



and pays homage to his inspirations

T

he life and times of country/rock/blues/allstylesinone guitar genius Will Ray are well-documented. • Born in Virginia, raised on the music of Peter, Paul, and Mary, Ian and Sylvia, Elvis, and Ray & Glover, he started playing guitar at 15, listening to records by the Stones, Clapton, Bloomfield, and others. • After high school, he joined the Army at age 18, served two years in Vietnam, then returned home to study pre-med. • For years, he didn't touch a guitar, until one of his brothers brought home the Grateful Dead's *Live/Dead* album. The spark was struck, and Ray was soon back at the guitar, putting in eight hours of practice while maintaining his studies.

By Ward Meeker

WILL RAY

GETS THE BLUES

Vintage Guitar: Can you recount the first time an instrument ended up in your hands?

Will Ray: I fashioned a little slide out of a straightedge and a cigar box. It had rubber bands for strings. It was something I did in my dad's office one Saturday when I was four or five.

And a guitar?

We always had a Gibson LG-4 lying around the house. My older brother, Gaylord, played it. That was the first official instrument I ever really picked up.

And you started getting serious about playing when you were about 16?

Yeah, when the Beatles were really big. And once I got hooked by them, I had to have a guitar like George Harrison played early on - a Gretsch Country Gentleman. My dad told me that if I saved my money, he would match funds with me and I could get any guitar I wanted. Well, I saved up, and when we finally went down to get one, they were backordered! So it took about five more months to get it.

But that was my first guitar - not a bad starter! I'm a big fan of Silvertones and Kays and stuff, but back then there were a lot of cheap guitars that just couldn't be set up right. Nowadays you can get a really fine instrument for \$100.

Your influences include some of the obvious greats, like Mike Bloomfield and Roy Buchanan, and there

are some not as famous, like Amos Garrett and Danny Kalb. What do you think you've drawn from all of them?

Danny Kalb was probably the first big influence on me, and I never

could figure out how he played a lot of stuff. But what I got from him, through osmosis, was his way of playing with a lot of open strings. He'd first somewhere on the first string, but play the second string open just to give it some sort of wank. That's what I took away from my "studies" of his style.

My earliest influences were very blues-oriented, and what I tried to do on my new album, *Mojo Blues*, was to sit down and remind myself why I started playing in the first place. Mike Bloomfield just blew my mind. The first Paul Butterfield album was very revealing about what blues could be about. Before then, I'd heard people like B.B. King and stuff, and everyone had their own style, but they were fairly traditional.

But Bloomfield took blues and went off in this weird direction with it. And somehow, it really fit - there was some sort of magic between Paul Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield. He had more energy... when you're a kid, you gravitate toward music that has energy. And he had more energy than anybody I'd heard before or have since, when it comes to

blues.

Hendrix had a lot of energy, too, but Bloomfield zoomed in. He was amazing on that first album. Then when the second album, *East West*, came out, it was almost like a different guitar player. He took it even further than I thought it could go. My favorite song is "Work Song," where he just goes ape****!

He was doing things that really made me think about guitar, and scales, and what my fingers were doing. I think he was probably a very visual player, and I tend to be visual because of that album. I look at my fingers - the patterns they're doing.

I first heard Amos Garrett on "Midnight At The Oasis," and at the time I was playing in a rock band in Richmond, Virginia, and our girl singer wanted to learn the song. But when I listened to it, I was blown away by that solo! I still think it's one of the top 20 rock solos of all time. It has this kind of suave coolness to it.

Amos plays with a lot of swing, and when I heard that - and I knew he was using a Lenny Pagan blues slide at the time - that's when I started experimenting with mini-slides. I would go to a local flea market, and there was a guy there who made rings out of spoons. He'd saw the handles off of spoons and forks, and

fashion them into rings. So I had him make me three or four, for different fingers and with different thicknesses.

Later, I had Dave Bortoff start making [slides] based on those early attempts.

