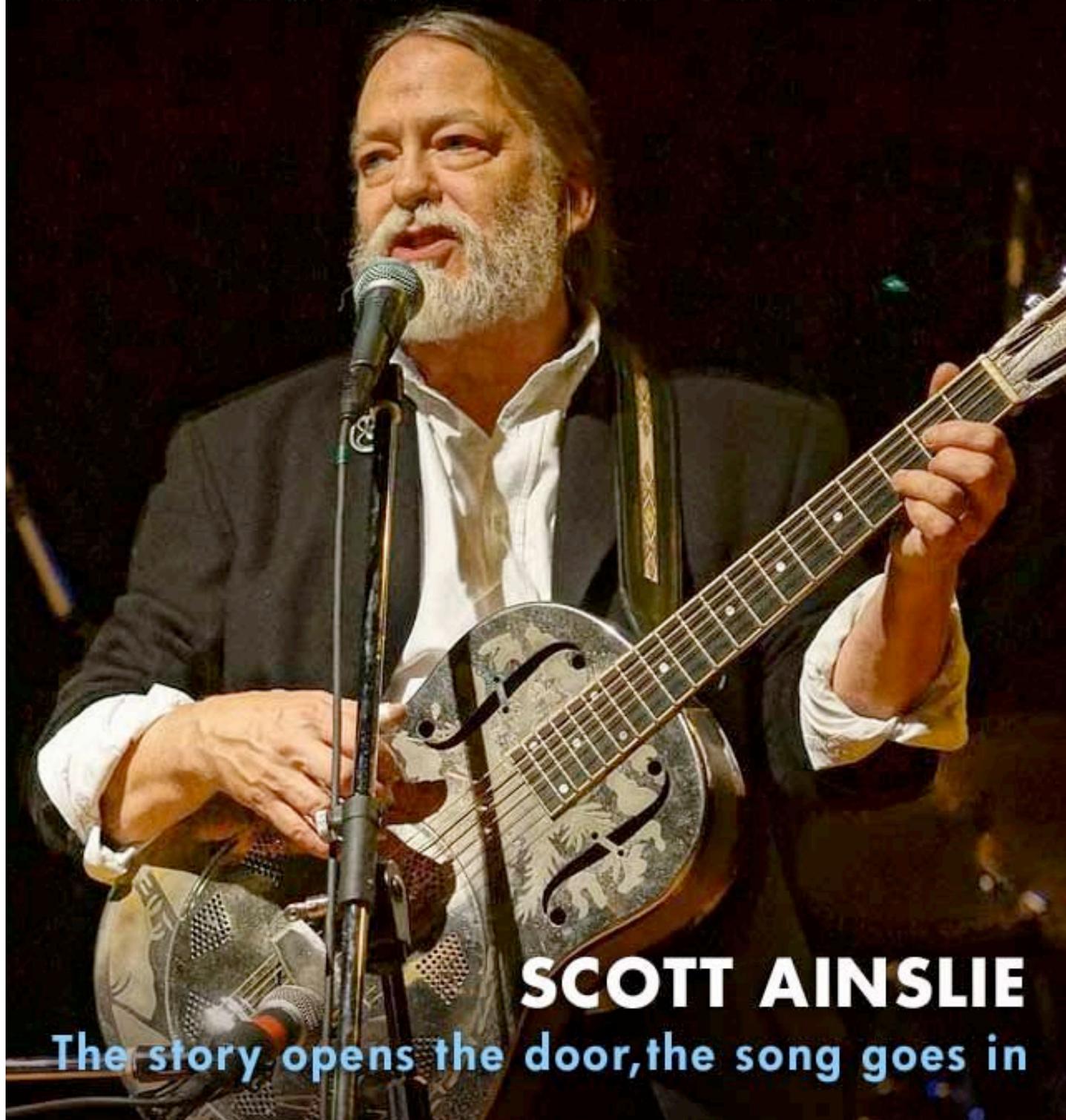


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M A G A Z I N E



SCOTT AINSLIE

The story opens the door, the song goes in

Featured Blues Interview – Scott Ainslie



It could be something as complex and spiritual as destiny or even the perfect alignment of the stars with the planets.

Or, it could be something much simpler, something like a happy accident or even the stubborn refusal to give up pursuit.

Whatever you choose to call it, the end result is the same; Scott Ainslie ended up with a guitar he had long coveted.

And with that prized possession – a Gibson L-50, circa 1934 -nestled firmly in his hands, Ainslie's latest album, *The Last Shot Got Him* (Cattail Music), was quickly given birth.

