

# The “cool little cluster” that is Mose Allison’s brain

By James Brewer  
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Experiencing a performance by veteran blues-jazz artist Mose Allison can be for some of us like finding a long-lost valuable. For younger listeners, discovering his music can be a cultural awakening.

I had the good fortune to experience this first-hand recently at the Dirty Dog Jazz Cafe in the Detroit area—coincidentally, the day before his 83rd birthday. His message is as straight-from-the-shoulder as it has been for over five decades. He threw in tunes from his latest album, “The Way of the World,” alongside some of his oldest material. But there is nothing nostalgic about a Mose Allison performance.

His music has lost little of its edge. “Everybody Cryin’ Mercy” was written in 1968. It could have been written today. Hearing Mose deliver it now is like entering a musical conversation about the current war. Which one? ... Take your pick.

“I can’t believe the things I’m seein’  
I wonder ‘bout some things I’ve heard  
Everybody cryin’ mercy  
But they don’t know the meaning of the word”

Mose Allison’s lyrics remain slyly subversive. Generations ago, young audiences were especially attracted to what he was saying. In the late 1960s and early 1970s when antiwar sentiment animated the so-called youth counterculture, Mose’s audience grew.

This also roughly coincided with the advent of FM radio. FM grew from a medium for hi-fi hobbyists to a thriving and lively venue in which creative DJs experimented and introduced all types of music to broad audiences. The playlists of the AM networks were controlled by the “top 40” maintained by industry powers that be.

Mose’s lyrics were too controversial to play on AM radio. It may seem peculiar to some, because the lyrics aren’t “explicit” by today’s standards, but tunes such as “Your Mind Is On Vacation” (1968) were appreciated by those who opposed the Vietnam war, as well as the anti-communist outlook associated with it. So many in my generation were introduced to his music through FM radio.

Allison has been performing since his days at Louisiana State University in the late 1940s. Like many musically- and critically-minded people growing up in the South in those days, he allowed a wide variety of styles to influence him, starting with the music from his roots in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. He played music on his family’s player piano and heard the sounds of Louis Jordan, Memphis Minnie, Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red and countless others on juke boxes in his hometown of Tippo.

Maybe it was his passion for music that compelled Mose to ignore or oppose the color lines that were enforced in the Deep South, but whatever it was, he never bought into the racial divide. Many years later, he notes that he may have been in the same local movie theater, the Tut-Ro-Van-Sum, as McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters) in his youth—Mose in the lower seats and Muddy in the “colored only” balcony. The Mitchell Hotel in Memphis in the late 1940s was a venue to which black musicians came from all around and jammed. Mose managed to sneak in.

Dividing popular music into hard-and-fast genres has always had limited value, but whether one calls Allison a blues artist or a jazz artist, Mose makes one reconsider how to look at things. Almost by way of explanation, he performed “Ever Since I Stole the Blues” at the recent concert, from his 1990 album, “My Backyard.”

“Well the blues police from down in Dixieland  
Tried to catch me with the goods on hand  
They broke down my door but I was all smiles  
I had already shipped ‘em to the British Isles  
Did wonders for their revenue  
Ever since I stole the blues  
Since the white boy stole the blues.”

In performance, Mose plays what he feels like at any given moment, or at least it seems that way. That he enjoys himself is apparent from his ever-present wry smile.

His tempo is usually slow and deliberate, but there are moments when it feels like it comes almost to a standstill, as if trying to overcome inertia, and you find yourself hanging on to his every syllable. I may have imagined this, but his

pickup rhythm section—Dan Colton, bass and Tom Brown, drums—seemed to be hanging on that same way, straining to get inside his head. (Mose usually tours alone and plays with “pickup” musicians—usually a bassist and a drummer—from the local area.)

