

LONG DISTANCE INFORMATION

Doug MacLeod: Singer, Entertainer

Doug MacLeod is making another visit to the UK this month and has just released a new album, *Exactly Like This*. Blues In Britain spoke with Doug at his home in California.

This is becoming a habit; you must like coming here. You'll be by yourself as usual, a hire car with a guitar in the boot?

Yeah, I'm old school. Once in Kansas City this old fella came up to me and said: "Doug, you're like those old country blues guys: one suitcase, one guitar and on the road". I said: "There's a big difference between me and those old blues guys - that's a Honda Accord sitting out there waiting for me!" Those guys had to get on the train, with a little satchel. But I am old school like that.

Your new album, Exactly Like This, is out and is getting a good reaction here. You've recorded it again with Reference Recordings, which is all very high quality bespoke equipment and so on, but at the heart of it is you and the guys, sitting in a room and playing live.

Yes, no headphones, no overdubs, no pitch control, no nothin'. It's like how it was done in the thirties or forties; the band would just sit down and play the music. We just took the best performances. I go in with 16 songs and whatever are the best 11, 12, 13 songs - they're the ones that go on the album.

And they tell stories don't they? Some of the songs are about women that you have met somewhere along the way; I like those, 'Raylene and Vanetta' - and a favourite one of mine is 'Serious Doin' Woman'. How much of these stories are true and how much is artistic?

The only thing about 'Serious Doin' Woman' that may not be the truth - and I'm not saying a lot to this as I'm a happily married man - is that the bus may not have been going to New York!

You'll be playing these new songs on the British dates, and I hope the stories are all going to be there too, as I love your stories as much as the songs.

Well I'm glad you do; that's what's nice about coming to the UK. People there really like the stories too and it's nice to tell the stories, so people have an idea of what the song is about. That helps them to travel along with the song, so I love telling the stories and I guess that's part of the old school thing too.

I remember seeing you once in Memphis and you came on the stage and you chatted and chatted, you told all these stories and I was



“You got to write, sing and entertain.”

laughing and crying, and after a while you said: "I guess I better sing you a song now" and it hadn't occurred to me and I looked at my watch and an hour and a half had gone by. I realised it wasn't a normal show; you were there to do the story telling. But it hadn't made any difference to me, I was very happy.

I'm glad to hear that and to give you a little scoop here; we're thinking about getting a place in the States where I'm going to do a concert thing just telling those stories, because people have asked me. They say they should be down on record and I did write some of them for a magazine, but when you write them down it's not the same as when you tell them, because of the inflections. I can do some of the accents the old guys had, and when it was a sad or poignant story the timing of how they stopped or said something - to keep that history alive. I kind of think that's important, so we're thinking very seriously about doing that.

I think that would be great. Did you do any of that on your radio show? I read some of your articles over here, but we couldn't get

the radio show.

Yeah, a little bit. I had a lot of fun on that show, but then I started to tour more and I had to give it up, but I enjoyed it and the audience did too - I guess that's a good thing.

Some of the old guys you talk about were early influences on you, like Ernest Banks; how did you come to meet him?

Yes, I was in Norfolk, Virginia, playing blues in coffee houses - I wasn't playing my music much; I didn't have a lot of confidence. I had just gotten over a stutter and if I wrote a song I would say "This is an old Howlin' Wolf song", but none of the hippy people knew that, so I could get away with it and eventually I was called The King Of The Blues of Tidewater. One guy said to me: "Do you want to meet a guy who ran with Blind Lemon Jefferson?" I said: "Yeah", but I wasn't going to learn anything from him because what on earth could he teach the Blues King of Tidewater.

I had a sort of uniform; I kinda looked like a blues guy and I would take my guitar case and scrape it up against a brick wall to make it look like I'd been travelling for

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20 or 30 years. I was only 19 or 20 years old; a pretty little thing too - skinny hipped, pretty little guy five years away from shaving twice a week, acting like a tough guy.

So off I went to meet this crusty old blues man. We went up to this old place called Toano, Virginia - in those days a little hamlet, nowadays it's a town. We went down an old road and you would have to know which magnolia tree to turn right at, to get to where he lived. So we got there and he said: "What do y'all want?" I said: "Well we came by to see you and to hear some blues", and he said: "Well I ain't gonna play no blues - my wife died and I wanna join her, so I ain't gonna play you no blues. I'll play you some spiritual music". I said: "Look we brought a bottle of wine, would you like a glass of wine?" Mr Banks said: "Alright, I'll have a glass of wine". He had a glass of wine and then another glass of wine and then he said: "Well, I guess one blues won't hurt" and then he looked over at me; I guess he saw something in me, and he said: "But first I want this boy here to play".

