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Colin Linden - Biography (2005 - Southern Jumbo)

Behind the magnolia curtain, in the southern United States, lies a land, a people and a music a world apart. Black or white, the best music from the area holds the possibility of cutting through the detritus of the modern world to capture a spirit that speaks to the essence of much of what makes being human in this world such a wonderful gift. This is a music that heals, that can bring joy to each and every one of us every day of the week. It's a music that's filled with love, that conjures up community, that makes anything seem possible, and that, ultimately, tells us something about what it means to be human.

Singer, songwriter, guitarist extraordinaire, Colin Linden has spent his entire musical life trying to get to the essence of this music. While he has hit the sweet spot a number of times over the course of his previous seven solo albums, Southern Jumbo represents a quantum leap in this quest. It's the sound of a mature musician, rooted in the past and yet making meaningful, timeless music in the present. It's the sound of a master alchemist who has learned how to enter a recording studio and make the conditions right for the spirit to come down.

In 2001 Colin relocated to Nashville. Busy writing with the likes of Gary Nicholson and Kostas, recording and touring as one-third of Canadian roots icons Blackie and the Rodeo Kings and producing records for the likes of Bruce Cockburn, Paul Reddick and Sue Foley, in the summer of 2004 Colin took time out, left Opryland behind and journeyed the two hundred miles down I-40 to Memphis, Tennessee. There he spent several days recording with his favourite Toronto-based rhythm section, Richard Bell on keyboards, John Dymond on bass and Gary Craig on drums, and the fabled Memphis Horns--trumpeter Wayne Jackson and tenor saxophonist Andrew Love. For those who don't know, it's Wayne and Andrew that crafted and played the soulful horn licks on virtually every smash ever recorded by Otis Redding, Al Green, Sam and Dave and Rufus Thomas. In their spare time they also cut hits with Aretha Franklin, Elvis Presley, Steve Stills, Robert Cray, Steve Winwood, Peter Gabriel and several hundred other musicians in love with the sound of Memphis soul.

For Colin Linden, working with the Memphis Horns was a dream come

true. "The rich timbral blend of the Memphis Horns has been so integral to so much of the music that I love," enthuses Colin, "That playing with them in the studio made me feel like I was in the middle of one of my all-time favourite records."

For Colin this was simply one more incredible dream to come true. Befriending his boyhood hero, Howlin' Wolf at the age of 11, Colin was invited to play on stage with the Wolf by the time he was 12. Too nervous to take the Wolf up on his offer, before the year was out Colin made up for it by playing at the Mariposa Folk Festival. By the time he was 15, in the company of older musicians such as Ken Whiteley, Colin had been featured on the CBC, playing heady mature-beyond-his-years versions of pre-war blues classics by the likes of Skip James, Son House and Robert Johnson.

Growing up Colin had been intoxicated with the heady mix of roots music that the five members of the Band collectively fused on seminal records like *Music From Big Pink*, *The Band* and *Rock of Ages*. Band members Rick Danko, Levon Helm and Garth Hudson would eventually sing and play on several of Colin's solo albums and the reconstituted Band would cut Colin's "Remedy" for their *Jericho* album. The track was subsequently chosen as the lead single from that album and ended up zooming to #6 on the Canadian CAR charts, the highest position any Band record ever reached on any chart.

Another dream came true when at the age of nineteen Colin talked Flying Fish Records owner Bruce Kaplan into financing an album with Colin backing up former Mississippi Sheiks guitarist Sam Chatmon. Released in 1979 as Sam Chatmon and his Barbeque Boys, it was Colin's first full length recording experience. His debut album, *Colin Linden Live!*, was released by Toronto independent label Ready Records in 1981. It was followed by *Colin Linden and the Immortals (Stony Plain)* in 1985 and *When the Spirit Comes (A+M)* in 1987. The latter record represented a massive step forward in Colin's songwriting and singing skills and, for all intents and purposes, it is with this record that Colin's career begins to take on meaning. One of the album's tracks, "Miles Away From You," was a modest hit on the Canadian rock charts.

As Linden's reputation slowly grew, he began to receive requests to produce albums by other Canadian roots musicians such as Mendelson Joe, Morgan Davis, Jackson Delta and eventually Stephen Fearing, Sue Foley, Paul Reddick and Bruce Cockburn. In 1991, with his solo and production careers moving into full swing, he received a phone call from Bruce Cockburn asking him if he wanted to play in his band. Linden would go on to work the road with Cockburn for the next three-and-a-half years, playing guitar on two albums, before becoming the veteran singer-songwriter's co-producer, working behind the board on Cockburn's subsequent four records, *The Charity of Night*, *You Pay Your Money* and *You Take Your Chance*, *Breakfast in New Orleans*, *Dinner in Timbuktu* and *You've Never Seen Everything*.