But it all kind of started with Amos Garrett and "Midnight At The Oasis" [laughs]!

I have a live album of his, recorded recently, and it's very bluesy. I just happened to listen to it about the time I was "going back to my roots," and I loved jamming along to it. Amos is another great player who is overlooked.

And you've somewhat gotten into A&R, to try to help players like him become more recognized...

Well, if I had power...[laughs] "If I Were King" things would be different. You'd have to kind of prove your abilities before you'd get a record deal.

...that'd leave a lot of pop bands looking for work!

It sure would! But hopefully, what we're trying to do with the Helencasters' label, Phoenix Records, is be a label for "guitar people."

I think one of the things that bothered Danny Gatton was that he wished he was more accepted by the mainstream. And I think there's a niche out there for people who really want to offer high art but get very little recognition for it.

Without compromising?

I don't know how you can make a record without some sort of compro-

more. I'm faced with the same thing every time I do an album, or the Hellecasters do an album - and we're definitely outside the mainstream. And part of it is that we like doing things our way, and we also like people telling us what to do. That's something everyone has to deal with.

Still, the Hellecasters are your outlet for the less-compromising music...

We're our own worst enemy sometimes, because of that. Not only do we talk this concept of "you're not gonna tell us what to do" so far, we often don't even want the other two guys to tell us what to do (laughs). We won't even record together in the same room, except to do basics. We do all of our parts at home because the last thing you want is the other two guys standing over your shoulder, saying "Well, I think you should have another go at that, Will!"

I guess it's from years of doing sessions, and compromising so much, and playing it safe for so many years. Eventually you just say, "I'm going to have at least one outlet where I'm free to do what I want." And that's good for musicians to have.

I think a lot of our fans are frustrated guitar players who have day jobs now. They're professional people, and they dig what we're doing because at some time in their lives, they were headed in similar directions. But they just got sidetracked by responsibilities.

And they probably love you and hate you at the same time for doing what you're doing!

(laughs) I know...

And then there's Jerry Garcia. After the Army, you came back and started really hearing what Garcia was doing, and his playing inspired you to start playing again. For those with raised eyebrows, can you quantify the attraction?

Well, I played in high school for a couple years, and at best I was terrible. I didn't understand music theory very much or anything. Then I went into the Army and did a stint in Vietnam. And for some reason, when I came back, my whole attitude toward life had changed.

And I think that's when this whole thing started with me, the attitude that "You're not going to tell me what to do anymore, because I listened to these other guys tell me what to do, and they

almost got me killed." But I wasn't sure what I wanted to do when I got out. So I went to college under the GI Bill, just to tread water.

My second year in college, though, my younger brother, Enos, brought home *Live/Dead*, and played it while we were putting up the Christmas tree and stuff. And when "Turn On Your Lovelight" came on, it just begged me to pick up that LG-6 and jam with it! All of a sudden, I started to remember what I knew about guitar. And I played along to that song over and over for two hours, until I was exhausted. But I was so jubilant because it was such a defining moment. I knew exactly what I wanted to do - play guitar.

That's how the Dead influenced me. And there's something magical about transcribing a solo played by someone who's stoned out of their mind... To this day, when I hear "Dark Star" I feel a little high!

That's the kind of stuff that I want to go back to. And I have to keep reminding myself why I'm in this music business. There are so many negative things about it, and the bottom line is you gotta have fun doing it.

I have a formula - what I call the three Fs: fame, fortune, and fun. Every project has some sort of balance of the three. Some you do for very little fame or fortune, but that's fine as long as you're getting a lot of fun out of it. Other gigs are money gigs, where the fortune part is high. The fame part probably is low because it's crap music. And the fun part might be low.

So the ultimate gig is something where the three Fs are really high. That's what I'm looking for: the fun factor is high, visibility is high, and you're making a lot of money (laughs)...

Have you had one of those lately?
No (laughs)?

