stellar contributions on harp, one has to wonder why his name is not mentioned more often in discussions about the best harmonica players. All four members of the Nighthawks were on top of their game for this session, which ranks as one of the band's finest efforts in its 35-plus year career.

Reviewed by Mark Thompson



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Mark Wenner,
lead singer of
the Nighthawks.

Playing the Blues

Musician Reflects on a Career in the Music Industry

A number of blues legends – including B.B. King, Lonnie Brooks and the late Muddy Waters – passed through Washington, D.C., in the 1970s and 1980s. But a quartet

“I’m having more fun now, and I think I’m playing better,” Wenner said. “In some ways I’ve spent all this time just to get to this point.”

At the invitation of Professor of Communication and Film Studies Mike Streissguth, Wenner addressed the approximately 40 students enrolled in the music concentration within the new Department of Communication and Film Studies.

“He really gave them a direct lesson in the ups and downs of the music industry,” Streissguth said. “I think the students learned that you can make a living in the music industry without having to inhabit the upper echelons of the business. You don’t have to be Paul McCartney or Kenny Chesney to have a successful career in music.”

As an undergraduate at Columbia University in the 1960s, Wenner initially planned a career as an author, and hoped to write the great American novel. However, there was something in music that called to him and that he found impossible to ignore. A classmate taught him to play the harmonica and music became his focus. After several years in New York, he returned to Washington and founded The Nighthawks in 1972. Since then the band, which has had very few personnel changes, has recorded 21 albums including *Still Wild*, *Rock this House* and *Side Pocket Shot*.

Wenner has witnessed changes in the music industry over the years. For instance, he said, now that artists have the ability to market and sell their work online, record labels aren’t as integral to their success as they were in the past.

Some things remain the same, though. After nearly 40 years, Wenner still loves to perform.

“It’s a rush. I’m addicted to it,” he said. “I think I would go crazy if I didn’t have a chance to do what I do.”



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**BluesWax Sittin' In With
Mark Wenner of The Nighthawks
PART ONE
Forty Years on The Road and They
Take The Brass Ring**

By Don Wilcock

After forty years of road-warrior touring, "The white-boy blues band from Bethesda" walked into Memphis last week and took the prize for Best Acoustic Blues album at the Blues Music Awards for their 2010 release, *Last Train To Bluesville*. It was the first time **Mark Wenner** and his crew had even been nominated, and they were up against acts with cache like **Eric Bibb**, **Lucky Peterson**, **Paul Oscher**, and the **South Memphis String Band**.

Here's a band known for very electric performances with a strong biker appeal (Wenner has a sleeve of tattoos and rides a Harley) doing an acoustic album that wasn't even intended to be an album. The group recorded a set at Sirius/XM for Bill Wax, and everyone liked the set so much, they decided to put it out as a CD release.

The Nighthawks performed "Rollin' and Tumblin'" and "She's Nineteen Years Old" at the BMAs with a standup bass, but this group is electric in almost every definition of the word.

Wenner and I talked a week before the group took the prize, and even then he thought they had a shot. He has a new drummer and singer in the band, **Mark Stutso**, who actually moved over from **Jimmy Thackery's** band after twenty years with Wenner's former partner. "This is really an incredible team right now," says Wenner. "I think it's the best team. The four-piece band that made the reputation from '76 to '86 was certainly a pretty hot-shot deal."

Mark Wenner: I spent a certain chunk of my life trying very hard to be cool.

Don Wilcock for BluesWax: You're going to admit that, are you?

MW: Yeah, I will.

BW: What are some of the things you did as a younger person that you thought would make you cool?

MW: Smoking cigarettes.

BW: Horrible!

MW: There was a whole greaser thing when I was in junior high [where I wore] pegged pants and pointy shoes.

BW: Your daddy let you get away with that? My parents wouldn't let me get away with that.

MW: Well, I had to do certain things. I would leave the house in one pair of pants and change somewhere.

BW: You're smarter than I was.

MW: My mom would take me to Lord & Taylor to buy me some friggin' slacks, and I would go to Robert Hall and buy me some pants that would cost me a dollar with money I probably stole.

BW: What has the addition of Mark Stutso last year done to your sound? You've said this is the best you've sounded.

