



Bald Eagle Moan -Smoke Blues Band

The Band

Sometime during the summer of 1967 in a run-down rental house just off the campus of the University of Utah, on Salt Lake City's 12th East, the band that came to be known as Smoke Blues Band was born.

Actually, the original inspiration came a few years earlier. Future band founders Mark Richmond and Richard Cordray had grown up together in Salt Lake listening to beat poetry and folk music. In 1965, right after school let out, the two headed for the lively San Francisco Bay scene. They found a place to stay in West Oakland, not far from Berkeley. The scene there was cool enough, but still they found themselves gravitating across the Bay to hang out in North Beach, spending hours browsing at City Lights Bookstore while taking in the local culture.

Sometimes, Cordray and Richmond wandered over into the Haight District, which at this time was still a fairly ethnic Russian-Jewish neighborhood not quite ready to experience the psychedelic explosion. There was a coffeehouse there called the *Blue Unicorn*, where they would sip tea and read the latest from the local radical press. The *Unicorn* had a juke box, and it was from that music machine that they got to hear the sweet wailing blues of Jimmy Reed for the first time. Richmond recalls that they were immediately drawn towards Reed's music as well as the music of Memphis Slim, another *Blue Unicorn* jukebox discovery.

Now you could say that this "was the spark" that set things off, but you'd be only partially right. That's because they were already digging the blues, mostly the country variety. This included artists like Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James and Blind Gary Davis, who were currently riding the crest of the folk-blues revival as told in the pages of *Sing Out!* magazine. And naturally, Richmond and Cordray were into playing and singing those folk and blues tunes which they were reading about and hearing.

But there was something else that happened there in San Francisco at the *Blue Unicorn*: Cordray and Richmond met up with blues harmonica player J.C. Burris. Long before, Burris had come off of a North Carolina farm to go to New York, where he had learned blues harp from his uncle, Sonny Terry. He'd migrated to the West Coast in 1960, and by this time, he'd become something of a legend as a street performer in the Bay Area. Burris asked the two teenagers if they would like to share a jug of wine with him in the alley behind the coffeehouse...It was a first-hand encounter with *the blues*.

Meanwhile, there was a lively counter-culture scene forming on the streets of Salt Lake City back in 1967. People were starting to take a different look at things. Radical politics was showing itself on the U. campus, and the drug culture began to appear in the community as well. In conjunction with these developments, a handful of hip businesses sprang up, the foremost of which was the Cosmic Aeroplane. The magical atmosphere of the Aeroplane and the few other spots worked like a magnet to draw the new scene together. Musicians mingled at these places, and soon new bands started forming, just as

performers like the Doors and Janis Joplin came to play Salt Lake's Terrace Ballroom, Lagoon Amusement Park, and the Coliseum at the State Fair Grounds.

Psychedelia was coming on strong, but so were a lot of other things. Richmond and Cordray had come to know John Miller, who was perhaps the most colorful character ever to come out of Heber Valley. Miller had the makings of a real counter-culture icon thanks to his uncompromisingly radical life style and frivolously distorted sense of humor. To most enlightened people he was a truly likeable sort who possessed a personality which could make rebellious character traits form a real charisma. John Miller became the "glue" that would bond the group.

Miller, Richmond and Cordray were all starting to steep themselves in the music of the Rolling Stones, while at the same time they drew closer to the blues, recognizing that it was the root music for the Stones and other hip groups. A spaced-out diabetic with electric-frizzed hair named Brian Allred, who was a would-be drummer better known as "Rotis", started to hang out with them. And they all soon met a wildly creative art student who wore an oddly-distinctive bowler derby hat named Peter Brandt, who had a "thing" for playing the blues harp. These five were the core of what would become Smoke Blues Band.

There was plenty of music being made in the house on 12th East during that summer of 1967. Finally, somebody got the idea that they should get some amps and microphones and go electric. They met another guitar player, someone who had already gone electric and wanted to be in a band real bad: James Warburton. Now Warburton's musical lexicon paid homage to different roots so he never really fit in with Cordray, Miller, Richmond and the rest, but he *could* play the guitar, and he also had an amp.

Towards the end of that summer the group moved from the 12th East house into a dingy, run-down two-story "pad" on 5th East. It was a condemned building, so it was OK for the occupants to practice a little mayhem now and then. Walls were spray painted, axes were used on woodwork for pleasure or to take out frustrations, and here and there one could see bullet holes in the walls. In short, it was a perfect atmosphere for a fledgling blues band.