Do you know anybody who has?
I don't know... I suspect someone like Kenny G probably does.

While the rest of us suffer...

Yeah, he probably enjoys listening to himself!

In the last couple years, have you been doing more playing or producing?

I started producing in about 1987, and I've always had quite a bit of a hand in producing. I have a studio in my house, and I do a lot of demos and CDs for local artists. And I do all my Hellecaster overdubs in my house.

When I started producing, it meant I was involved 10 times more than if I simply came in and just recorded a guitar part. So in the early days, it was a question of economics. Then it got to where I kind of enjoyed it because there's a control element to it. Plus, I got to play all the guitar I wanted! And most of the things I produce tend to be guitar-oriented. People who come to me want a rooky feel, which to me is guitar-oriented.

So I enjoy producing, and it's what I do most of the time. And when [Hellecaster bandmates] John [Jorgenson] and Jerry [Donahue], and I can get together, we do shows. But as time goes on, we're kind of going in different directions, which is only natural. We go together out of friendship, and we still love each other - and I can't say that about most of the bands I've been in over the years.

So a fourth Hellecasters album isn't in the works?

It's not in our sights right now. I'm not saying it's not on the horizon somewhere, but all of us have to get our individual yayas out, I think. And I don't think any of us wanted the Hellecasters to be a full-time, main gig. We got together to do one show, for Ronnie Mack's barn dance in 1990, and it just snowballed. It has always been something we do on the side.

Sometimes I think people make too much out of it. We're just three guitar players trying to have a little fun! I remember going on our first tour, and I think a lot of our audience was guitar players who came out to watch because we were gunslingers, coming into their town to show everybody that "We're the best there are..." (laughs)!

Number one, we're not the best, and number two, we're just trying to have fun. A lot of people misinterpreted what we were about. All we're trying to do is play guitar. We were all tired of playing behind vocalists and playing little eight-bar or 16-bar solos. We wanted to do something where we could wail.

Well, you might not have been trying to threaten anybody, but you were playing places where one great guitar player would've made news. And one could assume there was never a show where you didn't deliver...

I was always amazed by that... there were times that, in our own opinions, we

were just awful, but people would walk away saying, "That was the best show I've ever seen in my life!" And I'd think, "Man, are they serious? We were awful! We didn't play harmonies right, we were sloppy, I broke a string..." But the people didn't care. They got something out of it that three of us didn't know we were delivering.

Since we last spoke, you've teamed up with Fender on a couple of Teles. How did those come about?

In '96, Fender came to us and said they were thinking about doing a line of signature instruments like they'd done with the Ventures. We started with the Hellecaster series, which were made for about a year and a half. After that, they wanted to do the Custom Shop signature models. They'd already been doing one for Jerry, and when they said, "Let us build your dream guitar," we let them!

It was fun. I tried a lot of different things, and I ended up with what I consider to be the ultimate guitar. And I'm talking with G&L about doing an affordable signature model, as well as clinics in the spring and summer.

Your new solo record, *Mojo Blues*, is an ode to the guys who fired you up from the very beginning.

Well, I just tried to get back in touch with that part of me that started playing in the first place; having fun with my influences. I listened to a lot of Mike Bloomfield, Danny Kalb, Peter Frampton, and others. So I got in touch with the part of me that enjoys playing and having fun on guitar.

So the solos were just me trying to have fun, and not trying to beat myself up over them, like I do with the Hellecasters stuff (laughs), where you're not just playing a solo, but you're playing to not be left in the dust!

Sometimes you just have to rest a little bit, and what I tried to do with *Mojo Blues* is just have fun. I've always had trouble writing blues songs, so I went back and really listened to a lot of it. And I found that I could really tap into the simplicity of the blues without oversimplifying it. It's a fun idiom to play.

It can be as challenging as you want it to be...

Yeah. Danny Gatton could wail on a three-chord blues song, but make it really sound totally different by throwing all kinds of stuff in there. Same with



The Will Ray Signature

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Some Mojo For Ya!

