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Colin Linden Biography (2006 - Easin' Back To Tennessee)

Colin Linden wears more hats than you'd find at a Royal wedding, and we're not just talking about the trademark big black hat he favours on and offstage. This musical renaissance man is indeed a multiple threat - as a singer, songwriter, guitarist, and producer. He is in major demand by artists wanting him to produce, write for, and/or play on their records (he has played on 300 and produced 60 albums), yet somehow finds time to both pursue a prolific solo career and play a key role in Canadian roots-rock "supergroup" Blackie and the Rodeo Kings.

If forced at the proverbial gunpoint to come up with just one self-defining phrase, chances are he'd come up with "bluesman." The form that first stirred Colin's musical soul nearly four decades ago sustains him still. *easin'back to tennessee*, his tenth solo album, represents the fullest consummation of a lifelong love affair.

"I've been playing country blues, '20s style acoustic blues, since I was a really little kid," the 45-year-old Linden explains. "When I was 11, I met [electric blues pioneer] Howlin' Wolf. One of the things he said to me that really got me onto this path was that 'if you want to play this kind of music you should listen to the people I listened to.' He told me about Charlie Patton and Son House and that generation of artists. That was like opening the biggest door in the world for me, so I just dug in deep. I listened to it and have been playing it seriously for 32 years now."

Colin's thorough and committed exploration of the blues is, he explains, "at the core of everything I do. If I'm playing guitar on a Lee Ann Womack record or playing with Bruce Cockburn, I'm still thinking of Son House and Charlie Patton and Blind Blake. That is the foundation, the deepest root for everything that I do."

He does his long-gone sources of musical inspiration proud on ***easin' back to tennessee***. The time is indeed right for an album like this. Years spent on a life well lived are reflected in the resonance of Colin Linden's virile and compelling voice, an instrument perfectly complemented by the fluent fretwork that has long been one of his calling cards. As Colin notes, "this is not particularly young people's music. I think it is something you bring more authority to the older you get."

easin' back to tennessee features both original compositions written by Linden over the course of his career and inspired versions of tunes written by some of the greats of the acoustic blues. Voice and guitar are placed front and centre, while subtle accompaniment from the ace rhythm section of Larry Taylor (Canned Heat, Tom Waits) and Stephen Hodges (Tom Waits) graces a handful of the tunes.

"I always wanted to make a record like this," says Colin. "I first started thinking seriously about doing it about 15 years ago, and actually did my first ever home recordings on it then." Acoustic blues elements were present on such earlier solo albums as 1994's *South At Eight North At Nine* and 2002's *Big Mouth*, but the style is given full expression on *easin' back to tennessee*. The record can be seen as a companion piece to *Southern Jumbo*, the critically-acclaimed album Colin released in March 2005. That gem was described by noted musicologist Rob Bowman as "an exceptionally mature, stylistically diverse, and extraordinarily moving work."

Tracks on *tennessee* were recorded in Los Angeles, Toronto and Nashville, Colin's current base. "Some of the mixes that ended up on the record were done in hotel rooms while I was touring with Blackie," says Colin. "For this kind of music, it is hard to keep the spirit for a solo performance for more than a couple of takes. After that, I'd rather come back to it." Such an approach accounts for the honesty and authenticity of the material. "I found the making of this album liberating, as it was something I never felt I'd got down properly on tape before. It reflects the way I play when I play by myself."

On *easin' back to tennessee*, Linden captures the spirit of his early blues heroes, but his approach transcends mimicry. "After a while, the tradition becomes part of who you are, especially when you utilize what you do in different capacities. If I play Son House style guitar on some country record, you begin to feel like you are an emissary of this style that you walk around with. That frees you from feeling like you're an imitator. When the dance floor is full, you have to get them going some way or another, so you pull out what you have in your back pocket. In my case, that is usually Robert Johnson or Son House, the country blues."

The combination of his deep passion, encyclopedic musical knowledge, and a well-trained empathetic ear has also made Colin Linden one of the most sought after roots music producers in North America. In 2005 alone, he produced eight albums, some surely destined to bring more awards into his crammed trophy case. That list includes the Bruce Cockburn instrumental album, *Speechless*, the new solo album from his Blackie comrade, Tom Wilson, (*Dog Years*), the strong-selling *Limelight* from Colin James, plus upcoming records from fast-rising blues songstresses Janiva Magness and Roxanne Potvin, whose disc will feature guest appearances from the likes of Daniel Lanois, Cockburn, John Hiatt and The Fairfield Four.

Linden has produced earlier Juno Award-winning albums for Bruce Cockburn, Sue Foley, Ray Bonneville, Lennie Gallant and Colin James,

while he has taken home Junos for his own solo discs, *South At Eight*, *North At Nine* and *Big Mouth*, and for Blackie and the Rodeo Kings' *Kings Of Love*. Then there are the multiple Maple Blues Awards, his 1999 Toronto Arts Award, and a 1999 Grammy Award nomination in the Best Traditional Blues Album category for the starstudded *A Tribute To Howlin' Wolf* CD, one Colin conceived, produced and played on.

As a songwriter, Colin has written hits for such artists as Michelle Wright, The Band (the now classic and much covered "Remedy") and Colin James, while his participation in the *O Brother Where Art Thou* phenomenon increased his Stateside profile greatly. Linden's version of the Skip James classic, "Hard Time Killing Floor," was used in the hit film, and led to Colin's participation in the subsequent *Down From The Mountain* tours and documentary.

Blackie and the Rodeo Kings, the side project formed with Tom Wilson and Stephen Fearing exactly a decade ago, has also become a significant part of Colin's career. The band has made real strides in the U.S., even on to George W. Bush's iPod, and Colin will soon be back in the studio producing their new disc.

He won't be doing a lot of takin' it easy in Tennessee in 2006, but that will suit Colin Linden just fine. This is the 25th anniversary of Colin Linden's career as a solo recording artist, and ***easin' back to Tennessee*** sees him mark this memorable milestone in the most fitting way possible.