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Brooks, Blues And Brits: A Very Special Relationship

Brooks Williams is now firmly established as one of the world's premier acoustic guitarists and singers. Yet unusually for an American rooted in the blues, his musical journey has been less about crossing the tracks than crossing the pond. He talks to Noel Harvey.

The first time I saw Brooks Williams was three years ago at the Blue Walnut in Torquay. It's a small, intimate venue that doubles as a cafe and art gallery, and for some fanciful reason I assumed that Williams must have grown up around small music gigs, surrounded by people who played American roots music for a living. There was something in his playing, in the dexterity of his picking and slide work and the deftness of his chording. It had me conjuring images (as you do) of three generations of Williams'

family playing together on the porch of some neat picket-fenced house in his native Georgia. Because, surely, that's how they bring 'em up down South, right? And that has to be how Williams got to be such a dazzlingly good guitarist, isn't it?

Er...well...no actually, it isn't. Williams grew up in Statesboro, Georgia, right enough, 'But my mother,' says Williams, 'was a classical musician. Opera, medieval, baroque, renaissance music, that kind of stuff. She loved all that, and made sure music was in our lives. But not pop, or

rock, or blues. It was all hard-core classical.' So although Williams got started on the violin at the age of five, it wasn't till he was aged ten, when he was away at a summer classical music programme, that he had his first guitar lesson. 'I'd met one of the guys who worked in the kitchen, helping prepare the meals,' he explains. 'I'd walk by and hear this great guitar music – Jimi Hendrix, Beatles, stuff like that. And one day he asked me if I'd like to learn. So he taught me the chords to 'Hey Jude' and the opening riff to 'Purple Haze'. I returned to the programme the

following year, but when I came home, announced to my mother that I was quitting classical music forever, and was going to play rock and roll.'

'How did that go down?' I ask. 'Oh, she hated it,' he says with a quiet laugh. 'She said, "I'll buy you a classical guitar, and if you're still playing it in 12 months then we'll talk."' He laughs again, longer and a little louder. 'So she bought me a classical guitar. But nobody played guitar in my family, so I'd listen to records and try to figure out what was happening based on the records. That's a really

slow way to learn. There was no YouTube then, of course, so it took forever. I didn't make much progress initially, but the more you do it, the easier it gets.'

I'm surprised at this. 'This is Statesboro, we're talking about, right? Home of Blind Willie McTell? Surely roots music was all around you?'

'Yes and no,' he says. 'There's great music in the South, but we weren't tied in with roots music. If you wanted to find blues, you had to cross the tracks. Literally and figuratively. If you wanted to find bluegrass and old-timey, you had to cross into the woods and into the hills, it wasn't just everywhere. It was in the ether, in the air, but it wasn't something I witnessed. It wasn't until I moved to Boston at the age of 17, to go to university, that I saw my first intimate live music gig. That's where there were clubs with some local guy doing Robert Johnson tunes. And I thought, what is this stuff? It's Allman Brothers, or Eric Clapton, but really they were doing Robert Johnson songs. I was mesmerised by it. That's when the blues took hold of me big time.'

'When I first started performing, and making a living from it, I'd do gigs where I used to work six nights a week. So Monday to Thursday I'd play biker bars – rough gigs that started at ten o'clock in the evening and went on till two in the morning, and you played four hours straight. You could maybe take a break, but if you did that, things could get a little violent. Those were tough bars: think Blues Brothers and chicken wire, those kind of places. I was playing New York and Boston, and anywhere around the north-east – Providence, Rhode Island, Worcester, Massachusetts. Very tough cities. But Friday and Saturday nights I'd play the folk clubs and the coffee houses and they'd be the exact opposite. People drinking tea or having a glass of wine, and I'd play 30 minutes to rapt attention. But it was a great time and a great experience, and it really cemented who I am, because I had to play upbeat stuff on the week nights, but could get a little more introspective and intimate on the weekends.'

A demanding apprenticeship, then, and certainly there's no denying that Williams is a supremely versatile musician. He'll turn his hand to jazz, rock and roll, swing, bluegrass, country, you name it, though he readily acknowledges that blues is the bedrock of what he does. It's a tad incongruous, perhaps,



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for a man who comes over as so mellow and easy-going. Because, after all, the blues is sad music. It's all about loss, isn't it?

'Sure,' he says, 'blues is about loss. But all of us have loss on some level. But there's loss that takes you down, and then there's loss that you've expressed. That's one of the things I love about the blues: it talks about loss, and talking about it can really help. All of us have had a broken heart, all of us have lost someone we love, all of us have struggled with the demons inside. That's what it means to be human, and blues music expresses that. The message I get out of blues is, yeah, I've experienced loss, but it's another morning, and I might be looking for my shoes, or looking for my baby, or looking to catch that train that's leaving soon, or I'm going to ride the blind, or

whatever it is, but still, it's another day, and I'm going to get on with it. Blues isn't wallowing in pain, blues is expressing pain.'

