

BLUES FROM BEHIND THE ORANGE CURTAIN



The OC Blues News Interview with Crooked Eye Tommy

Tommy, I've just got to ask; how does your wife feel about the title song of your new CD; Time Will Tell?

"Women are made of butterflies, butterflies and snakes
Trying to please a woman can give a good man the shakes"
What happened to sugar and spice and everything nice?

You know the cool thing about Tammy is that she gets it she gets it, she totally gets it. If you listen to it, it's also about how humans have dual personalities. You know every man's a sinner, every man's a saint. Depending upon the stress factors and what happens we all respond accordingly

When did you first pick up a guitar?

My father plays guitar, my older brother and sister both play guitar, so it was really early. I would imagine I had one on my lap at about five or six years old, not knowing how to play it. But as I grew up I played and I learned. I got into the orchestra and for eight years I was in the school orchestra, through junior high. Then I realized that girls like guitar players a lot better than viola players.



I always played guitar but I wasn't really focusing on it. When that puberty thing hit, okay, okay that's how this goes. I love music in all forms but with the write music. About that time, seventh or eighth grade, I more orchestra.

Were you thinking that playing guitar would be your career?

Oh no, no not really. I wanted to be a music teacher. I sang in the choir and I was a student conductor. I had a couple of bands through high school but I thought I would teach music. Senior year of high school my mother became very seriously ill. That changed everything as far as school was concerned. I had to go live with my dad and my stepmom. My brother and I both did. That really changed my whole career idea, it was a big emotional blowup. The idea of being a music teacher sort of went out the window.

Is anyone in your family musically inclined?

My mother was a classically trained pianist, she was a fantastic piano player. We grew up sitting under the piano while she played. There was music everywhere in the house. We had an old Magnavox tube radio record player thing and there was always something playing on it. My father played guitar. He was more of an Irish folk song player and we grew up with all that going on. On my grandmother's side of the family was more music. We would always have these family reunions. A lot of the family members played guitar. Many of them were songwriters as well. They would sit around playing these Irish folk songs and drinking Bushmills and having a good time. We grew up under that. I think the emotion in that music pretty powerful and the hilarity of it all as well. I think that helped shape my brother and I in our guitar playing.

Do you play any other instruments?

I play a little bit of mandolin. The guitar is my main instrument.

Are you more of a self taught musician or have you had formal training?

I can read music but I haven't really done it in a while. Everybody uses chord charts now anyway. I learned when I was in the orchestra in school but I was also in a jazz band, it was big band jazz. It was a big horn band. It was called the Fabulous Studio Band and we traveled quite a bit. We played down on the field at the Coliseum for a Rams Game. That tells you how long ago that was. We played at the Forum for a Miss Cheerleader America thing. I played guitar in that band and that's where I actually learned chords. Before that it was just 1, 4, 5 style. But when I got in the jazz band they played very complicated chords. I had this old chord chart. It was like this circular chart with a guitar neck on the front and an arrow on it. You would turn the arrow around to the chord you wanted and it would show up on the fingerboard of the guitar. I would be sitting there in the middle of rehearsal and go, "oh what chord is that" and have to stop and find it. It forced me to learn chords and different modes because jazz is so different from the blues.

So you're more of a self taught guitar player?

Absolutely.

What's your go to guitar? I see from your photos that you have what looks to be an Explorer and an ES335?

Actually a heritage H555 which was made by the old Gibson factory. I've been playing my SG quite a bit lately. It's A 72 and it just plays like a dream. I've been a Les Paul/Humbucker guy forever. And when I got this SG and I really loved it because it allows me to play slide with ease. My Les Paul has such low action that it's really hard to really work the slide on it.

What is the set-up that you play through?

I am playing through a Quilter Micro Pro 200 amplifier. I don't know if you are familiar with Quilter, I got turned onto them by a cat by the name of Gino Mateo. You've probably heard of Gino. Fantastic guitar player. I saw him with Sugar Ray Rayford and he was playing this tiny little Quilter and I thought, "wow that's amazing". So I went into a store and tried it out and I walked out with it. It's an amazing, tiny little amp. Now I don't have to haul that heavy gear around anymore. I've got a pretty good arsenal of amps. It's not like I don't have anything that's really significant. I've got a Tone King and a 69 Twin Reverb and I've got a Rivera and a couple of Peavys. But this little thing is just insane with the amount of sound that comes out of that little bitty amp. I love it. I've got sort of a merry-go-round of pedals that I use. The primary ones that I have are an EP Booster, it's sort of like a sparkle drive, clean boost. I have a Pickle Vibe, which is sort of a tremolo/univibe kind of a feel. I've got an OCD Overdrive that I just love. I've got a Mooer Overdrive that I use as well. then I have, of course, a tuner. I've got this cool little Shimverb vibe thing that's also Mooer and it sounds sort of like a Leslie cabinet. It's not really an exact replica but for guitar it sounds really good and I like that. You can hear that on the record on track number two, Come On In. It's kind of got a real cool shimmery thing going on.

How would you describe your guitar playing?



