



Sol Roots acoustic

Taylor Harris Photography

Sol Roots

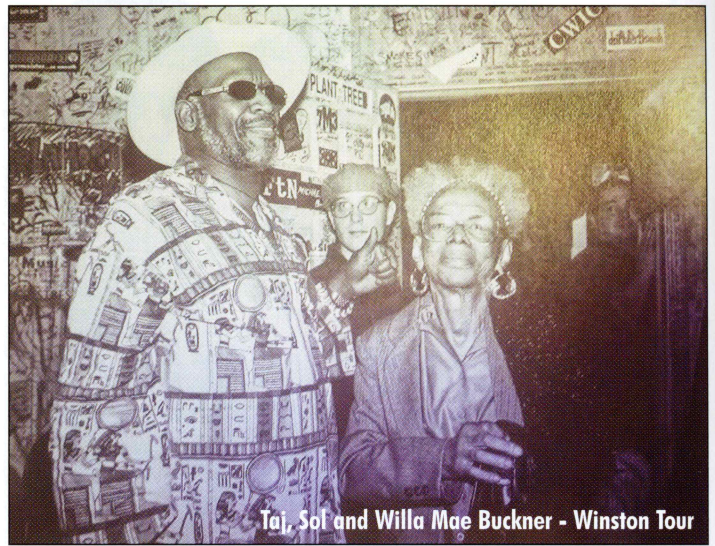
Out of the Blues Shadows

BY CHRISTOPHER KLUG

In February of this year, only weeks before the Washington, DC area shut down due to the pandemic, Sol Roots and his band recorded a live album at The Hamilton, one of the area's top music performance venues. The CD, which features Phil Wiggins on harmonica, Andreas Holmstrom on bass, and Eddie Christmas on drums, was released in June. More recently, a single, "Work It for Me", featuring Phil Wiggins, appears on the Big City R&B Magazine Sampler #28. While

these are just the latest releases under his own name, Sol Roots, who describes his music as a "musical crossroads" of blues, funk, soul, and rock, has been working with the Music Maker Relief Foundation for over twenty years and has appeared on recordings with many of their artists.

Sol Roots, whose given surname is Creech, was born in 1975 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Both of his parents played music: piano and flute for his mother Meg and piano, guitar and harmonica for his father, John. Sol describes



Taj, Sol and Willa Mae Buckner - Winston Tour

Photo courtesy of Sol Roots

his father's style as "more like Bob Dylan, singer-songwriter, and folk blues type of stuff." When Denise and Tim Duffy, the founders of the Music Maker Relief Foundation, first moved to Winston-Salem in 1988 they became friends with John who introduced them to many of the local musicians. "Even before Music Maker started, my dad and Tim recorded a couple of cassette tapes and would go around gigging around Winston-Salem." John Creech was a band member of Guitar Gabriel & Brothers in the Kitchen and went on their first tour of Holland. Sol and his brother, Johnathan, both

were able to witness all of this, absorbing the North Carolina music. "I fell in to hanging out with the Winston-Salem guys from the very beginning." "I think the first blues thing I got into was Guitar Gabriel & Brothers in the Kitchen, a cassette tape that they recorded and my Dad gave to me and I kinda got inspired along that way." These recordings were made in 1991 and released in 1993, but unfortunately Guitar Gabriel died not long after, in April 1996. Sol fondly remembers hanging out with other area musicians such as Willa Mae Buckner, Mr. Q, Macavine Hayes, and Captain

Photo/Josh Brick



Sol Roots

Luke, all of whom would go on to work extensively with Music Maker. “Captain Luke, he would always say that he raised me from a pup. I feel that way about pretty much all the Music Maker people, it’s pretty much a family, musical grandparents and aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters.”