WILL RAY

Duane Reinhardt. There's a kick you can do with the old blues stuff.

Which songs or solos are the closest to what Hellecasters fans might expect?

Well, Jerry and I trade solos on "Oh Me, Oh My." Jerry has a real sweet side to his playing, and in the Hellecasters he doesn't always get to show himself. I wanted to show that a bit.

Same with John - he plays on "I Hate My Day Job." He came over - didn't bring a guitar - and went into my music room, which is lined with guitars, and he grabbed the least accessible one - a Gibson ES-175 with strings that hadn't been changed in 10 years - 'cuz that's the way he is!

Then he looked at my amps and said, "What's that over in the corner?" He likes to go for the things that are the least obvious. And then he just kinda wailed on a blues solo.

And that's what I wanted - I wanted them to be spontaneous, and play the first thing that came to mind. That's how I approached the whole album.

People who know about the Hellecasters will probably like "Shenandoah." I think there's something there, especially for Will Ray fans.

And there's the "hidden track" - which is mentioned in the liner notes!

There are actually two: the "Chicken Song" and then there's a backwards message. Is it some sort of secret?

No, we were just having fun... just making people find their own way of playing it back. Get their creative juices flowing! ☺



Will Ray

Mejo Blues

Wild Rose Records

It's just plain-old ridiculous, some of the guitar playing on this album. Will Ray, as most of you probably know, is one of the Hellecasters. He and cohorts John Jorgenson and Jerry Donohue have cut a swath through boring guitar playing for years now, making even the most simple melodies sound interesting, vital, and new. And now, Will does the same with the blues.

If you're looking for yet another pedal-to-the-metal SRV distortion-saturated blues-style outing, you're in the wrong place; Will uses an amazing number of imaginative licks to bring new life to this now-seemingly ancient genre. On the sleeve of the disc, he says the CD lets him wear his blues influences on his sleeve. Among them are Darryl Korb from the Blues Project, B.B. King, Michael Bloomfield, Eric Clapton, and Dicky Betts and Duane Allman. You can definitely hear flashes of those players, especially the ABB guys. But there is so much more here.

"Wait A Minute" has chops galore. I don't think I've ever heard anyone (except maybe Robben Ford) go from the I chord to the IV as brilliantly as Will does. And that's just the opener of the solo. From there it's a guitar player's feast, as is most of the album.

The slow blues of "Bad, Bad Day," and the interesting take on "Shenandoah" highlight Will's dazzling

double and triple-stops, excellent chordal work, and killer chops. Those chops throughout the album feature some very unique licks for this kind of stuff. His use of open strings and hammer-ons is effortless. His bends are big and on the money. There are some chromatic licks (i.e. the swing portion of "Trouble") that'll leave you smiling while shaking your head in amazement.

"219 Orange Avenue" has basically the same chordal framework as the Allmans version of "Sloppy Monday." The solos and fills are as good as it gets. The solo starts with volume swells that fit perfectly. From there, it's a big, fat blues sound followed by a jazzy solo that swings and sways wonderfully with the music. And if you delve deeply into the CD, you'll find a hidden track that's just plain hysterical. It's a live recording from 1990 called "The Chicken Song" the lyric has a chicken giving love hints to another fella, and as you might expect, some hellacious chickin' pickin' follows.

Will's vocals are nice, too. His style fits the tunes perfectly, with its distinctive timbre and emotive sense. Lyrically, the tunes fit Will's sense of fun, for the most part.

And there are a couple of guests here you might know. His Hellecaster buddies appear on one or two each, and Ted Greene (yes, that Ted Greene) plays on the very fun "Holy Smokes."

I could go on, but let me just say if you'd like to spice up your blues playing, or just want to have some fun listening, here's a good place to start. Easily one of my top five guitar albums of 2001.

Visit greatguitar.com for this one and lots more great guitar stuff. - John Heidt ☺

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