Another band member came to live in the house on 5th East: Jack Brady. Brady had been spending the greater part of his youth up at the U. studying everything it seems but never coming up with a degree. He played saxophone, which was great, but he was classically-trained, so coming into the blues was something of a learning experience for Jack.

About this time, one evening Mark Richmond was studying up at the Huddle, which was the only real excuse for a hang-out on the entire University of Utah campus. While sipping a cup of coffee and reading music theory, Richmond was suddenly interrupted by an apparition which had come before him dressed in a droopy hooded sweatshirt. Richmond looked up at the monk-like figure. The mysterious stranger asked, "Are you a music major?" Richmond replied that he was studying music, and that he "was playing in a *blues band*...", to which the stranger responded, "That was one of the reasons why I came to Salt Lake...to play piano in a blues band (!)" This was the one and only Jerome Mische, or "St. Jerome".

Incredibly, Jerome hadn't played any blues up to that point. He'd played some jazz, but he, too had been classically trained. But when the boys played him some Otis Spann for the first time, he was transfigured almost as if a religious experience had happened. With Jerome, things often were like that. Rapidly, he became an awesome

blues piano player. Jack Brady tells the story of how the members of *Canned Heat* tried to get Jerome to join their band because he was so good. Anyway, if John Miller was the heart, then Jerome became the soul of the band. And when the band started to play gigs, he would be the most dependable player of all.

In the beginning, they didn't have a name. They started out as the "Neon Erection", but it didn't fly for long because a name like that back then couldn't score ANY gigs. Surviving members seem to remember an early gig at the U. Art Department in which they called themselves that, but the name soon died.

The name "Smoke" was tossed around by band members while warming up for a performance at a VFW hall, of all things. They were in the kitchen of Warburton's mother's house. Apparently she had arranged the gig, and the hall was nearby.

Other names had been considered. Everybody liked "The Diesel Ducks", but it was already taken. Jerome wanted "Cactus Jack and the Boys in Back", but not everybody did. "Smoke" stuck because it was the name least offensive to everybody.

The original lineup was: Cordray, singer; Warburton, lead guitar; Richmond, rhythm guitar; Brandt, blues harp; Miller, bass; Jerome, piano; and Rotis, drums. Jack Brady was the band manager. He didn't play the sax with the band until later.

The gigs came, but not with astounding regularity. There was a little basement venue downtown on Second South known as the Abyssie where many early performances took place. It was a dark and seedy little grotto, with steam pipes running the length of the ceiling and black-painted walls for atmosphere. The light was dim enough for the band to survive the intense stage fright which affected them. Brady recalls that in the early days, the stage fright got to be so bad that the band actually played with their backs to the audience at a few gigs.

Stage fright notwithstanding, as time went on, the band slowly got better. Their repertoire grew out of the music which had influenced and inspired them. At this time, Charlie Musselwhite's *Stand Back!* album was the prime source for a daily blues fix. Other influences were: Jimmy Reed, Memphis Slim, Junior Wells and Buddy Guy, and the whole Chicago blues scene. Hank Williams, Charlie Pride, and Bob Dylan were big influences, as were the old country bluesmen and naturally, the Rolling Stones.

In the end, Warburton was eased out of the band. His kind of acid rock-styled guitar repetitions simply didn't fit. Richmond took charge for a time as the lone guitar player, but the demands of the music seemed to insist on somebody new. That's when Gary Soeffker came in. Soeffker had been playing in a Byrds-type of rock cover band, but he was digging the things Smoke was doing. Besides, he had been hanging out with the band for some time. He borrowed a Muddy Waters album, learned to play slide from it, and joined. He was an awesome addition.

Rotis struggled with the drums and finally left the band by his own choice. Steve Harris replaced him. Oh, Rotis was still there, in spirit (he always *will* be there, in spirit, too), but Harris was a technically more competent drummer. He may not always have had his head in the same place as the rest of the band, but he was able to keep a beat and thus improve things.

By 1969, Brady was playing his sax, Soeffker was learning slide, and Harris was laying down a steady beat. Bass player John Miller was the unmistakable spiritual leader of the group, and Jerome couldn't be touched as both keyboard virtuoso and as the group's existential alter-ego. Brandt's harp was reaching into places previously unimagined, while Richmond was laying down some solid rhythm guitar licks. And

Cordray was singing the blues with sincere conviction. In short, the band had come a long way in terms of becoming a coherent entity. There was talk of "really making something" of the group, and demo tapes were recorded with the plan to "sell" Smoke Blues Band to performing agents elsewhere. Salt Lake just didn't "cut it" as a viable music scene. Lots of possible cities were discussed, but it came down to a quick trip to the Midwest: first to Denver and then to Minneapolis, in an attempt to find a place which could accept and (somehow) support a 7-piece blues band.