In the 1990’s Sol “got real interested in recording music” and attended Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee where he obtained a degree in recording engineering from the Department of Recording Industry. Here he also learned about copyright law and the music business, all of which would come in handy later on. While in college he was in several bands and performed in styles ranging from blues, rock and funk to jazz. One of these bands was Eddie & The Readies led by harmonica player James “Eddie” Patterson. After graduating, Sol returned to Pinnacle, North Carolina, near Pilot Mountain and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company’s Winston-Salem headquarters. (The cigarette company sponsored the first big national tour of Music Maker artists, *Winston Blues Revival*, in 1998.) He went to work at Music Maker, going on field trips with Tim Duffy and photographer Axel Kustner. During these trips to Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee he recalls “we would go hang out at everybody’s house and just set up Tim’s old Nagra reel to reel and record them right at the house.” Among the artists they recorded were Othar Turner, Jack Owens, Eugene Powell, and Robert “Wolfman” Belfour.

Back at Music Maker, Sol was working to back up and duplicate the field recordings. It was listening to this music that inspired Sol to put together an album which combined the recordings with samples and beats, something he calls blues-experimental-hip hop, which came out on Music Maker in early 2003. “I was sitting down and listening to all these recordings and by doing that I kinda focused in on some stuff that I really liked and I ended up picking some stuff to sample and remix and make that Volume Blue album.” “It was



Sol Roots

Photo/Ari Strauss

kinda like trying to do a tribute to a lot of my teachers or mentors or people I looked up to and get the message of the blues to the next generation.” Some of the songs even ended up in commercials, on HBO and Comedy Central, and also on a European Dixiefrog compilation.

As time went on, Tim Duffy recognized the talent Sol had as a musician and it wasn’t long before he began backing up Music Maker artists on tours. “For quite a few years it was like every single summer ... for a good eight year stretch we were hitting really hard.” These tours took Sol literally around the world, to Italy, France, Belgium, Spain and Austria in Europe, Guatemala in Central America, and all the way to Australia. He also got to do the *Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise* several times. Among the many artists he has performed with are Cootie Stark, Lee Gates, Beverly “Guitar” Watkins, John

Dee Holeman, Jerry “Boogie” McCain, Taj Mahal, Roy Lee Johnson, Albert White, Robert Lee Coleman, and Cool John Ferguson. Not all of the tours were big revues. Talking about Cootie Stark Sol recalls “There was a couple of times that just me and him would travel together, like we did something at the Pocono Blues Festival and the Chicago Folk Festival. It was just me and him, so that was like some really meaningful travels cause he was a deep dude.”

Among his fond memories are the chances he has had to learn guitar techniques from people like Robert Lee Coleman, Albert White, Beverly “Guitar” Watkins, and especially Cool John Ferguson. “In my mind he’s definitely one of the best guitar players ever. He’s been probably the strongest influence on my guitar playing for sure, just because we did so much hanging out.” For a while Sol would make frequent trips, at least twice a month, down to the juke joint All

Photo/Josh Brick



Sol Roots and Ron Holloway

JOSH BRICK

Peoples Grill in north Durham, North Carolina to play with Cool John.

One of his favorite tour memories is from the Byron Bay Blues Festival in Australia when he saw Yothu Yindi & the Treaty Project, a band which combined modern pop and rock with Aboriginal songs. “To see everybody joining together and vibing on things that were rocking and respected the traditional stuff was really cool.”

All the while performing with Music Maker artists, Sol has kept his own musical vision alive by putting out albums. In 2008, when he was based near Roanoke Virginia, he released *Freedom* which featured King George on drums and Jake Dempsey on bass. The album which Sol describes as “funk, blues, soul and a little bit of reggae” was recorded in Dempsey’s studio, the Red Room, while Sol did most of the mixing. This led to work at a variety of festivals in the mid-Atlantic area including the Vintage Virginia Wine Festival in Washington, DC, Shakori Hills Grassroots Festival in Silk Hope, North Carolina, and FloydFest in Floyd, Virginia.

Asked about performing with many different musicians as a sideman and leader and at a wide range of events, he feels lucky that many of the people he works with are musically flexible. “Blues is an interesting thing cause there is a lotta people that can play all the notes, but sometimes they want to play all the notes and that messes up the vibe or messes up the feel totally, you know. So it’s really important to have the musicians that can respect the groove and respect the melody of it cause that’s where some real powerful stuff can happen.”