The album – with just Ainslie on guitar (plus a touch of banjo) and vocals – is like a love letter to another glorious time, a time when legends like Robert Johnson, the Rev. Gary Davis and Mississippi John Hurt were still alive and in their prime. Ainslie's sixth solo offering seemed

to strike a responsive chord with lovers of authentic acoustic blues far and wide.

“Last year ended on a lovely high note. Here in the state that I live in – Vermont – The Times Argus (newspaper in the state capital of Montpelier) gives out yearly awards for various records and they gave *The Last Shot Got Him* the award for Best Album of the Year for 2014,” Ainslie said. “The award is called a Tammie Award and I'm honored. The album also ended up in a lot of radio top 10 lists for the year as the record started to find its legs, so that's a delight.”

The album, named for a line in Mississippi John Hurt's “The First Shot Missed Him” features Ainslie's takes on tunes not only from Hurt, but Rev. Gary Davis and Robert Johnson, as well. Ainslie also ushers cuts from Irving Berlin and Fats Waller – along with the eternal “Over the Rainbow” – into the 21st century with warmth, charm and much love on the long-player. The ‘newest’ song on the disc is the Ainslie-penned “Late last Night” from all the way back in 2008.

“In many ways, it's a very simple record, but those can also be the scariest ones, because you can't cover up by turning up the bass,” he laughed. “There's no place to hide.”

When an instrument as magnificent as the L-50 is in the room, hiding places are usually not needed. It did, however, take Ainslie a bit of time to get that Gibson into the same room that he was in.

“I first heard that guitar in around 2008 or '09 in Louisiana, when I was down there

working and visiting friends. I taught a slide guitar workshop at the Dewey Balfa Cajun & Creole Heritage Week that Christine Balfa runs. I heard Linda Handelsman play that guitar, accompanying David Greely, who is a dear friend and a wonderful fiddle player. It was fiddle and guitar and two voices and it was just lovely – about a 30-minute set during lunch at this music camp,” Ainslie said. “After it was over, I asked Linda if she minded if I looked at that guitar, because it was an archtop with a big, round soundhole in the front of it, and most archtops have F holes and have a really-compressed sound and have not been my favorite guitars. But I liked the way that this one sounded in her hands. I asked if I could play it and she very graciously handed it to me and I sat down and put on some fingerpicks and played about three notes of a Robert Johnson piece, knowing it was made when Robert was 23-years-old, in 1934.”

Ainslie was immediately overwhelmed by the undeniable charisma of the 80-year-old L-50 that day in south Louisiana.

“It sounded more like Robert’s recordings than any instrument I have ever picked up. I thought, ‘Damn. The ghosts are here.’ My mouth fell open and Linda casually said, ‘I brought it out here because I don’t play it very much and I’m thinking about selling it.’ I said, ‘What do you want for it?’ She said, ‘A thousand bucks.’ I said, ‘I’ll take it.’ And I could hear eight guys behind me – kind of like the seven dwarves – slapping their foreheads going, ‘Damn ...’ But it turned out over the course of the next eight to 10 hours that Linda was not actually ready to part with the guitar. So I told her, ‘Look, if you don’t want to sell me this guitar now, I couldn’t take it. It’s clear you’re not ready to let go of it. But when you DO want to sell it, give me the first refusal.’”

Fast forward another two years down the road back in Vermont ...

“Late one night I found myself on eBay, looking longingly at small-bodied, archtop Gibson guitars and I thought, ‘You idiot, you know where one of these things is, you should give Linda a little tickle and see if she’s thought any more about selling it to you.’ So I did that and she said that it hadn’t been out of the closet since she’d played that gig (at the music camp in Louisiana) and that she had thought it might be time to sell it to me. So it took about another two months after that, but I eventually got the guitar in the house,” Ainslie said. “I then started exploring it. It needed a little bit of work; it had an open crack in the back and some other small things. Since I made the recording, I’ve had some more work done on it, which has transformed the guitar in a really beautiful way.”

With a lengthy decades-long background of playing acoustic blues – along with plenty

