

BLUES IN BRITAIN

Issue 174

June 2016

£5.50



DEBBIE BOND

UNCOVERED

Debbie Bond: Opening A Window on Alabama Blues

Alabama should be better known as a home of the blues. The border between Mississippi and Alabama was decided by the US Congress but much of Alabama has the same kind of history. It is as close to places like Memphis as many of the famous Mississippi sites. It was probably Alabama bluesman Ike Zinnerman who was responsible for Robert Johnson's guitar technique rather than the devil he met at the Crossroads in Mississippi. That says much about how the facts sometimes take second place to a compellingly told story.

Debbie Bond is a white woman, brought up in California, who went to university in Sussex, England, is married to a Brit

who went to the same university but she only met after relocating to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Now through her music and

work to get recognition for blues from Alabama, Debbie is a respectful but zealous champion.

"I have this traditional blues beginnings. I got to share my band with Johnny Shines, and then Eddie Kirkland and then the last one Willie King. So I had the experience of playing in the juke joints and travelling extensively through the backwoods festivals with these guys. That influenced my playing tremendously in terms of my guitar style and way of handling audiences and enjoying the music. But I'm a white person – I didn't grow up share cropping. I write my own songs. They're very influenced by that but they reflect me."

Talking to her from her home in Tuscaloosa prior to her arrival in mid-June for a tour of the UK and Europe left me not only looking forward to seeing her play but spending more time talking to her about the blues history and heritage she has become a part of. More of that later.

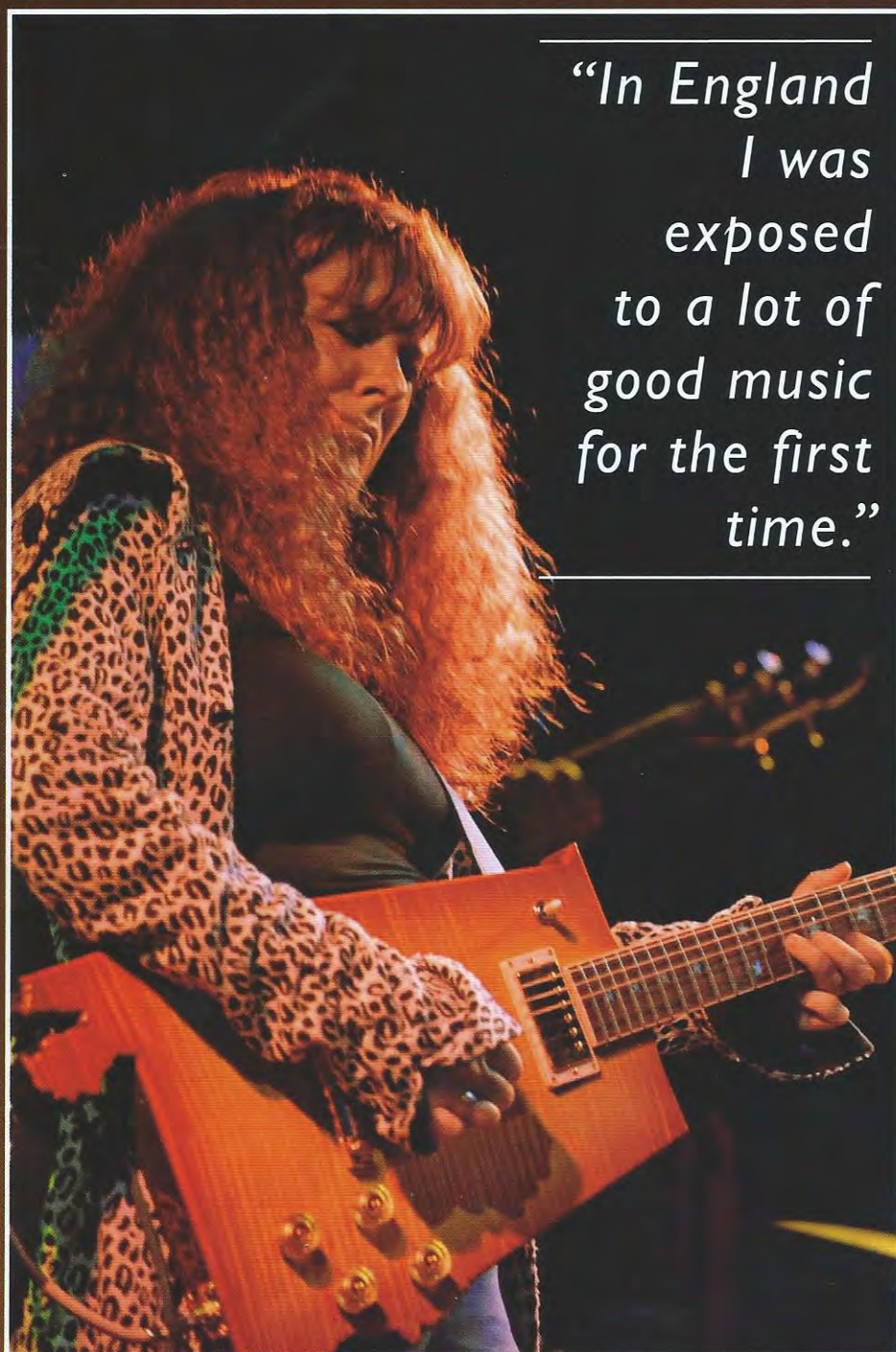
Her time here is primarily to perform, promote her new CD and build her audience. The new album *Enjoy The Ride* was recorded and engineered by Billy Lawson of Fame, Muscle Shoal Sound and Wishbone amongst others, at his Big Star studios.