MW: Well, in terms of the changeover that's been going on since [bass player] **Johnny Castle** and [guitarist] **Paul Bell** joined the band [in 2004]. I mean, God bless **Pete [Ragusa]**, drummer 1974 to 2010]. He hung in there, but I think he was not quite ready to admit that he was done. When **Jan [Zukowski]** bailed [in 2004] he probably should have bailed, but there was a very high-paying band breathing down Jan's neck, and I don't think Pete had anybody banging on the door saying, "Quit the Nighthawks and come with me."

BW: What was the time period when that happened?

MW: About eight years ago that Jan and [Pete] Kanaras [guitar 1995 to 2004] left. So things really changed dramatically in terms of everything with Paul and Johnny and really getting Mark [Stutso] in the band kind of completed that transition in a way.

BW: Changed in what way, 'cause I tend to think of you as rather consistent through your career. How do you see yourself as different?

MW: The impact is ideally consistent, but getting there is a lot less complicated. It's actually a lot more behind-the-scenes stuff, but also the visual interaction of the players on stage; people are smiling and really having fun and intercommunicating, and there's a degree of – always a great potential with spontaneity. The degree of teamwork that goes into loading, unloading, going to and from, the lack of drama and crisis behind the scenes lends itself to a performance that's just wonderful.

It's something that no one sees and knows about, but it really helps make a difference. This is really an incredible team. The four-piece band that made the reputation from '76 to '86 was certainly a pretty hot-shot deal, but again it was like weirdly four individuals that didn't look like they quite belonged together. Maybe that was some of the magic and not that I wanted everybody to wear the same uniforms, but we were different personalities, but when we get out of the van, we don't look like one guy picked up three separate hitchhikers. There's just a kind of consistency to who we are in a way.

BW: I'm interested in your comment on the preparation that goes into getting you to that moment in time when you actually take the stage. Never did that come home to me more vividly and focused than on the *Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise* when I was watching acts that the only time in their regular career they didn't have to schlep equipment from point A to point B and make a scheduled departure and arrival and make sure they had a motel room and was okay, and blah, blah, blah. That's the kind of thing you're talking about that's coming easier now?

MW: Yeah, exactly. [Chuckles]

BW: That's a telling laugh that you use to describe that.

MW: Exactly.

"I was even a roadie before I was in bands, schlepping. The schlepping hit before getting to play."

BW: What does it take to be a road warrior? You've done it now for what, forty-five years?

MW: Well, yeah, more than forty. I mean we're about to have forty years of Nighthawks. I was even a roadie before I was in bands, schlepping. The schlepping hit before getting to play.

BW: What kind of a band were you schlepping for?

MW: The last two bands I schlepped for, one was kind of **Who** quartet kind of band that was pretty incredible actually, but they were – it was herding cats. They were a bunch of real maniacs. This was in New York City, one Columbia [University] guy [Wenner] and three way upper West Side Italian kids.

BW: That sounds like a violent combination.

MW: I mean they were spectacular, but the most fun with them was the singer was drinking Southern Comfort. That was his – I guess because **Janis Joplin** drank it or something, and he would get pretty nutty and our venues were primarily frat parties and school dances. He had hair down to his ass and wore patched velvet and patched bell bottoms and would do the **Roger Daltrey** stuff, and when a frat boy would come up and say, “Hey, we can’t dance to this.” He would have no qualms about saying “F*** off!”

It was my job to keep him from getting killed. The other band was actually a pretty incredible band with a lot of cool originals and a guy sang and played rhythm and a guy – the other band sort of moved over toward becoming my first band as I finally decided I was not gonna drag three other guys around. I was gonna have a band myself, and they started out as a pretty hard-core blues band and then sort of evolved in to a lot of influence from people like **The Band** and stuff like that. And they were both really good bands. And these guys I discovered hated carrying their stuff around, and they didn’t have any way to do it and I was in New York City with a station wagon, and then I discovered they formed a band and then sat around waiting for something to happen, and I would run up and down fraternity row and knock on everybody’s door and say, “Got a great band for ya,” and so they’d call me.

BW: Nice. This is when you were at Columbia?

MW: Yeah. And by the time I started my first band, I got all the best players. They all said, “I’ll play with your band ’cause you’re doing dances and stuff, but I really have my own band, and we’re doing a demo for A&R Records. I’m getting ready to f*** Janis Joplin.” I had a couple of bands. Starting three bands, I was just a harp player, I didn’t sing at that point.

BW: Really?