In 1993, Colin released his fourth solo album, *South at Eight, North at Nine (Deluge)* featuring guest appearances by Cockburn, Rick

Danko, Levon Helm and Garth Hudson. A year later South at Eight, North at Nine garnered Colin his first Juno Award as Best Blues and Gospel album that year. The following year Colin cut an instrumental slide guitar version of the Band's "Whispering Pines" that was included on a European anthology of slide guitar playing entitled Everybody Slides (released in North America by Rykodisc in 1996).

Colin's fifth album, Through the Storm, Through the Night (1995, Sony), manifested a deepening interest in gospel music, the album's standout track being "No Rest for the Wicked" featuring legendary Nashville gospel quartet the Fairfield Four. In 1996, Colin's won Album Of The Year at the East Coast Music Awards for Lennie Gallant's The Open Window, co-wrote Colin James' hit single "Real Stuff" and, in cahoots with Tom Wilson of Junkhouse and Stephen Fearing, formed Blackie and the Rodeo Kings. That year the Rodeo Kings issued High or Hurtin', followed in 1999 by the double disc Kings of Love and in 2003 BARK.

In 1998 Colin released his sixth solo album, (raised by wolves), and conceived, produced and played on A Tribute to Howlin' Wolf (Telarc Records). Nominated for a Grammy in the "Best Traditional Blues Album" category, the CD featured guest artists such as Lucinda Williams, Ronnie Hawkins and Taj Mahal fronting the tougher-than-nails core members of Howlin' Wolf's band, Sam Lay, Eddie Shaw, Hubert Sumlin, Henry Gray and Calvin Jones.

Shortly thereafter, Colin received a call from T-Bone Burnett asking him to teach Chris Thomas King how to play Skip James "Hard Time Killing Floor" for inclusion in the O Brother, Where Art Thou film. Colin ended up cutting an instrumental version of the song that was used over the credits in the film and played on the subsequent critically acclaimed Down from the Mountain tours and documentary.

With his list of credits rapidly piling up, the quality of Colin's work was eminently recognized when at the 2000 Juno Awards he won three awards; in the "Blues" category as the producer of Ray Bonneville's Gust of Wind, in the "Roots and Traditional: Solo Artist" category as the producer of Bruce Cockburn's Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu and in the "Roots and Traditional: Group" category as a member of Blackie and the Rodeo Kings.

That same year Linden produced blues singer and guitarist Sue Foley's Love Comin' Down and Paul Reddick and the Sidemen's Rattle Bag. Both records were superb roots music recordings and both were nominated for Juno's in the "Best Blues Album" category, Foley winning in 2001 and Reddick ironically losing out to Linden's eighth solo album Big Mouth in 2002.

In between attending award ceremonies, Linden spent 2002 co-producing Blackie and the Rodeo Kings member Stephen Fearing's That's How I Walk and Bruce Cockburn's You've Never Seen Everything. Both albums were released in 2003. That same year Linden made his acting debut, playing the role of a guitar playing priest in the latest epic from the Coen Brothers, Intolerable Cruelty. Linden can be heard singing snippets of two Simon and Garfunkel

tunes in the film and playing a ragtime/blues version of "The Boxer" during the closing credits.

Southern Jumbo is the culmination of Colin's efforts over a quarter century to perfect his craft. Highlights abound. The semi-autobiographical "Which Way Does the M & O Run" (two points to anyone reading this who gets the reference to "Big foot Chester" in the song's opening line; bonus points to those who know the significance of the M & O railroad in roots American music lore!) jumps out for its deliriously intoxicating melody, the subtle harmonies of Buddy Miller and the brassy good time feel provided by the Memphis Horns. "Bucket of Soul," co-written by latter day Band member Jim Weider, similarly features an irresistible and catchy melody and a groove that owes a debt to all the years Colin spent listening to the Band. Further evidence of the Band's influence can be heard in his swaggering Levon Helm-derived vocal on "I Give Up." The album's closing song, "Back Door to Heaven," manifests a beauty, dignity and emotional depth that is the product of a master musician at the height of his game. It's the kind of song and performance that, in its evocation of the desire for redemption, peace and life everlasting, is simply timeless.

With Southern Jumbo, as a songwriter, producer, guitarist and singer, Linden has successfully integrated the roots musics he has been intoxicated with from the age of eleven into a body of work that is emotionally mature, stylistically diverse and, ultimately, extraordinarily moving. The journey along the way has been fascinating.

- Rob Bowman -