I think you're the first person that's ever asked that. I would say that the influences that I have obviously shape how I play. My favorite guitar player is Warren Haynes an amazing guitar player. He's been with the Allman Brothers for the last 15 years but he's got his own band called Government Mule. His tone and his feel, they really speak to me. Paddy and I both grew up listening to Southern Rock and Blues. We had a big love affair with the Allman Brothers, Molly Hatchet and Skynrd and all those big guitar bands, 3 guitars. I think

when you listen to the record you hear those overtones although I wouldn't say we mimic any of what they do. Its just a result of that influence coloring what we do. We've been playing Blues all along, all our lives but in the last 5-6 years we've embraced it as a genre that we're in.

What musicians have influenced you?

We've been listening to a lot of great blues bands and there's so many great ones out there. Chris Cain, who's a phenomenal guitar player. We were fortunate to have the opportunity to play with him a couple of weeks ago in San Jose. He is somebody who also shapes what I do now. Gino Mateo too, amazing guitar player. When I'm practicing those are the guys that I am looking at as influences.

Why the Blues?

It sort of goes back to when my older brother brought home a couple of really heavy blues records. He brought home some Johnny Winter and Muddy Waters records before either of us were really playing too much. We just sat and listened to those records and it just resonated in a way that no record since has resonated. We had an old record player and both of us would lie there on the floor, on the orange shag carpet in our room, and just soak it up. It's always been an underlying thing. At this point in my life I started to play a lot more, my kids got grown, I paid them off you know (hahaha). I said now I'm going to do something, I can do this now. I don't like to pigeonhole myself into any specific genre of music. We're definitely not straight blues. We got a little Rock feel, we got a little Soul feel. Even a little jam bandy thing going on. A lot of people get bent when you call it the blues and it's not traditional blues. I don't get hung up on that, I play what I play. If it fits in the genre it fits in the genre. It's just sort of come down that way.

Is there a particular genre of Blues that you call your own?

No I don't think so. You listen to the record we've got some straight, super slow blues. It's just a wide range of stuff, it's just how it came out. I don't think there's a label you can put on it, that I would put on it. Other people are clearly going to do that, that's what they do. I don't like to think of it in any other way, it's just the music that comes out.

How long have you been playing music with your brother?

Well, you know, all our lives off and on. We've played in four different bands together throughout our lives. When we were younger and we lived in Marysville California, we had a band called the Amos Rose Band. We had a band called Sacrifice, the Tule Devils was another one. But circumstances in our lives didn't always have us living in the same town. He got married and moved away for a while. There was a gap there of about 7 or 8 years where we didn't play together at all. In this band we've been together since 2013.

How's that working for you, playing with your brother?

Oh it's great he's a phenomenal guitar player, Singer and songwriter. We're

both now to that place in our lives where we've gotten through the child rearing, the joys and headaches that go along with that. Just like any other set of brothers we have our moments.

There is a long history of feuding brothers in the music biz; Ray and Dave Davies of the Kinks, Don and Phil Everly of the Everly Bros., Noel and Liam Gallagher of Oasis. Any of that between you and Paddy?

I can't say there's none of that. We're brothers, we've fought each other and there's all that history to filter everything through. I think we've finally come to the place where we realize this is it, it's our time.

At a gig who in the band is making the connection with the audience?

Well you know, I do most of the singing, so I would have to say I guess it's me. But we work in tandem pretty good together. I would say he's pretty hilarious. I'm a little more of the straight man, you know, and he's a little more of the comic relief. It's a pretty good combination. We don't have a schtick that we do, per se, we just sort of roll it out however it rolls out, you know? I would definitely say I am the main character that interacts with the audience. He's definitely right there with me.

What would you like your listeners to walk away with from one of your performances (besides all the merch you are selling of course)?

(laughs) Well I'd like them to buy a record because (at a show) you sit down and listen to a band. You hear the band and you think to yourself, I like these guys. But in a club or a concert situation you don't really get a chance to soak up what the songs are about. You hear them, you hear the words, but there's distractions. We want folks to take it home, listen to it when it's just them and they



can soak it up. Because in every one of our songs, there's a story. There's a lot of good ones, there's a lot of funny ones, "Somebody's Got to Pay" is pretty hilarious. It's about being ticked off at the government. "Mad and Disgusted" is similar, it's lighthearted and fun. Then we've got songs like Tidepool, which Paddy wrote, and it's just a heavy, heavy, intellectual song with great imagery. You said the merch, it's funny but it's really true, the record is something that I would like folks to have. What I want folks to take away from a show is that we give a shit, we care. We are not just up there to bang on our guitars and then roll off. We're just regular folks, we've got the same lives, we've got problems and we've got to work through them. Music is a powerful thing that we don't take it lightly but we don't take it too seriously either. I work four days a week so I'm still out there in the blue-collar world. I totally get it. It's a release, we want folks to be happy and have a good time. Maybe think a little bit. One of the songs on the record, "Love Divine", it talks about the things that matter in life, not the ones that society would like you to think matter. These are the things that I believe I would like folks to come away with.

How long did you live in Porterville?