It's a mix of self-penned and cover tributes to her Alabama musical influences and friends like Johnny Shines, Eddie Kirkland, Jody Williams and Willie King. "I've been knowing Willie since the early 90's. We could pinpoint that we definitely knew each other at Johnny Shines funeral. We did a fundraising event with other blues musicians here in Tuscaloosa to mark Johnny Shines grave. We would do shows off and on together."

As an advocate of Alabama Debbie wanted this album to be recorded in the state and with some of her new songs having a souly side Muscle Shoals was a natural choice. Spooner Oldham plays on one track and Bonnie Raitt's guitarist Will McFarlane on five. Her backing singers are



*"In England
I was
exposed
to a lot of
good music
for the first
time."*



Rachel and Carla Edwards who are also close friends that have come up through Debbie's after school band camp programme. "We really wanted that warm, analogue, souly sound - and we got it. I'm really thrilled."

Debbie is heavily involved in and is co-founder of the Alabama Blues project dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Alabama's blues heritage

"I was working increasingly in schools. I founded the Alabama Blues Project which is a state wide award winning organisation to promote the state's blues heritage. I felt very strongly as a white person I didn't feel comfortable headlining anything to do with teaching blues heritage when I had people like Willie King, Eddie Kirkland and SharBaby more recently. African Americans musicians who had lived the life the blues came out of. I would play guitar, front it and do much of the narrative and curriculum development for those programs. Willie and I became closer and closer. One day in 2002 he called me and said I got this guy you gotta meet. He's a Brit - he's in there making tea."

It turned out the Brit was at Sussex University the same time as Debbie though they didn't know each other. Londoner Rick 'Radiator' Asherson and Debbie connected - they went to see Jerry Boogie McCain, and married about a year later. Willie was best man and the reception was at Freedom Creek where they all played. They now work together musically. "It was a fabulous serendipitous meeting and I'm lucky to have a partner like that in both life and music, its super cool."

Debbie's father was a preacher whose mother was a singer in the 1920's. She wasn't much of a mother and he was adopted by other members of the fairly musical family based in California. Debbie's mother was a choir director. After her parents split up Debbie's mother put the

musical part of her life behind her. Debbie says "She wasn't too pleased when she saw it coming out in me. But it came at me from all sides. Hearing the blues and hearing American soul music, it got me early on. I just knew I wanted to sing and I started playing the guitar when I was thirteen and just haven't quit! The first blues artist I saw live was Johnny Guitar Watson. He blew me away - the genuine deal entertainer - playing the guitar behind his head and just killing it! The first band I was in was a soul band where I sang backing vocals at Sussex University. When I was in England I was exposed to a lot of good music for the first time - I saw BB King and heard a lot of good blues and soul music. I had a good record collection and still do."

