

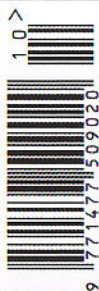
BLUES MATTERS



*The Black Crowes
Before the Band...*



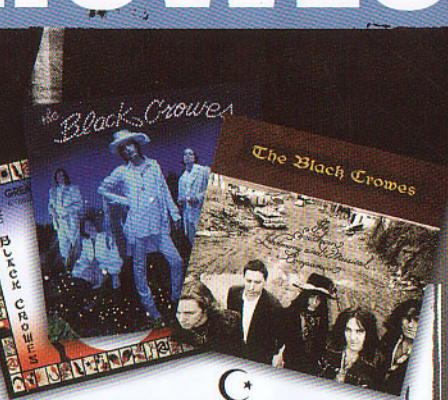
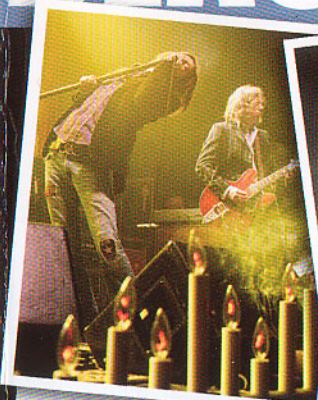
ISSN 1477-5093



OCT/NOV09 | Issue 51 | £4.50

**"We are all big fans and purveyors of the Blues,
and obsessed with the Blues."**

THE BLACK CROWES



THANK BLUES FANS FOR TWENTY YEARS OF SUPPORT

"It was like an extended near death experience. I felt extremely close to the other side, and a couple of times I crossed over and couldn't seem to find my way back."



WILLEM MAKER

SONGWRITER COMES BACK FROM THE BRINK

Darren Howells sees much better days ahead for musician

Fat Possum has taken its fair share of criticism for moving away from the music that helped establish the label – the Blues – to release anything ranging from indie guitar to electronic music in recent years. However, the label's founders regained some kudos with us in 2009, supporting the heart-tugging and gut wrenching second album from Willem Maker.

The label has returned to its roots, and is once again bringing to the attention of a wider listening public the

music of an artist so nearly lost to us. However, this is not the discovery of music recorded some fifty years ago by an aged Mississippi Bluesman, but a young man who has been fast-tracked through several lifetimes of the Blues...

Willem Maker was born on 19th March 1974, and had little chance to settle or make friendships during his formative childhood years, as his father moved around on the rural southern stock car racing circuit.

When his father took a job for a wire manufacturer, the family settled in Carrollton, Georgia. Here Willem took a different path

to his father – "I think I did, in my own way" – instead, taking encouragement from his older brother, he began learning bass guitar, inspired by classic rock and heavy metal artists.

Willem went on to form the band Ithica Gin with his brother Sloane, developing a healthy local following, which led to an early single release and the offer to support Ryan Adams. But just as things looked set to takeoff for the budding musician, Willem's health deteriorated.

The illegal disposing of toxic waste near Willem's home – "Carroll County is one of the top three dioxin hot spots in the world" – not only cost him his burgeoning music career, but nearly his life.

"It was actually a heavy metal cocktail," elucidated Willem.

"I was never diagnosed as manic depressive, but that term describes my experience well – extreme highs and lows. I was already sick from a long bout with mono (*mononucleosis is a type of herpes virus which affects the lymph nodes, throat, salivary glands, liver, spleen, and blood – DH*) that I never recovered from, so my immune system was low when I moved into the house surrounded by slag (*toxic waste from the copper refining process – DH*). It was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"It was like an extended near death experience. I felt



"What makes me angry is thinking about new generations being born into toxic environments and the old folks not doing anything about it."

extremely close to the other side, and a couple of times I crossed over and couldn't seem to find my way back."

Companies would illegally dispose copper slag and residue from the smelter into farmers' fields, and the highly toxic slag was all around the house Willem's family rented.

With doctors and medical specialists unable to identify what was causing Willem's mania, he was diagnosed as mentally ill - his symptoms were similar to those suffering bipolar disorder - and was taken into psychiatric care at Ridgeview Institute in Smyrna, Georgia.

"It was hell on earth!" exclaimed the songwriter.

"I spent about a month inside, but thanks to a mysterious grace, I did come back."

This period of Willem's life unsurprisingly dominates the songwriting on new album "New Moon Hand", whilst positive and grateful to be given the chance to live his life in relatively good health now ("After moving to a healthier place, the episodes stopped and, with medical help, I slowly returned to 'normal'") on tracks like 'Saints Weep Wine', songs such as 'Lead & Mercury' show an unwavering bitterness towards those who stole years of his life.

"What makes me angry is thinking about new generations being born into toxic environments and the old folks not doing anything about it," he revealed.

"Compensation? How do you put a price on your youth?"

"I heard that with every breath you or anyone else on this planet takes, there are least trace elements of one of the dirty dozen environmental toxins."

As tends to be the case, though, coming through such adversity can have a positive effect for an individual. "In the midst of all the chaos, something magical happened to me," began Willem, with a more upbeat tone. "Whoever I was up until the age of 19, that person died...like an old skin falling off. And with that came a freedom and light-heartedness that I didn't know existed. It is impossible to explain, but that's when I started songs, or they started writing me - before I had even left the hospital!

"I was a walking dead man before it all happened. Somehow, that experience was exactly what I needed to wake up."

Literally given a new lease of life, Willem retreated to the tranquillity of Turkey Heaven Mountain - "It's in the middle of nowhere... The silence is golden" - where he would hone his songwriting skills in isolation for over ten years.

"Writing was the only thing I cared about," admitted Willem.