I was born and raised there. I played at the Riverview in Three Rivers, I use to play there a lot. I've only been in Ventura since 2009, until then I was living in Exeter and Kingsburg before that, I've been in the San Joaquin Valley my whole existence. We played at the Riverview quite a bit with a band called the Tule Devils. That's actually how I met my girl and that's sort of what brought us over here. A friend of hers had a bed and breakfast up there and she was visiting and came into the club and boom, it was on.

Tell us about your songwriting process. Do you write the music first and then the lyrics or do you write the lyrics first and then put the music to the lyrics?

I don't have a go to. I do sit and write a lot. A lot come out as just sort of a prose thing. You just sit and scribble them down. When I'm playing guitar I might just come up with a cool riff that I really like and then and there I might start writing it down. I don't really have a formula. I think a lot for whatever reason. When I'm in my mind I just think of lines. I'll be walking along and I'll see something and I think, "oh that'll be a good line in a song", then I'll just start to throw a few things together. I do it all the time. A lot of times the stuff doesn't stick, it's not memorable enough to remember it. So I think to myself "if it's not good enough to remember, then it probably isn't something anyone else is going to remember either". That's something I learned from my father's cousin who is a very famous songwriter in the country music world. That's something he does as well. In fact he never uses paper until the very end, until he has to give it to somebody. He was one of the ones who was sitting around drinking Bushmills. He made a really good career writing songs for artists like Garth Brooks and others and became very successful.

Where do you draw the inspiration for your songs?

Wow, you listen to the different ones and they're situational. "Somebody's Got to Pay", I wrote that about April 15. Very situational. In fact, "After the Burn",

which is one of my favorite tunes to perform, talks about burning the house down. It's kind of a cryptic story. Every bit of it is based on stuff that happened. Now I didn't burn a house down but there was a house fire and it essentially, because of what happened after the fire, inspired this song. So the story's about what happened after the burn and that's the whole premise. I really do write about stuff in my life or something I see. "Love Devine" is about stuff that really matters and I see a lot in the world where people get caught up in what the popular culture wants them to do. It's horrible, I mean cable TV, just the sickness that is what's going on. The simple things are really the most important things. Something needs to remind people of that now and again and that's what that song is about.

What makes your music unique?

That's a good one. You know I think anytime you have brothers in a band, I think there's something different about that. The connection between my brother and I has always been musically very fluid and seamless. Even when we sit down and are just jamming, there's sort of an unspoken kind of communication that goes on that I don't have with any other player. Maybe that's just from the history we have together, but it's kind of always been that way, ever since we were young. I think that's probably it. When I listen to our record, and I do listen to it a lot because I like it. But when I listen to it, to me it doesn't sound like somebody else, it has a very distinct kind of sound. There's a wide range of material on it covering all of our lives essentially, at least mine and my brothers. It stands on it's own.



Do you and your brother co-write music together or do you write separately?

We write separately mostly. We will arrange songs together and write musical passages together. But generally, I'll come with this song, this is my idea for it, we'll play it for 20-30 minutes then, Hey let's try this, or how about if we did this. It's back and forth on the music side, we arrange it together. Mostly

because when I write a song I write it for my guitar playing. When you add another guitar player, he can't play the same thing and I can't play everything that I play when I sit and play by myself. The arranging part is important between the two of us.

What is your fan demographic? 16,17,18 year old girls who crowd the front of the stage trying to touch the band?

(laughing) Oh jeez Rick. You know Ventura's a pretty amazing place, I'll say that. We play in a number of clubs here and we'll get a pretty wide range. I know we're not going to have teeny-boppers by any means but I think the whole population is pretty diverse and they're willing to come in and listen to something different. I think that's something that's very good for us. When we travel a little bit, it will be a little bit older group, 40 on up I suppose.

Where can our readers and viewers find, listen to and buy your music?

It's just like anything else, you've got to make it available so it's pretty much everywhere; iTunes, on Amazon and CDBaby.com and I promote CD Baby the most because they're the kindest to musicians. They take the bare minimum so I always try to blow them up and get folks to go to that site, not just for our music but for other music because musicians are that main focus in that business. It's available for digital download as well at 99 cents a song. Our website is www.crookedeyetommy.com, we have a very big presence on Facebook, most of our shows get posted and reposted so I encourage folks to hook up with us there. That's going to be the highest response rate from us just because social media is where it's at.

Thanks for your time Tommy. Any parting comments you would like to leave our readers with?

Like I was saying before, the things that matter in life are not the things that are going on in the world today, they are the things that are going on in your family, that are going on in your neighborhood. I think one of the woes that America has right now is that we have gotten away from being close to each other and we've become a bunch of pontificators. Facebook is crazy because on Facebook you'll see people who type out these big, long soliloquies about things they believe and there's nothing behind it, you don't really know anything. We've become a digital world and I think in a lot of ways that separates us, even though we have a connection with probably more people, we don't actually connect. I guess the thing that I would say to anybody, to everybody, is spend more time with your family, with your friends. Sit down and look them in the eye and talk to them and you'll find a better world.

And go listen to some live music

Yes, There you have it, that's right

LIVE
Music