So I picked up my guitar and I played, played a whole bunch of nothin', a lot of notes; I was nervous, I was scared. He only had one eye and he looked at me and said: "Give me that guitar, boy." Then, he tuned it from regular tuning into open G and he played some bottleneck blues, with so much feeling and so much soul, not a lot of notes, just a powerful groove going on. He looked at me with his one eye as if to say: "Can you do that, boy?" and I kept my eyes on him, as I didn't want to cower or

look away from him.

When he was done playing he said: "Tell me something, boy, which one moved you more, yours or mine?" I said, "Yours did." Then, he asked: "You want to be a blues man?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Never play a note you don't believe, never write or sing about what you don't know about." And he looked at me, and he said: "Can you do that, boy?" And I said: "No, Sir, I can't do that." And he said: "Well, you're not a blues man are you?" I said: "No, Sir."

That really crushed me and I couldn't wait to get out of there, but as we were going out the door he put his left arm around me and spoke into my ear and said: "You know where I live now boy don't you?" I looked at him and said: "Does this mean I can come back?" And he said: "You ain't deaf too are you boy?!"

I think that's a good lesson, to write about your own life and experiences. I mean, I can't write about picking cotton or life in the Delta!

That's right. He said: "You got to write, sing and entertain - then maybe I'll call you a blues man." Maybe three or four months later we were sitting on a corner in Norfolk, Virginia, outside a place called the 'Folk Ghetto', sharing a bottle of wine together right on the street corner. I told him: "Ernest, you know, I want to be a blues man, I really do."

He told me: "If you want to be a bluesman you got to write your own blues, son." I said to him: "Look, I don't know anything about the real blues. I've never been to Mississippi. I don't know about picking cotton, mojos and black cat bones - that's stuff I learnt from you. I don't want to know about that, it's scary stuff. What am I going to write about?" So, he looked at me with that one eye; he said: "You ever been lonely?" I said: "Yes." He said: "You ever needed a woman?" I said: "Yeah." He said: "You ever needed a little rent money?" I said: "Yeah, sometimes." He said: "That's the blues, too, son. Write about that."

And that's what I learnt - if you write from your own experience, your own heart, that's how you reach other people. If it comes from your heart it'll go to someone else's, then it can find its way to the soul and that's where songs like to live. Blues is an honest music going from one soul to another, that's always stayed with me.

You had a long career as a sideman on bass and guitar with artists such as Big Mama Thornton and George 'Harmonica' Smith. What made you decide to go out on your own?

To be honest what moved me away from playing the bass was girls; I couldn't get any girls being a bass player. The guitar player was getting all the girls. He was the third ugliest guy on the planet and he had all these women around him after a gig and I thought: "I'm giving up bass, if he can get five girls I could at east get one". So I decided the guitar was where I was going to go. As for writing songs, a big thing happened with George 'Harmonica' Smith. I was playing electric blues with George and I sounded like B.B. King and George came up to me once after a gig and said: "Dubb, you sure sound like BB King" and I said: "George, that's nice to hear". He said: "Dubb, that wasn't a compliment! Dubb, you gotta sound like Dubb - we already got B.B. King." I think that's when it really changed; he was the guy who said: "You're writing, you're singing, you're playing, you're entertaining" - connecting with what Ernest Banks had told me so many years before.

I was lucky that these guys liked me and allowed me to be with them and be part of their culture. I worked with some of the best and I never heard one of them call themselves an 'artist'; they all called themselves entertainers and that was a lesson to me.

Doug Macleod will be touring the UK through May and into June - singing his blues, telling stories and most of all, being an entertainer. Old school.

Paul Long

Forthcoming Gigs: Blues Band

15 May: Southern Pavillion, Worthing

16 May: The Windjammer, Dartmouth

18 May: Norman Knight, Whichford

23 May: Old Town Hall,
Hemel Hempstead

24 May: Bluefunk, Poynton Legion

25 May: Red Barn, Lingfield

26 May: Blues Kitchen, NW1

27 May: Bottleneck Blues Club,
Rochester

29 May: Sheep Dip Sessions,
Princethorpe

31 May: Hope Tavern, Holton-le-Moor

3 June: Bath Fringe Festival

5 June: Fairkytes Arts Centre,
Hornchurch

