

BUDDY

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Buddy shows off *Svengali* licks

Tim Shuller tried to piss off Buddy Whittington. It didn't work.
by Tim Schuller

I REALLY LIKED BUDDY WHITTINGTON'S recent set at the Sons of Herman Hall. Prominently featured were selections from his new CD *Six String Svengali* (Hatman '11). I like his assertive role on John Mayall's *Road Dogs* (which was released on Eagle Rock back in '05 but only recently came to my attention). And I surely like how nice it was for Whittington to motor all the way from Hurst down to where I live, to endure my interview for this story.

And here I am, fixing to piss him off.

Can't resist.

Whittington was with Mayall for 18 years. That's about 17 times longer than Eric Clapton. The Fort Worth native would hardly have stood pat that long unless he dug Mayall. And, it was probably good dough.

So here I go.

"Uh, Buddy," I venture, "What would you say to someone who said Mayall was a half-ass limey imitator who was only as good as his sundry Bluesbreakers?"

Whittington's instant retort: "I would answer that, with B.B. King saying, anytime he plays the U.K. he gets John Mayall to open his shows!"

Good answer! The mighty B.B.'s imprimatur is high coin of the realm in bluesworld.

Buddy continues, "Mayall turned so many people on to the blues! I mean, I heard Jimmy Reed and Freddie King on the radio when I was a kid, down on the left end of the dial, but I didn't know about a lot of that stuff until I heard it from the English guys."

"Dystopian" is the word I'd choose to fit what America would be had not the Brits sashayed over here in their winklepickers to remind us of blues/R&B culture we'd tossed aside for white toast. Whittington, like most of us his age (or thereabouts), was enthralled by redcoat bands but

particularly fastened on an LP with a nickname I'd never heard — the "Beano" album.

"That's what they call *John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton* (Decca '66)." Whittington clarifies. "Clapton was probably, 19 or 20 years old. There's a picture on the front — by this time he (Clapton) was getting kind of pissed off being in (that band), and they're sitting on a curb, there's John (Mayall), John McVie, Hughie Flint, and Clapton, who's reading a *Beano* comic book, looking very disinterested in the photo shoot."

(BTW — the "Beano" mag in Clapton's mitts was a British kid's comic, with *nothing* to do with the American fart preventative.)

Beano

WHITTINGTON'S NEW *SIX String Svengali* kicks off with "Back When The Beano Was Boss," a celebration of the sense of thrill and adventure young Americans felt when they started careening down the blues path. This is a chummy CD, one that'll go down best with blues initiates and guitar buffs. ZZ Top is the influence most readily noted, in the chugging rhythms, overlapping guitar parts, and blues core.

The lyrics to "Deadwood and Wire" will pull grins from anyone who's been awe-struck at the prices some guitars will fetch. The song's name derives from the practice of the dad of (Whittington's present bassist)



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Wayne Six, who would periodically *paint* his vintage '50s Strat. In response to horrified criticism about how this would diminish its value, he'd say, "aah, it's just deadwood and wire." (I'll leave it up to you — was this guy a base defiler of art, or a saint of anti-materialism?)

Another standout cut is "I Had To Go See Alice", which bowls into Dave Dudley turf, not unrelated to the old school country music the senior Whittingtons liked.

"They dug Bob Wills and Hank Thompson and I did too. I just didn't want to admit it because it was 'their' music." Whittington laughs.

There were blues and country 45s on the jukebox at the Pixie Drive-In, a burger joint near the Whittington residence. His sister, a few years older than he, had 45s by the likes of Slim Harpo and Jimmy Reed,

But the first gigs he did were country gigs along Jacksboro Highway (a colorful place for a youngster to learn the ropes).

"I was about fourteen," recounts Whittington. "We did a lot of (Merle) Haggard, (George) Jones, and the guys I was playing with were real good singers so we did, like Kingston Trio, folksy stuff, too. One of the guys was Mark Peterson, who's now a retired Wise County detective. We loved to play acoustic guitars and stuff."