At the end of August, armed with a demo tape culled from a formal recording session, John Miller and Mark Richmond were joined by Smokey Koelsch for the trip to the two cities. Koelsch was from Minneapolis, and he came along to help Miller and Richmond navigate the strange big city.

Anyway, after hearing the demo tape, agents in both cities were cordial and expressed a willingness to help find performance venues for the band. Minneapolis, however, was the favorite city by far for the travelers. With the Koerner, Ray and Glover *Blues, Rags & Hollers* thing still big it was kind of a "blues town". Adding to the mystique was the fact that Miller, Richmond and Koelsch were able to get tickets to see Muddy Waters and Otis Spann play with their band at the Guthrie Theater during their visit. A side trip up to Bob Dylan's home town of Hibbing, in northern Minnesota, completed the fantasy.

But back in Utah, reality set in. Lives were changing. Soeffker and Brady got married. Richmond got married and had a baby! The band kept on for a time, but other issues began to make demands on everybody's time and energies, as it periodically did in those days.

Ultimately, Smoke Blues Band was more than the music. It was a social thing. Along with the Cosmic Aeroplane, which had been the brainchild of Steve Jones and Sherm Clow, it existed as the focal point for a larger group of people. As a matter of fact, the band used the Cosmic as a place to practice in the early days. But Smoke really existed *for* that larger group of people, so in a sense, they were all part of the band as well, even if they didn't play at the gigs. And above everything else, it was John Miller's infectious charisma which perfected the union of the band and the people. They all got together at the gigs: at the Abyssie, at Rotary Glen, at the Old Mill, the Union Ballroom and elsewhere, including the famed Bastille Family Reunion at Fairmont Park in 1970. The band also opened for Canned Heat and It's a Beautiful Day at the Coliseum. And at other times, they would gather at the funky pads on 4th Avenue, on "J" Street, and the big house next to the YMCA on 2nd South. If you knew those places, you were a part of the band.

Smoke Blues Band periodically faded away and then came back when some new inspiration rekindled everyone's energies. But finally, perhaps sometime after the Bastille Family gathering, it passed from the scene for good. And yet, it didn't really die. A resurrected group soon resurfaced with a new name: Rocks and Gravel Blues Band. But that's another story, and it will make for another CD.

Sincere thanks are in order for surviving performing members of Smoke Blues Band Mark Richmond and Jack Brady. Without their input, insight and assistance this project would not have been possible. Meanwhile, from a far-off farm on the northern prairies of North Dakota, another surviving band member has proclaimed that the name of this CD should be "*Bald Eagle Moan*". Many years ago, Jerome Mische (Remember: Jerome was the *soul* of the band) returned to his home in the north country. He may be

physically far removed from things, but if you can appreciate his uniquely prophetic grasp on reality, you will be able to recognize that Jerome's insight into matters relating to Smoke Blues Band carries a lot of weight. If Jerome says that the album should be entitled as such, then so be it.

The Music

Most of the material comes from sessions recorded by Harold Carr at the ITV studio on the University of Utah. Six of the tunes were selected for a demo tape the group took back to Minneapolis looking for gigs and possible relocation. The date of the sessions is somewhat controversial. May 21, 1970 is noted on the back of one of the reels; however, the Minneapolis trip was in September, 1969. So Summer of 1969 is the most likely time frame of the sessions.

Anyway, we are lucky to have this recorded history of Smoke Blues Band, thanks to the efforts of guitarist Mark Richmond who preserved these tapes for 30 years. The sound quality of the 2-track, reel-to-reel studio tapes is good, but not perfect...perhaps the years took a little oxide off those reels.

The selections are presented in order of recording and include songs #1 through #15. Personnel of Smoke for these sessions is as follows:

Richard Cordray--Vocals
Peter Brandt--Harmonica, Vocals on #9
Jerome Mische--Piano
Mark Richmond--Guitar
John Miller--Bass
Steve Harris--Drums
Jack Brady--Alto Sax

While the studio material is certainly the best quality of any existing Smoke Blues Band recordings, we did discover some other interesting material for inclusion on this CD (cuts #16 through #19). Unfortunately, the quality of this supplementary material is marginal at best; however, it does show other sides of Smoke Blues Band.