It might seem ironic that a musician born south of the Mason-Dixon Line would have to wind up in Boston to discover that the blues was at the core of his musical identity, but there's an even odder twist to the story. It wasn't, Williams says, until he crossed the Atlantic and came to the UK in the early 1990s that he was confident that he'd found his true voice. 'I'm playing this music,' he says, 'then I come over here, and I'm trying to figure out what is it that I do. Singer-songwriter, contemporary acoustic, what is this music I play? Robert Johnson, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Blind Willie McTell, Willie Johnson, all these heroes of mine created this music. It crossed the Atlantic, and

Eric Clapton, John Mayall, Keith Richards, Bert Jansch, Wizz Jones – the list goes on and on – they took it and reinterpreted it, and it came back across the Atlantic. And that's where I get in on the picture. As a teenager, I had all those records, and in the process of learning from them, I realised that the blues is an older music. And that's when I went back to the originals. So I have British musicians to thank for that, for getting me back to the original Robert Johnson and Mississippi Fred McDowell.'

Williams may have turned to the early bluesmen for inspiration, but that doesn't mean, of course, that he's an imitator. Far from it. Listen to his music and the chances are you'll be struck by its freshness and vitality.

'I know there are purists in the blues world who like to play it



© Andy Craig

note for note,' he says, 'and I have a great deal of respect for that. But to "caretake" the music to that extent is a very specific calling. If we only do that, the music will die. It needs to be reinterpreted, it needs to live, and I've always felt that's my role. So I take Muddy Waters and flip it on its head, not out of disrespect, but out of a love for the genre, and it's so strong it can take it. But what's really amazing is how I had to come to England to learn to do that. British audiences and venues held up a mirror to me and said, "This is what you do," and that just solidified it.

"There are only two places on the planet that have done that for me. First and foremost there was England, and then there was Texas, which affected me in the same way. Even when I was struggling to find my own voice and in between record companies and not sure what I was going to do, Texas audiences were going, "Yeah, this is what you do." And those were the poles that I would bounce between, the UK and Texas. I'd go back and forth between the two, and it really inspired my songwriting, and it

inspired the songs I've chosen to interpret. It's been powerful stuff."

So powerful, in fact, that Williams has decided to record his next CD this side of the pond.

'It's been on my mind for a couple of years,' he says. 'I was speaking to a guy in Austin, Texas, about making my next CD there, but nothing was working. It didn't seem to be anybody's fault, it was just that people weren't available. So I thought, well how about England? When I did the launch in Bristol for *The Time I Spend With You*, I'd worked with Dave Goodyear and Keith Warmington and Karen Tweed, and I thought that was a great little acoustic ensemble that would work nicely. I'm also friends with PJ Wright from Little Johnny England and The Dylan Project. He plays pedal steel and slide guitar and he sings harmonies, and he's a great friend. So I thought, well, all these people are over there, and I started the process of connecting with the musicians. Then just by chance I met Andy Bell, the guy who engineered the recent Seasick Steve album. I loved the sound of that record. It's a very real, raw kind of music coming off the floor,

and it's a sound that really suits me. Andy's keen to do it and he has the dates free. So the pieces are falling into place. I'll come over at the end of September and we're going to record for two weeks, and then I'll be back for mid December through Christmas. We're going to finish it then, and launch it at the beginning of next year.'

I suggest he must feel at home here to make that kind of commitment and Williams nods with enthusiasm. 'Yeah, I feel a real sense of home here, and when you feel that sense of home, that's a great place to make a record. Sometimes people say, "Oh I'd love to make an album in my living room." Well, actually, I wouldn't like to make an album in my living room because it's a mess, it'd be chaotic, but making an album in England feels very right.'

'You wouldn't,' I ask him, 'be a bit of an Anglophile by any chance, would you?' He smiles. 'You know, I just might be,' he says, and he's chuckling now, like there's more to his answer than he's letting on. 'Yeah. I just might be.'

Noel Harvey

BROOKS WILLIAMS GEAR

Guitars:

Collings OM 2 HE Acoustic with Headway HE2/G.FEQ pickup
National Estralita resonator with iP-1X Inline single cone, biscuit bridge pickup

LIVE SOUND GEAR

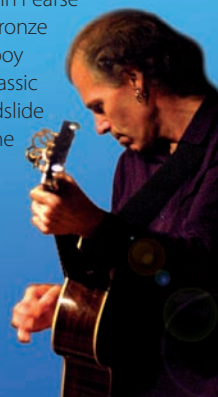
Preamps:

Raven Labs PMB-1
Highlander PAMDI
LR Baggs Para-Acoustic DI

Strings: John Pearse
Phosphor Bronze

Picks: Pickboy
Rainbow Classic

Slides: Mudslide
& Moonshine



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