Debbie was brought up in California and moved with her family to England when she was eight. Her mother was a social anthropologist who did field work in West Africa. Debbie lived in West Africa for some of that time as a result and her first television appearance at thirteen was in Sierra Leone.

Through a series of circumstances Debbie finished up in Alabama in 1979 in her early twenties. What was intended to be a summer escape from her family who didn't approve of Debbie's desire to be involved with music turned into a full time move. "I met Johnny Shines and stayed here because there just wasn't the recognition. I was like a kid in a candy store. Around all these blues guys nobody seemed to appreciate. It gave me the gumption to just go for it. Nobody else was so why shouldn't I? I hung out with them, played with them and finished up in their bands."

It was around this time Debbie really came to appreciate how under recognised Alabama Blues was "Johnny Shines lived in a suburb of Tuscaloosa called Holt and it was the classic thing of not being

recognised in your own back yard. New Orleans and Mississippi and Memphis have capitalised on the heritage as part of their cultural tourism but Alabama, they're finally working on it. A lot of the old guys are dying and dead but there's a new generation and there's a vibrant blues culture here now. The more I dug into it the more I realised the deeper it went. Most blues people think the Robert Johnson story is codswallop - as you say over there. Yes he was woodshedding, but he was woodshedding with Alabama bluesman Ike Zinnerman - check your box set liner notes. That's just one story. The Alabama Blues story has not been told and it's a really important one. It is part of my mission - missions choose you, you don't choose them. Sometimes it's a blessing and a curse. Somebody needs to really dig and write a book about Alabama Blues. Eventually I'll have to do it if nobody does it. I just hope I live long enough to get it out of my system."

Debbie has an extensive archive of pictures and interviews with the blues pioneers. "Each of their stories is a window into the rich vibrant blues culture of Alabama."

There were juke joints, local musicians of every ilk. There were blues musicians going back at least as far as Mississippi."

Debbie's happy to share her archive with anybody serious about researching for publication but so far has had no takers. It is tempting to take her up on the offer.

Her new album is well titled, and it's clear she is determined to 'Enjoy The Ride' herself. Better still Debbie Bond opens the windows into the neglected history of Alabama Blues. Whoever writes the book, she'll deserve a credit and more than a passing mention. It should be a good read.

Steve Morphew

debbiebond.com

Debbie Bond: Enjoy The Ride

This is the fourth album from Alabama based Debbie Bond on vocals and guitar with her husband Radiator Rick Asherson on harp, Rachel and Carla Edwards, backing vocals, and various guests not least Spooner Oldham on organ. It is a very pleasant listen. Good songs, plenty of Soul influence in evidence and a touch of Country too. The opening title track has a philosophical lyric about enjoying life as you live it, and 'Rainbow' is an easy paced shuffle with some decorative guitar work and those effective backing vocals. 'Love Vibration' has a definite Country vibe with some lovely slide work before her Jody Williams favourite 'Left Me In The Dark' which is given a rather more dramatic treatment than the original.

'Find a Way' has some funky horns before a medium paced 'I Am The Blues' with some superb harp from Rick. 'Humble Pie' has a terrifically acerbic lyric about a love rival with nice touches of swirling organ. Live set favourite 'Wishbone' about a girl-friend constantly making the wrong choices in men precedes another find staple 'Remedy'. 'Start With Love' has an admirable if unrealistically sentimental lyric about world peace before the closing 'Train Song'. The fine harp and Gospel type chorus work very well and is typical of the well thought out arrangements and orchestration. At eleven tracks over 45 minutes this is a body of work of which the very approachable and talented couple can be justifiably proud.

Bob Chaffey