

COLIN LINDEN

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

easin' back

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

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 star-studded *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.

COLIN LINDEN

easin' back to tennessee - Track by Track

1 - "Easin' Back To Tennessee"

"This is a Sleepy John Estes song. What you hear is the first time I ever played that song. I knew it, but not how to play it. I thought it'd be a cool one to do with Larry [Taylor] and Stephen [Hodges]. I related to the lyrics and decided to name the album that. I couldn't get Sleepy John Estes' stamp of approval as he is dead, but, interestingly, after I recorded it, my wife found a book of interviews from *Living Blues* magazine and in it he said 'Easin' Back' was his favourite song."

2- "Go Back Old Devil"

"It was written by Bo Carter who is the

brother of [blues legend] Sam Chatmon. I knew Sam really well and I made his last record with him [Sam Chatmon and his Barbeque Boys]. That was my very first record. Sam showed me how to play this song when I was 14.”

3- “Broke Down Engine”

“It is a Blind Willie McTell song. He was one of the greatest. It is hard to imagine all these country blues guys who wrote these songs. It was like a hockey team of geniuses. That period from 1927 to 1931 was just an unbelievable time for African-American music.”

4- “Nowhere To Go”

“That’s the oldest song of mine people have ever heard. I wrote it when I was really young, before I started making records, and it has stayed with me. Gordie Johnson recorded it on the first Big Sugar album, but I’d never recorded it myself.”



5 - “A True Friend Won’t Let You Drown”

“It is the newest song on the record. I wrote it with my friend Gary Nicholson [one of Nashville’s top songwriters]. About a week after Hurricane Katrina hit, I played with Chris Thomas King, a good friend of mine from New Orleans, at a festival in Nashville. He had lost nearly everything there. He has a lot of pride and a very independent personality. People showed such an outpouring of love and friendship towards him, and it surprised him. Well, if someone is your friend you won’t let anything terrible happen to

them, if you can help it. That is the simplest thing.”

6-“There Would Be Hell To Pay”

“That is a T-Bone Burnett song, and it’ll be on his album coming out in 2006. He played me some of his record at his place in Los Angeles, and I only heard his version of this once. It had atmosphere that owed quite a lot to “Delia,” by Blind Willie McTell, and I thought I should record this in that style. I kind of remembered the chord changes. I played it later for T-Bone, and he gave his seal of approval.”

7 “You Can’t Get the Stuff No More”

“It is a Tampa Red song. Doc MacLean [Toronto bluesman] and I traveled and played together as kids, as The Barbeque Boys. When I was 15, we went to visit Tampa Red at a nursing home in Chicago. He wrote this song with Georgia Tom when they were a duo. Tom then quit the blues and wrote songs as Thomas A. Dorsey, the most famous gospel composer of all time. I only sing a couple of verses of it as that is all I know, but we wanted to play something in that groove.”

8- “Paramount”

“It is an instrumental I made up, but it owes so much to people like Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and David Wilcox. A quote from one of David’s tunes came out here. It is named for the Paramount 12000 series of what were called race records back in the day. Paramount was the record label for country blues greats like Skip James, Ma Rainey, and Blind Blake, so this is my tribute.”

9 - “Keep It Clean”

“I’ve played it since I was 14. It was the first hard to play finger-picking piece I ever learned. It was written by Charlie Jordan in the ‘30s, but this arrangement and version owes a huge amount to Larry Johnson. He was a student of Rev Gary Davis and would often play here in Toronto in the early ‘70s. I saw him at a coffee house in

stage and- we all hung out all weekend. I learned that song from Larry but Ken helped me remember it.”

10- “Champ”

“I wrote this myself. The sentiment is like that of a blues song, where the

character in the song could be an old man who is dying. An old person or animal can show a lot of character, a lot of heart. That is what the song is about.”

11- “Dry Spell Blues”

“It comes from Son House. I did it with Larry and Steve, and we just wanted to get the chaos of drought in the way we recorded it. I took



some of the blues with the guitar

part, but it is likely the closest to the original of the songs here.”

12 - “Trouble Soon Be Over”

“It comes from the great Blind Willie Johnson.”

13 - “Tears Come Rolling Down”

“It was written by the great piano player Walter Davis in the ‘30s, but the version I do owes an awful lot to Geoff Muldaur’s version, on the record he made with Amos Garrett. The changes in the form of my version owes quite a lot to that

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