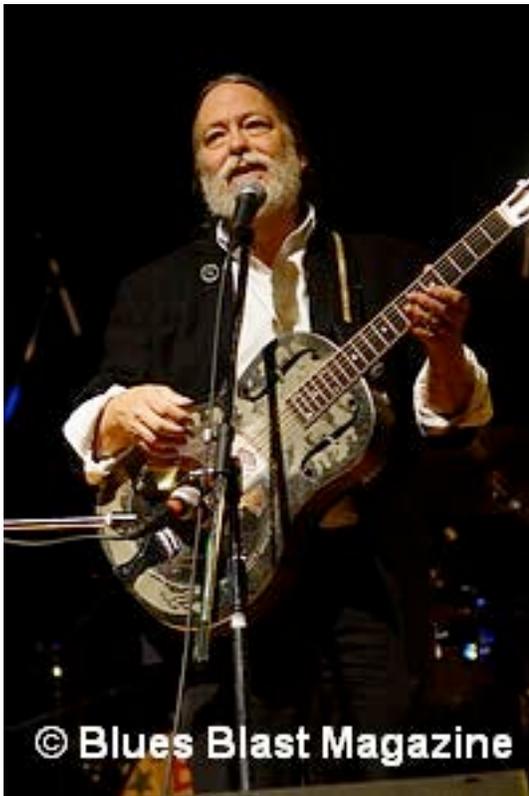


of old-time fiddle and banjo – it would seem like Scott Ainslie and a vintage 1934 Gibson L-50 would be a union forged in heaven. That’s precisely the case.

“It turns out the guitar likes what you’d think it likes. If you want to play Jimmie Rodgers on it with a flat-pick, it does that; it sounds like 1927 in Bristol. If you want to play John Hurt, it sounds like that. If you want to play Robert Johnson, it sounds like that,” he said. “So I started letting the guitar lead me around by the nose around the repertoire that I play that hadn’t fit on previous records. A bunch of them were songs that came up around the time when that guitar was new, so I thought that’s an interesting story for a record. I thought I’d just follow my nose and try it. I think the record has worked well – partly because of the story.”

No matter which way the river of fashionable musical trends flows, no matter how much technology comes and goes and no matter how many years separate the days of their performing prime from the current days and times, cats like Robert Johnson, Rev. Gary Davis and Mississippi John Hurt – along with a host of other forefathers of the authentic county blues – never seem to be forgotten about. Ainslie explains why he feels those artists and their music is as relevant today – if not more so – than they were back in the day.

“It’s just great music and great music doesn’t die; it continues to find its legs in new generations as people encounter it. And the fact that someone can do this kind of music without a synthesizer, without a band, without an amplifier, without a drum machine – that one person can play this music with a guitar in their lap and make music of this quality, is an important element of what I’ll call this ‘handmade music.’ That’s part of the reason that this music is still hitting us so hard and finding its legs now, when people are so seduced by the screen in front of them – whether it’s the iPhone or the computer or the television. The handmade nature of this music is consoling in a world that we feel is getting out of control technologically. With a wooden box with even just one string on it – and your voice and two hands – you can express yourself to the world. You can scream into the wind. That is a really powerful thing.”



A musician since the tender age of three, Ainslie really fell under the spell of the blues – and became a guitar player – after seeing bluesman John Jackson perform during the middle of a Mike Seeger concert back in 1967. Although he basically went from 1967 to 1982 without ever touching an electric guitar, Ainslie does own a beautiful Paul Reed Smith. However, he has somehow managed to keep from being seduced too far into the dark side of high-voltage noise.

“I’ve always been interested as a musician to see how far you can push the expressive power of one person’s voice and hands. Having been

raised on rock-n-roll and soul music and rhythm and blues, that's what drew me back into the 1930s, where you hear those solo guitarists at the absolute zenith of their powers working up this remarkable kind of pre-rock-n-roll passion that eventually changed rock-n-roll from a 'bubble gum, let's go dating and race cars' music to something much more formidable," he said.

One of the unique things that certainly helps to make Ainslie the gifted purveyor of authentic music that he is, has to be due in part to his academic background. He is a Phi Beta Kappa and honors graduate of Washington & Lee University and if he wasn't busy playing the blues, would probably be right at home in an institution of higher learning on a daily basis. Ainslie got to use his academia a little bit when he delved pretty deeply into the world of Robert Johnson by transcribing his original recordings in a published book – 1992's Robert Johnson/At The Crossroads (Hal Leonard) and instructional DVD from 1997, Robert Johnson's Guitar Techniques.

"When I first heard Robert's music, I did what everybody else did – my life stopped. I sat on the floor and stared at the 33 r.p.m record. There were years when if I dropped the needle on a Robert Johnson LP, I'd better not have anything else to do for the next 25 minutes, because I was not going anywhere," he said. "I, as many of us did, chased down the only book that seemed to be available, which was Samuel Charters' book (1959's The Country Blues), which was very early – and although he did the best he could – was misleading. He moved things into guitar keys that they were not in and he didn't have the lyrics right and didn't have the accompaniments set where they were set, but again, he did the best he could. As I started to unpack Robert's playing, I realized that I could write a book that would serve guitar players, so I did. It took about six years and cost me about \$12,000 in legal fees before the book came out. Robert didn't sell his soul at the crossroads, but he did give up his publishing rights. The book was hailed as a landmark, precisely because it had so much information in it. The historical context for the music really empowers the songs, it gives them more power, rather than taking it away. When you get academically involved – and God knows there's no quicker way to kill a musician's career – when someone goes after something from a scholarly perspective, generally they lose emotional power and immediacy. It's almost like looking at a painting that looks great from 40 feet away, but the closer you get to it, the less cool it is because the brush strokes are not that good, because it was painted to be viewed from 40 feet away. But the closer I got to learning Johnson's music and its details, the more interesting the music became. It was an incredibly-rewarding project to work on."