He continues: "We'd play the clubs, and now and then

someone'd have a wedding at a country club, we'd play that, we'd play Am Vets halls, VFWs, American Legion — you know how it is. We'd play anywhere they'd have us! Never played Panther Hall but we played the Panther Hall Annex, a little dive, a honky tonk across the street. Mark, the guy I was telling you about, somebody shot a gun in the bar next door and the bullet went through the wall and hit Mark in the hip while he was playing!"

Whittington kept at his craft, playing the usual tri-state circuit (TX, OK, AK), and formed the Sidemen, so-named because — well, they had little identity of their own but could play just about any sort of date they were asked to. Corporate gigs, heehaw — gotcha covered.

They did a Dallas Alley date in '91 because they could take a blues turn when needed, and would be an apt opener for John Mayall. Whittington remembers Mayall, even then a tad north of grizzled, wrestling legs to his keyboard out of a ragged duffel bag and screwing them on to the instrument, obviously sans a road crew. He paid close attention to the Sidemen set, liked how Whittington sounded, and asked for contact info.

Time passed.

Whittington: "Mayall had done 'Jacksboro Highway,' the Gary Nicholson song, and one day I was out driving around and got out at the Jacksboro 829 exit and

took a picture of the exit. Just as serendipity would have it an old '57 Fairlane rolled by, got in the picture. I had it printed up in a sepia tone, looked kinda ominous, and sent it to him. Wrote on the back, 'Just keeping in touch'."

He called in about a week, and Whittington became a Bluesbreaker.

Thus commenced a long, globetrotting stint with the patron saint of British blues. In his song "Road Dogs", Mayall cites tiring of the "bitching of the rock stars" about touring rigors. He was 73, give or take a year, but on the road he was in his element.

One time in Frankfurt, in '95 or so, a promoter took the troupe to visit Eric Clapton. The star asked Whittington how long he'd been a Bluesbreaker.

"Oh, about 18 months. Longer'n you!"

The air turned blue.

Then Clapton laughed heartily.

"So this pleased 'The King,'" grins Whittington wryly. "so everybody figured it was OK to have a little sport with him."

Mayall has a right to gripe about pampered rockers sniveling about their tough times aboard chartered jetliners with on-board caterers. But he'd been in the game long enough to know that you don't play well if you travel in antiques and crash in shitholes.

"Most of the time we were in

a tour bus with bunks in it. And we'd stay in hotels. Lotta these kids, man, they want to shower, they got to shower at the gig and you better take a bi-i-i-g bottle of Absorbine Jr., so y'don't get athlete's foot! Mayall always made sure we were comfortable. Not fancy stuff — but comfortable."

My tape ran out when Whittington was conjecturing about his exit from the Mayall troupe. He'd prefer to still be in it, but said nothing lasts forever, and didn't seem unhappy about the matter. He

certainly needn't fear being idle! A day or so after his Sons set I phoned him to see if we might meet that night but nope, he was leaving for France in mere hours. He played a fest commemorating the recently deceased Gary Moore, and planed right back.

It was tiring but, he sighed, "I made the house payment." (I wouldn't have "sighed" it. I'd have got a megaphone and blared it from rooftops.) And right about now, as I'm typing this, he's snapping shut his instrument cases as he readies to tour the Midwest with Randy McAllister.

This won't exactly be a rung up the comfort ladder from Mayall. Instead of a tour bus it'll be a pickup truck, and Whittington can't help but think of the last time he saw Iowa, which he says is "flat, man, and I mean FLAT, all covered with snow with a couple thing o' wheat stickin' up out of it." But I guess he's been up there before with McAllister, as he referred to clubs in the middle of this lunar-looking landscape that get packed to the rafters with crazed snowbelters who know the lyrics to McAllister's songs (his whole repertoire is self-penned) and whoop along as McAllister sings.

Snap.

The Les Paul case is shut, the pickup revs, and out goes Buddy Whittington, yet again, to take music to the people.

"Mayall turned so many people on to the blues! I mean, I heard Jimmy Reed and Freddie King on the radio when I was a kid, down on the left end of the dial, but I didn't know about a lot of that stuff until I heard it from the English guys."

—BUDDY WHITTINGTON