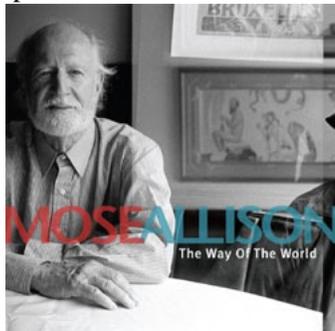
His chops aren’t so bad either, especially for a man in his ninth decade. His biting lyrics are only part of what Mose does. His music has always been informed by his bebop sensibilities and he has long been master of the keyboard. He performed tunes by Robert Lockwood, Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon, but made them uniquely his own. He also did some tunes from his latest album “That’s the Way of the World,” including the title tune:

“I’ve heard every battle is the one to end the war  
Seen thousands fall in line and never know what for  
And still our greatest fear is just that knock upon the door  
It’s the way of the world.”

And “I Know You Didn’t Mean It”:

“I know you didn’t mean it when you stole my coat  
It just happened to be the logical one  
I know you didn’t mean it when you cut my throat  
You’re just out with the fellas trying’ to have some fun.”

The release, “The Way of the World” (in March of this year), appeared after a 12-year hiatus from recording. He was performing during that time, but had been so frustrated with the failure to receive royalties from his catalog of over 50 albums—he still *owed* money to the record companies—that he decided to stop making records.



Producer Joe Henry from Anti- [Records] convinced Mose to record again. Mose has been treated lovingly in this production, and it shows. His daughter, Amy, performs the last poignant cut “This New Situation,” with her father. Mose performs a tune from her album, “Sad Girl,” called “Everybody Thinks You’re an Angel.”

Mose’s new songs on this CD are as witty and sardonic as any of his earlier material. The opening cut, “My Brain,” (to the tune of Willie Dixon’s “My Babe”) sets the tone. He does a formidable job covering “Once In A While,” a standard recorded notably Nat King Cole. Allison’s voice, even at its peak was never a match for the satin elegance of Cole’s, but his delivery of this classic is no less poignant.

Allison’s professional career spans virtually the entire

postwar era. When he arrived in New York, in the mid-1950s, after graduating from college, Mose immersed himself in the vibrant jazz world in Greenwich Village, where he came under the tutelage of Al Cohn and played with greats Zoot Sims, Stan Getz and Gerry Mulligan.

In a 1998 interview, Allison explains that his first record contract was with the Prestige label, based on tapes he made inspired by Béla Bartok’s approach to Hungarian folk tunes. He heard Bartok’s music for the first time at Louisiana State University.

What is remarkable about Allison’s discography is the homogeneity of the musical approach from the earliest recordings to today. His genius is such that everything he plays becomes his own. Even tunes by other artists such as Hank Williams’ “Hey Good Lookin’,” Duke Ellington’s “Don’t Get Around much Anymore” and “I Ain’t Got Nothin’ But The Blues,” also by Ellington.

In my view, Mose’s version of “I Ain’t Got Nothin’ But The Blues” from his 1972 live performance at Boston’s “In Your Ear” (The CD is “Mose in Your Ear”) has become the tune’s archetype. I’ve spent some time researching many different versions—the original Ellington ensemble, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, even Josh White—and found that the version played by West Coast blues guitar master Robben Ford, a far cry from the original, was inspired by none other than Mose Allison. Granted, this is a very subjective area, and can’t be established definitively, but it says a lot for Mose’s approach.

Younger listeners unfamiliar with Mose Allison will certainly know some of the artists influenced by his music. The Who, (performed his “Young Man’s Blues” in their “Live at Leeds” album) Van Morrison (did a tribute album for Mose), Bonnie Raitt, The Rolling Stones, The Yardbirds, Elvis Costello—the list goes on.

Mose’s repertoire influenced more mainstream artists. Seven years after Mose’s 1959 recording of Willie Dixon’s “Seventh Son,” Johnny Rivers made a pop hit out of it. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was a fan of Mose.

The entire Mose Allison discography is well worth rediscovering, and for younger listeners who may never have heard him, he will be a valuable discovery.

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