That process of looking deeply into a song and its origins is always first and foremost with Ainslie, whether he's on the bandstand, whether he's giving a lecture on musical or sociological history, or whether he's teaching slide guitar techniques to eager students.

“I am very invested in apprenticeship in the sense of digging into a tradition or body of work deeply and letting it transform you, before you transform it. I think part of the price of becoming a musician is becoming the song,” he said. “I mean, I’m not a jazz singer in a piano bar just singing Billy Joel and whatever else, all night long. I don’t want that life; I wouldn’t have that life; I couldn’t do that life. What I’m interested in is being emotionally and deeply involved in the music and its history and background and what it feels like to sing it. My hope is that I’m open to being transformed by the songs that I sing. If I do that well, there’s a chance that it will move somebody else.”

That little peek behind the curtain of what keeps Ainslie from merely being a pre-programmed human jukebox also helps to explain why his stage performances are more than just singing songs and playing the guitar. He also takes valuable time to give his audiences some history of the music, its authors and events surrounding the creation of the tunes, as well.

“My first real gig playing the blues – previous to this I had played old time fiddle and banjo as a musician – was back in the 1980s, being hired into a program in North Carolina called the Visiting Artists Program. It was a program that put professional artists of all kinds on community college campuses and charged them to get out and teach the community. I wound up in a highly racially-divided part of eastern North Carolina, where they had just had a sheriff’s race in the Democratic Party that pitted a black candidate against a white candidate and divided the Democrats along racial lines and there was a lot of hoorah about that; the white candidate won,” Ainslie said. “I was chosen by the coordinator at the college precisely because I was white and I played blues. I found myself in front of black and white audiences – sometimes integrated, but largely segregated – and I would go and play music and talk about it. I was in front of a lot of people who either thought I didn’t have a right to play the music, or didn’t care for the fact that I was playing black music. I very quickly sized up that the music wasn’t going to be enough for these audiences. So I started looking into the history and to what the stories behind the music was to engage an audience that either didn’t know or didn’t care to know (about the music). I started looking for a repertoire that would unite an audience around the story. Even in the world of the blues, there are many, many people who don’t know about the history of the music. Hopefully people will leave one of my performances slightly better educated and more entertained than they would had I just stood up there and played the tunes. The story opens the door and the song goes in.”

As much as the music and its history has long motivated Ainslie to keep playing the blues, at the end of the day, the friendships he’s forged – some maybe unexpected –



have really become the foundation that he has built his life on. One of those lasting bonds of friendship was formed with the late George Higgs, a legendary bluesman from North Carolina who was inspired to play the blues after seeing Peg Leg Sam perform back during his youth.

“I met him in 1986 and the last time I saw him, I brought a guitar in, like we were going to play music like we usually did. It was a hot day and we pulled a couple of chairs around the kitchen table and he poured me a huge glass of Coca-Cola, which I generally don’t drink,” said Ainslie. “But we didn’t hit a note that day. We talked about our families and our kids. And I realized in that moment, that across what people consider the barriers of time, money, educational background and race, we’d become friends. That’s something that I wouldn’t trade. That’s made me who I am. If you could somehow take all the old men and women out of me – take the experiences, some very fleeting exchanges, out of me – no one would recognize me. I think that’s absolutely true. In my world, you can’t be a good musician without being a good person and the people that I revere – the people who made me what I am – were all extremely fine and refined human beings.”

Visit Scott’s website at <http://scottainslie.com/>

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Blues Blast Magazine Senior Writer Terry Mullins is a journalist and former record store owner whose personal taste in music is the sonic equivalent of Attention Deficit Disorder. Works by the Bee Gees, Captain Beefheart, Black Sabbath, Earth, Wind & Fire and Willie Nelson share equal space with Muddy Waters, The Staples Singers and R.L. Burnside in his compact disc collection. He’s also been known to spend time hanging out on the street corners of Clarksdale, Miss., eating copious amounts of barbecued delicacies while listening to the wonderful sounds of the blues.