MW: I started several bands and got singers and watched the bands evolve over into being the singer’s band because that’s where the real focus and energy of the band had to be. I got tired of that stuff, and the next band I started declared myself as singer and in those days the PAs were so funky I approached the job with great attitude, a little bit of style, and like a jump suit and Tom Jones shirt and some shades and pointy boots, jumped around, I was doing material that I wouldn’t even dare to touch at this time. I was doing “There Was A Time” into “Cold Sweat,” *James Brown at the Apollo II* and stuff like that. Everything was funky at that point in time. It was an interesting period of time dancing wise.

BW: I’m trying to imagine – I’m trying to get the visual image in my head of you wearing those clothes doing that song. Were you able to do the split?

MW: No, I didn’t do the splits, but I kind of hurled myself around.

BW: How many tattoos did you have at that point?

MW: Just a few. This might have been even pre-tattoo. So I got the first ink in 1968 I think, right around the same time that I started getting the ink, but I had a hell of a band. In those days if you did a shuffle, the frat boys would stand there and look at you stupid. So everything was – my business card said, “**B-Town Slim and His Rhythm Revue.**”

BW: B-Town?

MW: B-Town, that was Bethesda. B-Town Slim and His Rhythm Revue, and then in quotes it said, “That Memphis Soul Beat,” and everything had to go Brump-gump-ha-ha. Bump, grump gaga. It was a fundamental core of that I first started of a lot of **Junior Walker** and **Booker T.**, except using the harp

instead of the sax and the organ.

BW: Did you ever think they’d be using the instrumental of “Green Onions” to advertise Depends diapers?

MW: No, how about “Smokestack Lightening” to sell Viagra?

BW: I know.

MW: Oh, my God. Actually, it’s nice to hear “Smokestack Lightening” on mainstream television.

BW: Yeah, yeah, it is.

MW: I’ll give it that. But everything I was doing and the **Buddy Guy**, **Junior Wells** early stuff, “Snatch It Back and Hold It,” “Messin’ with The Kid.” I mean they were dealing with the same thing I was dealing with. They were playing Chicago clubs to a younger audience where they had to play James Brown. **James Cotton**, too, was doing a lot of “Hold On, I’m Coming” and James Brown songs at that point. So that’s kind of how I was working it, and the band I had – I had one guitar player that did nothing but chicka-chick-chicka – chicka-chick soul scratching. Even on a slow blues he was scratching like on some of the Slim Harpo records and another guitar player...

BW: Wait a minute, “Rainin’ in My Heart,” I’m having trouble hearing that.

MW: Well, the slightly later ones. Around this time in the late ’60s **Slim Harpo** was still putting out some pretty cool records, but there was a little soul scratch on almost everything, and the other guitar player was a **Steve Cropper-B.B. King** guy who was awesome, and I had a bad-ass rhythm section, and I had a percussion conga guy, but we were doing these long jams on “Wish You Would” and ...

BW: I’ll bet you drove those frat boys right out of their minds.

MW: Well, you know, I had a bead on what they wanted. So it worked pretty good. Frats at Columbia were pretty lame. If you were in a frat, you were not very cool on our campus. If you were in a frat, you were not very cool on our campus in ’68, ’69, ’70. Frats were not the happening thing.

But I was also playing some of the hippie stuff at the school dances too, but the only stuff I got paid for was the frat parties, but at Columbia the scene was musically very competitive. When I arrived on campus, **Billy Cross** and **Rob Stoner**, who were still Billy Schwartz and Rob Rothstein, had this phenomenal band called **The Walkers**, and they were actually putting out records – **The Druids**, a band called The Druids. I’m sure the guys that did **Spinal Tap** were aware of them. Their album came out, The Druids of Stonehenge, and that was like **Tom Werman** and some guys that went on. Tom Werman produced everybody from **Ted Nugent** to **Molly Hatchett**.

So there was some shit going on. I mean we watched **Sha Na Na** evolve out of a one-shot campus event into a giant – somebody saw it and smelled money and jumped in and took the reins and steered ’em to Woodstock and Madison Square Garden and ultimately to television. So there was a lot going on. There was a lot of heavy players.

Even in my freshman year I could take my harps and walk up and down the hall and go out on the lawn and find someone playing guitar. “Blues in G, man, blues in G. Wha ha, wha-ha, wha-ha.” Then we had New York City at our disposal. So many a night I was in Cafe Au Go Go, the Gaslight, The Electric Circus, The Fillmore East, coming home too late to make classes at 9 a.m., but these bands that I was involved with we’d kinda come out of the basement to showcasing down at the Bitter End or something, and I watched these guys that I would turn the band over to, the singers and frontmen I’d turn the band over to, I’d watch them clutch and not handle it. It would drive me crazy. I guess they were all neurotic, intellectual assholes or whatever.