"It was an inward thing, trying to find a voice and a sound that I could believe in. At some point, the process took on a life of its own, and a body of work emerged that I felt like sharing. I didn't have enough energy to care about anything else."

Taking inspiration "anywhere I could get it," songwriting was a vital cathartic exercise to help Willem overcome his haunting experience. "If you feel strongly about something and you don't let it out, you're gonna suffer," offered the songwriter.

Setting up his own studio (Foxhole) in the hills of East Alabama, Willem went about recording and mixing his debut alone. "The studio's nothing fancy - just enough gear to get by," he insisted, before going on to talk about

TWIST OF FATE

Willem's unlikely roommate

When Willem Maker was hospitalised at Ridgeview Institute, as fate would have it, he would room with GRAMMY award-winning singer-songwriter Joe South, who Willem would take great comfort in talking to about his music.

"I didn't know who he was until after he left," revealed Willem, "but he was very patient and kind.

"I still don't understand it. I mean, what are the odds?"

Born Joseph Alfred South on 28th February 1940, in Atlanta, Georgia, Joe began his career penning the likes of 'I Might Have Known' for Gene Vincent, before enjoying success himself in the late-60s/early-70s with hits such as 'Walk A Mile In My Shoes' (later a hit for Elvis) and, in particular, 1968's 'Games People Play', which made the top 10 in the UK and US charts, and won a GRAMMY Award for Best Contemporary Song.

Elvis was not the only artist to enjoy success with a South composition, 'Hush' would prove a hit for a number of acts (Billy Joe Royal, Deep Purple, Kula Shaker...), the Osmonds had success with 'Yo-Yo', whilst Lynn Anderson would chart in sixteen countries with '(I Never Promised You) A Rose Garden' - South won another GRAMMY Award for this interpretation.

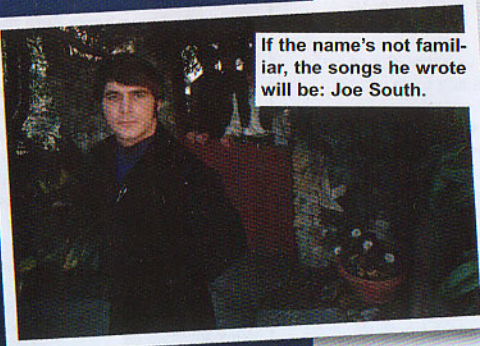
Not only a great songwriter, South was also a highly respected guitarist, recording with the likes of Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan (appearing on the 'Blonde On Blonde' album). However, the suicide of his brother Tommy would derail his career - Tommy was drummer in Joe's band and accompanied him on session work.

Following his brother's death, Joe would suffer severe depression, and mental illness, which would ultimately see him at the same psychiatric center as Willem. However, Joe was well enough to play with Buddy Buie, J.R. Cobb and Chips Moman when he was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in 2003 (twenty-four years after he was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame).

In 2006, Raven reissued two of South's most celebrated Capitol Recordings, "Games People Play" and "Joe South", on one disc, three years after reissuing "Introspect" and "Don't It Make You Want To Go Home" in simi-

lar fashion. There are number of retrospective/greatest hits collections - the most recent being 2002's "Classic Masters" from Capitol.

To read more on Joe South, who is reportedly in good health today and continuing to write, head to his official website: Joesouth.com. *DH*



If the name's not familiar, the songs he wrote will be: Joe South.

his first solo offering, 2007's "Stars Fell On". "I recorded drums to cassette and then moved to a Tascam 2288, before mixing it on my laptop. I played everything, except drums, and did all the artwork as well. I pressed 1000 copies under my own Makerworks flag and mailed it out to labels."

Although only a limited number of copies were issued, those 'in the know' began to compare Willem to Dylan as a modern day musical poet - "Maybe on a good day" - and word-of-mouth brought interest from Fat Possum, who had seemingly been keen to move away from their Blues-links.

Via subsidiary label Big Legal Mess, Fat Possum would return to their roots - reissuing Willem's debut collection and giving him the platform for a more realised follow-up.

"Since I made 'Stars Fell On' by myself, I wanted to do something completely different with the follow-up," he explained. "Bringing in great musicians and recording elsewhere was exactly what I needed - a creative change of scenery... Collaboration was my main desire."

And the label had the necessary clout to attract the likes of Cedric Burnside, Jim Dickinson and Alvin Youngblood Hart to lend their considerable talents. "Bruce Watson and Scott Bomar knew the guys," he disclosed, "and luckily everyone had the time and the willingness to be a part.

"They're all true professionals with more mojo than you could ever catch on tape."

Willem was no longer recording in solitude, and he no longer needed the safe haven of his home - recording at various studios in Nashville and Memphis with different producers.

"We didn't stay too long in one place, so if a song didn't work here, there was the opportunity to try it again with other players over there," he explained. "It's a great way to avoid getting caught in 'studio hell'."

Talking about the songs on his latest collection, 'Hex Blues' is a particular favourite - "I think the band sounds fantastic" - and he is acutely aware of the genre's relevance on his own music - "I think Townes Van Zandt said it best: 'There's only two kinds of music, the Blues and zip-a-dee-doo-dah'".

Willem's recently been on the road for an extensive tour with another contemporary American Blues act - himself once signed to Fat Possum - who has also garnered significant interest from his side of the pond: Bob Log III.

"It was my first national tour - 33 shows in 33 days," he revealed. "I was travelling alone, so it became quite surreal.

"I met a lot of good folks and Bob is one of them. Always positive and a true road warrior!"

However, there's one place he didn't get to travel to with Bob - "Unfortunately, I haven't played the UK yet" - but let's hope continued good health and Willem's new found confidence will see him venture even further from Turkey Heaven Mountain in the future. *DH*