

Doug MacLeod keeps rocking and ‘bluesing’ the crowd “You have to listen to as much music as you possibly can!”

Few artists are as charismatic as Doug MacLeod. The American blues guitar player has been a part of the music business for many years, but he has never grown stale or become pompous. Quite the contrary, for he’s still interested in almost every genre and he will get a kick out of experimenting and trying out new things. Doug MacLeod on life, work and inspiration.

BY JULIAN DE BACKER

B.B. King’s guitar is called Lucille. What’s yours called?

Doug MacLeod: “This one’s called *Moon*. I don’t know where it comes from. This is the one that National (National Reso-Phonic Guitars, red.) made for me. The one I had been using for so many years, called *Mule*, was a National. But it wasn’t in their catalogue so they asked me if I wanted to consider playing one that was in the catalogue. Of course I wanted to consider that, but I said: “If I don’t like the new one as much as I like *Mule*, then I’m going back to playing *Mule*.” So they made this guitar for me and they gave it to me, now six months ago. After about two and a half weeks, they called me up and asked me: “Have you named her yet?”. I said “no”, because they knew that if I had named her, I was going to keep her. Maybe a month later, they called me again. “How’s that new guitar going?”. I replied: “It’s going good. And by the way, I named her. Her name’s *Moon*. And she’s been with me ever since.”

But what does it mean, Moon? Apart from, well, “the moon”?

Mr. MacLeod: “It just came to me! I knew that, eventually, the name would come.”

Does Moon ever speak to you?

Mr. MacLeod: “Every night (smile). Every night she speaks to me.”

I’ve got a quote for you from The Blues Brothers, back when they were a band recording music. In 1978, they said: “By the year 2006, the music known today as the blues will exist only in the classical records department of your local public library.” Back then, disco was all the rage. It didn’t turn out like that, because blues is still here in 2012. Where did you think, in 1978, blues was headed?

Mr. MacLeod: “That’s a good question. That’s when I, ironically enough, got back into blues. I had given up blues for a while. Mary MacGregor had a big hit record with *Torn Between Two Lovers* and I was touring with her. But my heart wasn’t with this, I wanted to do blues. After I divorced my first wife, I met my current wife in 1977. She asked me what I wanted to do and I said that I wanted to go back to the blues and she replied: “Why don’t you?”. So, in 1977-1978, I went down to Los Angeles, met George “Harmonica” Smith & Pee Wee Crayton and that led to playing with Big Joe Turner, Mama Thornton and all of those.”

Your music has been covered by a lot of respected artists. Some artists don't like their work being covered. Prince, for example, was quite unhappy with Sinéad O'Connor's "Nothing Compares 2 U" and Roger Daltrey will always point out that "Behind Blue Eyes" is "not a Limp Bizkit song". What's your opinion on your compositions being covered by others?

Mr. MacLeod: "Two I thought were really great. One was Eva Cassidy doing *Nightbird*. I think she did a phenomenal job. My regret is that I never got a chance to meet her. I always wanted to know how she could interpret it, because that song was about a prostitute that was good to me when I was younger. Not financially, but she knew I had no business being on the street. She took me in and gave me an education, so I wrote that song for her. When I heard Eva Cassidy do it, I just, I said ... (silence). Now I tell people: "If you want to hear the definitive version of that song, you have to listen to Eva Cassidy!"

The other person that did a great job on a song of mine was Albert Collins. He did a great job on *Cash Talkin' (The Workerman's Blues)*."

He was "The Master of the Telecaster"!

Mr. MacLeod: "He was. Nice man, too."

What about the prostitute? Is she still alive? Did she ever hear the song?

Mr. MacLeod: "I don't know, I doubt it. Many years ago, I heard from an old friend of mine that she found and married a doctor. She was living outside of Baltimore, Maryland on a ranch. Maybe she landed into a bowl of whipped cream. I hope she did!"

You were 13 years old when The Big Bopper, Buddy Holly and Richie Valens died in what was later referred to as "the day the music died". What do you remember about that time?

Mr. MacLeod: "At thirteen, I was still in New York. We used to go to a series of music shows at the Brooklyn Fox Theater. Big R & B shows, where I saw Big Joe Turner - ironically, so many years later, I was playing guitar for him in California! But "the day the music died", I know what they meant by that, but to me, I don't think the music ever dies. Some of the great artists might die, but the music doesn't. The music they made lives on for generations!"

On your own website, you're credited as "the master of the original acoustic blues" ...

Mr. MacLeod: "(chuckles) That's what they say, yeah!"

At what time did you devote your time and music to the acoustic genre?

Mr. MacLeod: "I started out as an acoustic musician in Northern Virginia, when I was in the navy. Then I picked up electric guitar and I played that on my first four albums, with a band. But I felt the band was not right for me. I'm a guy that's much more comfortable being alone on a stage. In a band, I was always worried about the personalities, because as a bandleader you want to make sure your guys are alright. It was a lot of work and pressure. I wanted to know my audience, meet the people, be close to them. In my opinion, that's what blues is about. It's a way to understand life and to get through life. Look where it got me! Twenty-one albums, of which seventeen are acoustic. I guess it was the right decision."

A lot of blues songs begin with the immortal line “when I woke up this morning”. What’s the biggest misconception about writing and composing a blues song?

Mr. MacLeod: “Let me tell you something that might make you laugh. I was doing an album called *Little Sin*. Joe Harley, the producer, used big reel-to-reel tape and he was always ready to get that tape rolling, whenever the inspiration came. So I played a game with him. I was out there, playing, and Joe says: “Doug? Is something coming?” and I said: “Joe! I feel something!” So I’m playing the introduction, they got the tape going, and I sing: “I didn’t wake up this morning”! And that was the end. Joe said: “Where’s the rest of the song? What’s the name of that song?”. I said: “That’s called: “The Last Blues Song Ever Wrote”!” And they put it on the record! (laughs)”

Great, just great! Do you follow current musical trends?

Mr. MacLeod: “Yes, thanks to my son. He’s a 27-year old singer/songwriter with a few albums. He pulls my coat on stuff and I like to listen to it. I can’t honestly say that I’m influenced by these younger guys. My influence comes from other places; soul-jazz like Jimmy McGriff, Hank Crawford and Wes Montgomery ...”

Wes Montgomery?

Mr. MacLeod: “Ooh, you’d love him. Check him out. An excellent jazz guitar player! Nowadays, you can easily go on iTunes and sample everything. To get influenced, to get ideas, I go to country music, jazz, pop, folk ... not to blues, cause that’s mine. You have to listen to as much music as you possibly can. Otherwise, you would get very narrow-minded, musically.”

Last question! The riff for (I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction came to Keith Richards in a dream. Have your dreams ever made it into songs?

Mr. MacLeod: “No, but the ideas always come at night. I could be sleeping and my foot starts tapping. It will wake up my wife. At first, she didn’t want to disturb me, but now she’ll say: “Wake up, Doug, you got a song!” (laughs) You always have to get up or the idea is gone. Someone told me: “Songs float in the air and they choose their writer. If you ignore them, they will go to the next guy!” I think that’s how it works.”

Michael Jackson once said: “I got to get up or Prince will get my song!” ...

Mr. MacLeod: “It’s funny, but it’s true! When it comes, it comes. You gotta answer that call!”

Thank you very much!

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More on Doug MacLeod can be found on his official website <http://www.doug-macleod.com/>.