

Charlie Musselwhite—Music true to real life

A review of bluesman's new CD: "One Night In America"

By James Brewer
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One can be forgiven for being a bit suspicious nowadays when the word “America” appears in the title of any musical piece or recording. The American population is being barraged with mind-numbing patriotic drivel which represents nothing, artistically speaking, of value.

Charlie Musselwhite’s new CD, “One Night In America,” on the other hand, is a breath of fresh air. It seeks to portray the real America, and speak honestly about the strivings and pains of real people. It is dedicated to the memory of John Lee Hooker, Dale Patton, Junior Wells, Ed Mays, Pops Staples, Coastguard Dave, Stu Blank, George Caudle and “Daddy Ray” Arvizu, all recently deceased blues performers and advocates, some well-known, some not so.

“One Night In America” demonstrates the artist’s ongoing drive to break through boundaries of what is commonly categorized as blues. This selection of tunes is notable for its diversity. The title track is “One Time One Night,” a tune written by David Hidalgo. It was originally recorded by his band, Los Lobos, and released in 1987. Los Lobos, since its inception, has defied categorization, with a repertoire of traditional rock, blues, Mexican rancheras and their own tunes, which bring together elements of all of the above. “One Time One Night” eloquently tells the story of young people who have the cards stacked against them, living in the brutal reality of urban America.

Musselwhite’s treatment of the tune is notable for several reasons. Firstly, the lyrics take more prominence than in the original recording. His vocals are punctuated by Christine Ohlman’s tight harmony, so the power of the stories the lyrics tell comes through. It’s clear that Charlie is moved by the narrative.

Secondly, G.E. Smith’s hammering guitar work gives a “Memphis” feel to the piece, adding a “rockabilly” flavor, which has the effect on anyone who has heard the original of giving a more universal appeal to the message.

Since his first album in 1967, when he was marketed as a “crossover” artist to rock music fans, Musselwhite has been known as an authentic exponent of Chicago-style blues. Even though he is white, his harmonica style expressed the tradition that was transplanted to that big city by so many black bluesmen from the South, such as Little Walter, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), all of whom he played with while he was in Chicago.

Born in Mississippi and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, he came under the influence of the broad and varied musical trends which flourished in that city along the Mississippi. At the time of his youth, Memphis was the home of such substantial musical figures as Johnny Cash, Dusty Rhodes and Elvis Presley. Bluesmen like Furry Lewis and Will Shade also called Memphis home and in his teens, Musselwhite became friends with them and was taken under their musical wing. For the mature Musselwhite, the river is the place to come home to. Memphis is the place where he became engulfed in the diverse musical culture of America. From the liner notes, he says, “There was blues, gospel, and hillbilly on the radio night and day. Downtown, there were blues street musicians that I got to know, visited in their homes and learned from...”

The Mississippi River, referred to affectionately by many as “The Big Muddy,” runs right through the heart of America. Musselwhite takes his listeners on an exploration of this heartland in his new collection of

songs. This river's considerable significance to American literary as well as musical culture is beyond dispute. The music we know as "blues" had its origins in the delta of the lower Mississippi and its influence can be said to have traveled northward up the river and radiated outward, affecting and infecting all American popular music, from what is currently categorized as "country" to "jazz."

"Big River" is a Johnny Cash tune that takes the listener on a trip down the Mississippi, in pursuit of an evasive lover. T-Bone Wolk, Musselwhite's bass player, lays down the infectious boogie rhythm which sets the mood. "I met her accidentally in St. Paul, Minnesota, and it tore me up every time I heard her drawl," following her down the river to Davenport, St. Louis, Memphis, Baton Rouge and then New Orleans. "I've had enough. Dump my blues down in the Gulf."

Musselwhite responds to the often-critical inquiries about why he's doing a Johnny Cash tune on this CD in his liner notes: "I've already mentioned my memories of Johnny back in Memphis and that's really where it came from, but there's more to the story than that. Johnny Cash sings songs from the earth, especially when he lived in Memphis and recorded for Sun. In Memphis, in those days, Johnny Cash seemed like he was one of us and was singing about us, about the life we knew. So in that sense he served the same role as a bluesman and all his tunes were about life the same way blues songs are about life."

He says later, "[W]hat I have been trying to get across to people is that blues is a feeling and not confined to a theoretical musical structure."

"One Night In America" is a powerful yet personal collection. Musselwhite works on several cuts with West Coast guitarist Robben Ford, whom he has known since his days in the Bay Area where he lived for many years starting in the 1960s, when Ford was just a teenager. While Ford is known as a blues guitarist, his unmistakable style brings an eloquent jazzy flavor into the mix. He is a man who loves making music above all, and it comes across. The instrumental piece called "I'll Meet You Over There" gives both him and Musselwhite a chance to show off their own musical acumen.

The music of "One Night In America" reflects life, both in its form and its content. Musselwhite is able to achieve this because as a musician, he is himself a great

fan. His work embodies a profound appreciation for a broad range of music from both older musicians and contemporaries.

While the recording industry as a whole strictly categorizes music into genres, which are essentially market segments, in order to maximize profits, Musselwhite refuses to be confined by such labels: "I ignore the narrow-mindedness of some and rely on fans because they are with me and open to new ideas. My fans are real smart." It is rewarding to be counted in that number.

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