All of the touring with Music Maker kept Sol very busy and his next release came out almost ten years later, a single featuring Phil Wiggins called *Forgiveness* which led to the 2019 Wammie Award for Best Blues Artist/Group—the Wammies are the Washington Area Music Awards. Sol and Phil had first met at the Savannah Music Festival in 2009 when Sol was backing up Beverly “Guitar” Watkins and Phil was working



Sol Roots Band at Tinner Hill Blues Festival.

Photo/Josh Brick

with Corey Harris who was substituting for the recently deceased John Cephas. They performed together again in 2011 at the 8th Annual Congressional Blues Festival. Wiggins is also on the new live recording about which Sol says “I put it out there to try to raise a little bit of extra money for the musicians that are all out of work.” The proceeds are split equally between the four musicians.

The pandemic has had a profound effect on all working musicians. For the past eight or nine years Sol and his band have had a regular Sunday night gig at Jojo’s Restaurant and Bar on U Street in Washington, DC along with many other shows at other venues in the area. As he has been focusing on community building, Sol has performed with many special guests from the local blues scene including Ron Holloway, Linwood Taylor, Tom Principato, and Stacy Brooks. All of that ended abruptly with the shutdown in March and he says, “we’re just waiting for things to loosen up and we can start back up there.” Sol laments one of the sad results of the pandemic has been the permanent closing of area clubs. The Soundry in Columbia, Maryland, an intimate music venue and event space owned by the same people who own The Hamilton and which had only recently been opened in 2018 closed in July. Twins Jazz, a club started in 1987 by Ethiopian immigrants, closed its U Street location in August. Sol hopes The

Hamilton itself can hang in not only for the musicians, but also because of the charity work they have done. They were involved in the Food It Forward initiative where the public was encouraged to buy a meal for those in need. Only recently has Sol been able to perform live again, at JV’s Restaurant in Falls Church, Virginia, the same place where he performed one of his last pre-pandemic shows with local bluesman Linwood Taylor. This restaurant and live music venue has been open for over 70 years and during the pandemic they also have been very active in feeding the homeless and others in need. They recently started hosting live music, albeit at reduced capacity, to eager audi-

ences. “It really helps a lotta people out, not just musicians, but the venues, regular people, fans, music fans.” Sol also says “I want to give back to venues like the Hamilton and JV’s that are really fighting to do something good.”

Before the pandemic, Sol, who has been a full-time musician as long as he can remember, supplemented his income by teaching guitar and bass by making house calls to students. To get out of the house and some exercise during the lockdown, Sol has been hiking at nearby parks such as Great Falls Park along the Potomac River in Virginia. Musically, he has been doing a lot of digital recording and trading tracks with other musicians. He has more recordings “in

Photo/Josh Brick



Sol Roots at The Hamilton.

the back pocket” including a version of the Bob Dylan song *Gotta Serve Somebody* done with the same musicians who appeared on the album *Freedom* and he has another session planned with the same musicians on the recent live album. He has been learning how to do live streaming and has participated in several shows including Virtual Happy Hours in the Loft at the Hamilton in May. For the Hamilton show, Sol set it all up himself: “I have a computer that hung in there and I grabbed some stuff for a green screen and I taught myself this thing called OBS (Open Broadcaster Software).” For another show for Events DC, “we ended up just setting up at the drummer’s house in his garage.” Fortunately, Sol already had the recording gear and was once again able to make use of his college training. Unfortunately, things have been opening up in fits and starts. A planned performance on September 9 as part of the Rosslyn Jazz Supper Clubs series was recently postponed.

Reflecting over his career, one of the things Sol is most proud of is his connection with the state of North Carolina and its strong musical heritage and style which he describes as “a spirit and a laid back feel.” He is quick to point out that Chuck Brown, the godfather of Washington, DC’s Go-Go, John Coltrane, Nina Simone, Thelonius Monk, and Maceo Parker were all born in North Carolina. Talking about all the Music Maker artists he worked with, he says they “were road warriors their whole lives backing up everybody else and I guess I feel like that way in a different way. I’ve been a road warrior for Music Maker backing up all their artists and trying to soak up all their knowledge.”

These days Sol is also thankful for all the blues societies working hard to keep things going and for Music Maker and a local DC organization, DC Legendary Musicians, Inc., who have directly supported him.

<https://solrootsmusic.com>
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