



John "Gray Hound" Maxwell

MAY THE BLUES TRANSPORT YOU

Verbals: Billy Hutchinson **Visuals:** Roger Jones

Fingerstyle/bottleneck acoustic guitarist/singer, John "Gray Hound" Maxwell, retired at sixty from the Golden Gate Transport Authority to begin concentrating on his music. Teaching bus drivers has given way to opening up for some pretty big names on the Blues and Americana circuit. Blues Matters caught up with the San Rafael, California, guitarist, who plays clean and accurately with a sense of sweet melody.

John, being a Son of an Episcopal priest, and your mother a High School librarian, was it a strict upbringing?

No, the Episcopalians are the American equivalent of the Anglicans. My Dad was musical himself, and everybody in the family that way, too. I spent most of my childhood in Chicago. That is where I had tutelage from John(ny) Long (he has a new CD out on Delta Groove). I met him when I was about 17 in Chicago. He was teaching at The Old Town School Folk Music there. That, I believe, is the oldest folk music school in America. He was teaching bottleneck guitar, and I took lessons from him in a classroom situation for about eight weeks or so. It's funny looking back, because at the time I looked up to him as the elder of the Blues, and it turns out he was probably about 23 years old at the time. Back then and today, I consider him one of the more authentic players of blues anywhere. This is only his second official recording out, but he had a couple of earlier ones out in the nineties that were on cassette, which are probably impossible to find these days.

I read you studied at Webster University - what were you studying?

I was searching there. I was studying music, but they had primarily a classical music

department. I found I couldn't really apply what I was learning to what I wanted to do. So, I was there for two years until I left to play music. I met a lot of amazing people there that I am in contact with, mostly musicians. When I was in St. Louis, I met up with Henry Townsend. That was one of the joys of my life right there. I was playing at a club in St. Louis, and one of my friends came up to me and said, "You know there's this guy upstairs called Henry Townsend. He's an old blues player, if you want to meet him?" I'd heard of him, of course. I said, 'Absolutely'. I got to meet him. He was so great, so gracious. He said, "We should get together and play sometime". I said, 'I'm ready anytime'. He said, 'I'm not kidding'. I said, "I'm not either!" (laughs). That very night he took me back to his house in St. Louis. We listened to stacks of old 78's that he had recorded, starting about 1929. He did a lot of sessions with people that he never got credit for. We played quite a bit, and I ended up sleeping on his couch that night. His wife, in the morning, made breakfast for us. That was one of the joys of my life right there, meeting him, and getting to play with him. I also met Tommy Bankhead, who was up on the North Side of St. Louis - I believe he was a cousin of Elmore James. He

had a great band there, with one of my favourite drummers of all time sitting in the back behind the pool table, just the most solid groove I think I've ever heard. That was my first voyage into an all-black neighbourhood and an all-black club. It kinda felt like the Blues Brothers movie when they walk in, and everybody stops talking, and stares at you. I got to get up on stage and play a few songs with him. That was just great!

How much music did you play in the time you were a bus driver?

It was difficult, because the bus driving job was 12-14 hours a day, for five days a week, for almost twenty years, which took its toll. I always tried to keep it going, and keep working on that. I officially retired from my job as of March 1st, which is really great. I can devote myself to playing full time. Previously my performances were very sporadic. Having to get up sometimes at 3.30 am sometimes made it very difficult to book gigs, but over the years I got to open up for Roy Rogers, and Susan Tedeschi on her first tour here in San Francisco. I kind of hate to look back at all the time I put in outside of music, but I was like biding my time to get my pension set so I could do what I wanted to do. Bruce Iglauer sent me a really nice letter after hearing my CD, and I was really heartened by that. I have been really trying to be more precise, as I never do things twice exactly the same way. I kind of like the flying by the seat of my pants approach, where it is always



a little bit different. I have started on my second CD - I have all my songs picked out now, which will be originals to covers. I really like doing some of the obscure classic blues things, mixed in with some my own original stuff. I like that combination. I've started to get into the process of it, I am hoping by the end of the year to have that finished.

Tell us about Bella's Romp

Bella's Romp is actually about my pitbull, Bella. She had two leg surgeries which incapacitated her for over a year. The song was envisioning her completely recovered, and running through the fields - or romping. That's her on the

cover. It is an original by me, I put it up on Facebook first, and it blew my mind that it got 30,000 hits in the first week. Completely blew my mind! Unfortunately, it wasn't until a couple of days after that I put it on YouTube, but I didn't get as many hits as I did originally on Facebook. The response has been really great on that. I have been really happy and excited about that. The guy who shot my video on that is my friend Roger Jones, who went to Webster with me. He is an excellent photographer and videographer. He just set it up in his backyard, maybe in a half hour. I am really honoured and grateful to know him. He did a great job. He did the St. James Infirmary video for me, too. I like to mess with arrangements like that to make them my own. Blues For Evangeline actually came from a dream, where I realised that four songs on the CD had New Orleans connections. One of those was dropped, but the remaining three were, St. James Infirmary, Delia and Dry Side Of Town. Blues For Evangeline made it to the top five at the 2016 Memphis Blues Challenge for best self-produced CD. I am about to open up for Ramblin' Jack Elliot soon, and later, in June, I am opening up for Ruthie Foster. That has kind of been the kind of gig I have been searching for rather than playing coffee houses and things like that. Going back to what I have done, I have done a lot of electric work over years, but the last five years I decided that acoustic is really where my heart is. I

have played in a lot of bands, from a punk band in the late 70's in San Francisco, to jazz bands in college, and a bit of blues and rock 'n' roll stuff. I enjoyed all of that, but the acoustic is really where my heart is. Part of that is the preservation of my ears. Playing in the punk bands really took its toll on my hearing. Blues has always been my foundation of stuff, but about five years ago I went up to the Port Townsend Acoustic Blues Festival, up in Washington State. That is when it came to my attention that this is what I should be doing, because this is what makes me really happy. It's spectacular, and it's the best week of the year. Some people think I am crazy, because, when I explain it to them I say, "You are basically playing guitar for 16 hours a day and you're sleeping for about maybe four hours a night, six nights in a row. You are totally running on adrenalin. By the end of the week you are totally exhausted. You don't want to go to sleep, and you don't want to take naps because you know you're going to miss something that is really special". Oh yeah, and a friend came up with "Gray Hound" after the American bus, so I just changed the E to an A. 🐕

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DISCOGRAPHY

**BLUES FOR
EVANGELINE - 2014**