To be continued...



BluesWax with Mark Wenner of The Nighthawks

PART TWO

A Road Warrior Redefines Authentic

By Don Wilcock

When **Mark Wenner** and I talked a couple weeks before the Blues Music Awards, he revealed that he was ready to climb the next rung of the ladder of success. "I'm 62 now, so I deserve a certain amount of cred," said Wenner, the leader of a road warrior blues power quartet that's crisscrossed the country for forty years. Forty years without ever even being nominated for a Blues Music Award. Two weeks later, in the surprise upset of the BMAs, his band walked away with The Best Acoustic Blues Album Award for their CD *Last Train To Bluesville*.

It was a surprise on several levels. First of all, **The Nighthawks** are road warriors who don't do much original material. They come out of a 1960s blues mentality that originally dismissed them as "a white-boy blues band from Washington, D.C." In Part One of our interview, Wenner told me, "My mom would take me to Lord & Taylor to buy me some friggin' slacks, and I would go to Robert Hall and buy me some pants that would cost me a dollar with money I probably stole."

Secondly, they were up against **Eric Bibb**, **Lucky Peterson**, **Paul Oscher**, and the **South Memphis String Band**, all acts that some might argue have a more "authentic" cache. Wenner recalls one early band he fronted. "My business card said, '**B-Town Slim and His Rhythm Revue**.' 'B-Town,' that was Bethesda [Maryland, a suburb of Washington]. B-Town Slim and His Rhythm Revue, and then in quotes it said, 'That Memphis Soul Beat,' and everything had to go Brump-gump-ha-ha. Bump, grump gaga. It was a fundamental core of that I first started of a lot of **Junior Walker** and **Booker T.**, except using the harp instead of the sax and the organ."

Thirdly, The Nighthawks won for an album, *Last Train to Bluesville*, which was recorded in a single session at the Sirius/XM satellite radio studios in their hometown, Washington, D.C., for broadcast with no intention of even releasing the tapes as a CD. It features down-home versions of ten blues classics from such artists as **Muddy Waters**, **Bo Diddley**, **Slim Harpo**, **Chuck Berry**, **Sonny Boy Williamson**, and **James Brown**, among others. Add to that that these guys are probably the most electric blues band this side of the **Fabulous Thunderbirds**, and you have a real anomaly.

Don't get me wrong. The Nighthawks have been on my A list for most of their four decades and are definitely one of the top ten "bar bands" on the national circuit. But this award will force traditional blues fans to give them a new look.

Wenner loves playing harp and singing with this crack band, but he's watched artists five to ten years his senior, like **John Hammond** and **Elvin Bishop**, climb the next rung on career ladder, and as you will read below he was ready to cash in on that extra dollop of success that comes from being an elder statesman of the blues. Now, with this win under his belt, that goal appears much much closer to happening.

Wenner's come a long way, baby. In Part One, he recalled his days in the late 1960s as a student at Columbia University. "I started several bands and got singers and watched the bands evolve over into being the singer's band because that's where the real focus and energy of the band had to be. I got tired of that stuff, and the next band I started declared myself as singer and in those days the PAs were so funky I approached the job with great attitude, a little bit of style, and like a jump suit and **Tom Jones** shirt and some shades and pointy boots, jumped around, I was doing material that I wouldn't even dare to touch at this time. I was doing "There Was A Time" into "Cold Sweat," James Brown at the Apollo II and stuff like that. Everything was funky at that point in time. It was an interesting period of time dancing wise.

"In those days if you did a shuffle, the frat boys would stand there and look at you stupid."

After recording *Last Train to Bluesville*, veteran drummer **Pete Ragusa** was replaced by **Mark Stutso**, who in concert with the band at the Dinosaur Barbecue in Troy, New York, a week before the BMAs added a new level of energy to a band that already pushes a lot of testosterone into its sets. Stutso has a history of playing with an offshoot of **Black Oak Arkansas**, one of the most gonzo rock bands ever to come out of the south in the 1970s. He spent nearly twenty years with **Jimmy Thackery**, who originally founded the Nighthawks with Wenner in 1974.