From an ancient reel-to-reel tape via cassette copy comes an early attempt by the band to record a do-it-yourself demo tape. First is a warm up jam between Jack Brady on sax and Rotis G. Stix (Brian Allred) on drums. This is followed by two tunes: It Hurts Me Too and Help Me, the latter a band signature tune, and the only known recorded version, which compels its inclusion on this CD. The group members on these tunes is somewhat confusing but probably: Richard Cordray--Vocals, Peter Brandt--Harmonica, Mark Richmond--Guitar, John Miller--Bass, Rotis G. Stix --Drums.

Some notes on the cassette indicate participation by Jerome on Piano and Gary Soeffker on Guitar; however, the quality of the tape makes it difficult to determine their inclusion. There is no date indicated; but, with Rotis on drums, this was probably early in the group's career. No other material from this time exists, any other tunes recorded were erased by commercial music recorded over the tape.

The final selection on this CD is the only known live recording of Smoke. This is from a tape recorded by Val Ness at the University of Utah West Ballroom, probably Summer of 1969. Again, the recording quality is limited (amazing what you could get

with an old 4-track reel-to-reel and a couple cheap Radio Shack mikes), and only a portion of the long jam exists, all other material from this gig was erased.

This jam is loosely based on Howlin' Wolf's "How Many More Years" but band mythology now refers to this selection as the infamous Miller Jam. Even blues bands at this time were influenced by the popularity of long, often drug induced, jams popularized by the San Francisco psychedelic bands. In retrospect, this kind of playing is a bit embarrassing (remember Inna Gada Da Vida?), and many listeners may want to throw this off their CD players before it destroys their woofers. But there's still some pretty cool stuff going down on this selection, and repeated listening reveals the moments of magic that could occur during these jams. Hey, some of us were there that night, it was grand! (remember the drug induced part...)

This selection is important for another reason since it represents the departure of Jerome on piano and the entrance of Gary Soeffker on second (slide) guitar. Rotis is probably still on drums, but his departure was imminent since the band would soon record in the studio soon after this gig using Steve Harris on drums. Mark Richmond, Richard Cordray, John Miller, and Pete Brandt are the mainstays of the band for this gig.

Anyway, we hope you enjoy this music. For many of us it brings back old memories of the band, our friends, and the time we came of age. For others, it is important history, a document tying us to a past and to people we never had much chance to experience but want to know just the same.

Credits and Thanks

Band notes by Smokey Koelsch, music notes by Rev. Willis, cover picture probably by Larry St. Clair but we don't really know...

Thanks to Smokey Koelsch for the idea, Sherm Clow for digging up the recordings, Steve Jones for tireless research and posters, Mark Richmond for recollections, recordings and pictures, Jack Brady for recollections, pictures, and wine, Jerome Mische for the phone calls, Rocky and Michael Cordray for digging through old boxes, Ross Terry, Brian Record (www.brianrecord.com), and (probably) Larry St. Clair for photos, Brian Jones for posters, Herc for engineering, Kurt Schulder for layout, Godzilla for being one damn cool and OK monster, and, of course, the entire Bastille Family for friendship, support, peace, and happiness over these last 30 plus years.

For more info on the Bastille Family and Smoke Blues Band (including an expanded history), check out the web site: www.basfam.com

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JEWEL BOX TRAY CARD INFO:

Produced by Smokey Koelsch and Rev. Willis for Bastille Family Records
(www.basfam.com)

- 1--You Got Me Running -Mathis James Reed (Jimmy Reed)
- 2--My Baby's Sweeter -Willie Dixon
- 3--It's Raining Here (Storming on the Deep Blue Sea) -John Lee Hooker
- 4--Mystery Train -Herman "Junior" Parker-Sam Philips
- 5--You Gotta Move -Fred McDowell

- 6--Baby Please Don't Go -Mary Johnson
- 7--Fever -John Davenport (pseudonym for Otis Blackwell)
- 8--Walking Blues -Robert Johnson
- 9--Too Much Alcohol -Joseph Hutto
- 10--Yonder's Wall (Look on Yonder's Wall) -Arthur Crudup
- 11--Pledging My Time -Bob Dylan
- 12--Motherless Children -Traditional
- 13--That's Alright (That's All Right) -Arthur Crudup
- 14--Pickle Jam -Smoke Blues band
- 15--Watch Yourself (I Got My Eyes On You) -George Guy (Buddy Guy)
- 16--Warm Up Jam--Rotis and Jack
- 17--It Hurts Me Too -Elmore James
- 18--Help Me -Sonny Boy Williamson (Alex "Rice" Miller)
- 19--Miller Jam--Smoke Blues Band

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SPINE INFO:

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