

Interview Robert Cray

Robert, last summer you did release your latest album “Nothin But Love” with great success and now you came back on tour in Germany. How does it feel to be back here?

Feels great, it’s nice. With that new record we got a really good response from the public. And like you said we are back here again as a result of the good response. And so it’s great, because it has been a long time since we’ve been able to come back so quickly to Germany.

It’s your 19th album if I’ve counted right since your debut “Who’s Been Talking” in 1978...so you obviously did not rest on your laurels.

Well, well... (laughing)...in recent times we had some more live recordings and now the new studio album...

...so you have a big creative output...

...yes (laughs)... there’s a big catalogue so to speak, yeah...

...for me personally one of your best albums is the “Strong Persuader” in 1986 – one record every serious blues-fan must have. How can you explain the great success of that release?

I think that that record really crossed over because of a time. I think at that particular time there was a swell of Americana roots. And in that sense we had bands as Los Lobos coming out, Stevie Ray Vaughan hit the scene really hard, The Blasters, Fabulous Thunderbirds and lots of other groups bubbling up underneath. And also with MTV just starting to hit the scene, too and gave a sole opportunity to the bands I’ve mentioned. And all the bands I’ve mentioned got signed to major record deals. And the radio started playing their music.

...really one of my favorite albums...

...and it’s still selling, too (smiling)

At what time you did first come in contact with Blues music – and what was the reason why to decide becoming a Blues guitarist and singer?

Well, I started paying attention to the Blues when I was 16 years old. I heard it before – my parents had some records – but I was playing Rock ‘n Roll, so did a couple of friends of mine. One of my friends Bobby Murray who I went to highschool with, who’s more recently before Etta James passed away was heard one of her guitar players. He came over with a friend of his and they had both been listening to people like “Magic Sam”, B. B. King, Buddy Guy...so I fell in within. And we started listening to the music. I’d seen Albert Collins before in 1969 at the Nutdoor Festival – and that cemented the whole deal! Our idols became those Blues people. The books we read became books about Blues. The albums every time we run to the record store where all about Blues...finding out that new Elmore James record, you know. So it became like a “religion” to us so to speak, yes so it started...

As you mentioned Albert Collins, you’ve been on tour with him!?!?

Yes, that’s right. We did – I think it was 1976 into the middle of 1977 – whenever he was on the Westcoast we backed-up Albert Collins from like Vancouver, British Columbia

down to San Francisco, California. And so one of the first big gigs we did with him was at the 1977th San Francisco Blues Festival. We opened with the Robert Cray Band and Albert Collins joined us and his set was the final of the festival night. Because of that we got a really good reaction and a really nice article in the San Francisco Chronicle newspaper. Then things came up to where we met Bruce Bromberg and Dennis Warker who became producers for our album "Who's Been Talking". With the Albert Collins back-up started the whole thing!

Your main instrument is the Fender Stratocaster...what was the main reason for your choice?

I fell in love with this Stratocaster, 'though I'd been playing a Gibson ES 345. But I saw Phil Guy, Buddy Guy's brother who was playing where I used to live for a while a Eugene organ. And he was playing through a Super Reverb amplifier. And he had just a bright reverb sound which was cutting an piercing...and it was the most beautiful reverb for a guitar sound...and I thought "That's it, I gotta get a strat". And so I immediately went out for a search and found that guy who had a 1976 Fender Stratocaster. He had one for sale with a little pignose amplifier and I got a good deal and bought it from him. And that became my go to guitar. Now it's beat up and at home and I'm playing with signature models based on that original one.

Now back to the here and now: What was your main intension of your recent album?

Well, it's a combination of a lot of things. We got signed to the Provogue Label and so we had the opportunity to work together with Kevin Shirley. It's gonna be the second album with that particular line-up. So as we normally work we had gone out and did a short tour with twelve dates. And then when we came off of that tour we went straight into the rehearsal studios to present our material for the first time to one another and the band...'cause everybody can't take new stuff like a secret. We rehearsed then for six days and one a Sunday we took the gear to the recording studio. That was the first time Kevin Shirley heard the material and we started recording right the way. So we went into the recording studio having not been off the road too long.

We had still that energy to play together as a band. And so we worked well in a live-concept that we always use in a studio. And in working with Kevin Shirley disliked to do things over and over again. We never really do, we liked to get the songs best of the first take, normally two or three takes. If not you go to something else - that was the idea.

It's a very relaxed sound and good mixture of styles on your new album...it's never getting boring...

Thank you, that's the reason why I like to encourage the rest of the guys to participate in the songwriting.

Next month, in August you will be 60 years "young". How do you manage to stay fit and to generate new ideas?

Well, you should try to be cool, and on the road try to eat properly, do some walking around...when you care. The idea is just have to keep yourself open to the ideas as they come. As we do get older I think the idea of participating and what's going on in your day-to-day life is where we'll find the ideas for new songs. And I think that's the reason why some of the songs have the political tense to them that they doing. And so we pick up on what we as a collective group travelling around in a tour-bus every day talk about,

you know..."did you see that..." In sense it's a part of your day-to-day life and it's blues in its sense. And then also the idea not limiting yourself as to what defines your music.

... being open for new influences...

Yes, being open for new influences. That leads the way to songs like "Poor Johnny" or the Beatles' influence on "Saturdays" ...

Robert, last question: What about new projects? Is the album No 20 already in process ?

Yes, we are going into the studio in September – once again with Kevin Shirley. So we are collecting material right now!

Thank you for the interesting and polite interview, Robert!!!