Stutso twirls his sticks, sings lead on songs like "Matchbox" and James Brown's "Ill Go Crazy" and gooses the band into a rockin' revamp of The 1965 **Guess Who** classic "Shakin' All Over" that they call "Heartbreak Shake." Together, the group jells into a hard and fast tank attack. Wenner has morphed into a very "authentic" singer and under-appreciated harp player, **Paul Bell** emulates the best qualities of **Hubert Sumlin** on guitar, and **Johnny Castle** nails down the rhythm.

Don Wilcock for BluesWax: Was there a feeling that you'd made a coup when you hired Mark Stutso as drummer after he'd spent twenty years with your former partner Jimmy Thackery?

Mark Wenner: Well, he was already away from Jimmy Thackery for a couple of years actually.

BW: Okay.

MW: And I had my eye on him because I knew [our then drummer] Pete [Ragusa] was moving towards bailing, and so I was keeping my ear to the ground for drummers, but I knew he [Stutso] was not quite as busy as he wanted to be. He's living in Pittsburgh and he was playing around a little bit. He would come out when we'd play there and hang out.

So he was already on my list way at the top, but he and Thackery parted ways and I had been a fan of his playing, and his singing and the second I knew Pete was looking to make his move, I had the studio lined up and we had a very exciting little tryout session, and it was just totally obvious this was gonna be the next stage of the Nighthawks.

The blending of the four voices which had always been a thing, and it was something right from the get-go was – our version of "Bring It On Home," for example, or doing "Little By Little" – I was really into those either adding multiple vocals or going for those unusual Chicago blues things that had multiple vocals like "Little By Little" – and me and Pete and [former bass player] **Jan [Zukowski]** and Thackery that concept was there, but when [guitarist] **Paul [Bell]**, [current bass player] **Johnny [Castle]**, Mark and me sang together it was – I'd been waiting a long time for this.

There were certain grooves I had a degree of frustration with Pete about, conceptual differences Pete and I's concept of producing was so radically opposite. There were musical differences in how certain grooves should be, and certainly Pete and Jan were considered an incredible rhythm section, and they certainly were, but when it was Johnny Castle and Mark, I knew it was a new magic. It was one of those [things where] the groove was so wide you could jump in and climb back out. It was just really satisfying right from the instant, and things are happening now.

We had a rehearsal session, and I don't usually use the "R" word – we had a rehearsal session a couple of months ago where Stutso came in with two songs off his solo album and a couple of fragments. Johnny came in with a sort of a fragment, and in like a four-hour session we had five original songs. I mean – there's just a degree of working together that's just so professional, so focused, so – and still having fun. We'll just work until we get cross-eyed, and we can put other stuff together. We can add other material together quickly. We've done a lot of stuff. We just did three days with **Billy Price** backing him up. We've worked with **Hubert [Sumlin]** in this situation. All the cool things we get to do. We've got a thing coming up. We're gonna do some stuff with **Tracy Nelson** at XM in an acoustic format.

BW: She's got a new album out, yeah.

MW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We're gonna do a couple of tunes off that album totally acoustic down at XM right after the Blues Music Awards about May 11, I think. Her and my wife – she and my wife, excuse me, are big pals, and she's gonna stay here, and they just yak, yak, yak, you know, the whole time. So I don't get a word in edgewise.

BW: You can't always be the center of attention, Mark.

MW: No, I'm fine. I'm fine with that. Go in the garage and bang on things.

BW: So when are we gonna hear this new combination on record?

MW: Well, I think we're close to having enough material at least to start recording.

BW: Great!

MW: Well, we did these two songs of Billy's I think I can sing, so we already know them. So that's two, I haven't tried to sing 'em yet. I got two songs that aren't original, and we got four Stutso's and one Johnny. So that's kind of enough to go in studio and maybe make something, make an instrumental up. You know, come up with one or two other covers.

Bill Wax told me, and I hate these rules, but he said the next album has to have seven, eight, or nine originals on it to stay in the ballgame that we started with American Landscape. With American Landscape we committed to spending a lot of money with [publicist] Mark Pucci, tooting the horn, which we had never really done before. With Last Train to Bluesville we really went back in the game. Our booking agent accused me of being a regional act.

I said, "F*** me. I'm in forty-nine states." He said, "Yeah, but that was nine years ago," and I have been struggling with not having national identity. Yet it's been real easy for me to just do the things I do every year, and keep on playing open house to Fred's Bike Sop down the street, go to Florida in March and go to up-state New York in April and May, but that stuff of running from coast to coast and quarter to quarter is ancient history, and I'm not sure how much longer I really want to do that stuff. It's friggin' brutal. We about killed ourselves. So my biggest chance is being the last guy standing up, the legendary old guy and that's pretty close.

BW: When are you gonna get to the point where you just say, "Okay, I'm only gonna do the high profile gigs, and they gotta come and pick me up at the airport in a limo."

MW: [Laugh]

BW: Are you ever gonna get to that point?

MW: I kinda doubt it.

BW: You like being a road warrior, don't you?

MW: Well, there's a twist of fate in terms of making it any kind of – I'm trying to get up one rung on a ladder is pretty much what I'm really trying to do. I'd rather be making [a little more than I am]. And I don't think it's that unreasonable, but that's a huge chasm, and the difference is amazing, and very few of my peers can make it.

You've got an occasional Tab Benoit, but I'm not as pretty as he is, and I don't have that whole "Lou-Easy-Anna" thing goin' on. So my biggest chance is being the last guy standing up, the legendary old guy and that's pretty close. I remember when Charlie Musselwhite and Tracy Nelson, John Hammond, Elvin Bishop, they're pretty much all the same age, and I remember when they all turned fifty, and I remember when they all turned sixty, and how they were all able to gain a degree of stature in spite of their racial background in the blues world just by being old enough, and, Christ, I'm sixty-two now, so I deserve a certain amount of cred.

All those people who, when they were struggling like I am, I kinda have friendships with all those people. They've always been encouraging. They were all out there when I was getting started so they were definitely role models.

BW: Yup, yup, yup.

MW: I mean John Hammond's kicked us in the ass a number of times and given us a helping hand. We've worked with all of them. We've worked with Tracy. We've worked with Charlie for that matter. So I like to see myself just down the ladder from them. They've all pulled that off, and I've got – at this point I hate

it, but it comes down to having original material.

BW: Oh, yeah. Why do you hate that?

MW: Well, because I don't believe it.

BW: Why don't you believe it?

MW: Somebody's imposed this rule on me, and I see through it, you know. I see how much great stuff is being done and wasn't original. Here's the irony of it. We go into XM and we spend two hours cutting classic blues stuff in our acoustic format, and everybody does double back flips over it. Why is that against the rules? I don't understand it. It's our most successful stuff, Jacks and Kings, Last Train to Bluesville. It's like, "Well, **Elvis** never wrote a friggin' song, and **Etta James** never wrote a friggin' song, so you know.

BW: I was gonna say you've gone against the tide. Most people who've lasted as long as you have at the level you have done it on original material, and there's a certain – maybe it's an attitude. I know Bruce Iglauer has it.

MW: Oh, yeah.

BW: Iglauer won't hire anybody who won't write their own material.

MW: And the Blind Pig guy. The Blind Pig guy told me sixty percent of the album has to be original.

BW: Yeah.

MW: I didn't know there was a rule book. You send me the rule book, and I'll look at it.

BW: I boycott *American Idol* because they won't let the artists sing their own songs. I'm contributing to the problem, if you want to call it a problem.

MW: There you go. It's your fault.

BW: Yup, it is my fault. As a journalist I appreciate artists that add to the genre with their own original material.

MW: It's always suspect 'cause half the time I know where these guys stole it from. I'm sure you've read the Keith Richards book [Life] by now, right?

BW: Yes, oh, I love that book!

MW: I'm seeing so many fine little details that I'm really identifying with. He talks about how Andrew Oldham locked him and **Mick [Jagger]** in a room and can't come out until you write a song, and then they write all these schlock ballads and stuff. It took 'em another year before they could write something they would dare to even present to the band, which was "The Last Time," where they took the chorus from **The Staple Singers** song and wrote a couple of lyrics. You know?

BW: Yeah, but look at their entire songbook and tell me that we would be better off if they were still doing Slim Harpo and Staple Singers songs in 2011.

MW: Somebody should have taken me and Thackery and locked us in a room once upon a time.....

BW: I'm sorry I have to take Bruce Iglauer's point of view on this, and I would much prefer to see you stretch and do original material and, yeah, you may start off by copying old stuff and giving it new lyrics and changing the melodies just a little bit, but somewhere in there, there's diamonds in that rust.

MW: Right. I'm still relying on two songs I wrote twenty-five years ago. When we're doing the sets now that are primarily original I do "Back to The City" and "Guard Your Heart."