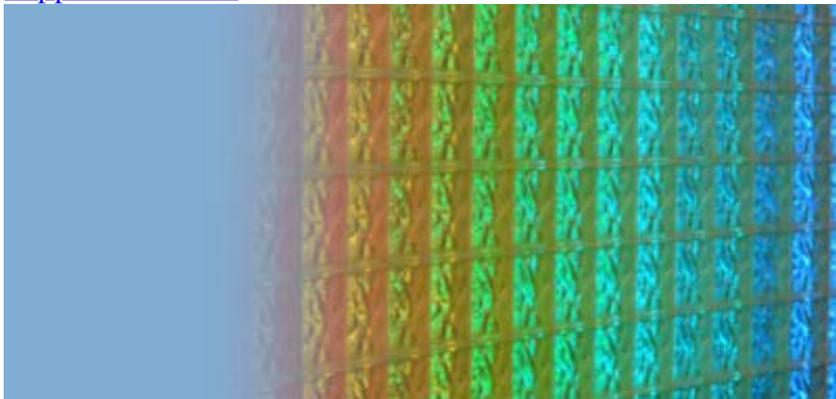


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A FEW MINUTES WITH... Paul Asbell



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By *Don Wilcock*

[Paul Asbell](#) takes the stage at [Caffe Lena](#) in Saratoga Springs on Sunday (April 16) along with [Andy Cohen](#) and [Dakota Dave Hull](#) in a performance being billed as “[Blues Brothers.](#)” Although largely eclipsed by bigger marquee names, guitarist Paul Asbell was been involved in two enormous cultural shifts that forever changed the paradigm of American music.

He played rhythm guitar and was involved in producing two blues albums that teamed seminal Chicago blues artists with then young but rising stars in the rock world on **Muddy Waters’** *Fathers and Sons* in 1969 and *The Howlin’ Wolf London Sessions* in ’71. He also toured San Francisco in 1969 with **Earl Hooker**, an under-recognized Chicago slide blues guitarist who was so good he convinced **Buddy Guy** not to even try taking up the slide. (If that statement seems incredulous in light of Guy’s enormous success, I understand. That admission

by him to me when I was writing my 1991 Guy biography “Damn Right I’ve Got the Blues” had me dropping my jaw.)

I say Asbell was involved in paradigm shifts because these two albums introduced an American mass audience to the African American originators of blues being covered by rock artists of the day. By 1971 blues had permeated the consciousness of a large, young white rock fan base through the music of **the Rolling Stones’ Charlie Watts** and **Bill Wyman**, **Eric Clapton**, **Ringo Starr** and **Steve Winwood**, all of whom appear on *The Howlin’ Wolf London Sessions* with **Howlin’ Wolf** and his guitarist **Hubert Sumlin**.

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This was a follow-up to *Fathers and Sons*, which had teamed Chicago blues artist Muddy Waters with **Michael Bloomfield**, **Paul Butterfield** and **Sam Lay** of **the Butterfield Blues Band** and **Donald “Duck” Dunn** of **Booker T. & the M.G.’s**. To this point rock fans’ only exposure to blues by and large had been through cover versions of songs by Wolf and Muddy like “Little Red Rooster” and “Goin’ Down Slow” on *The Howlin’ Wolf London Sessions* and “I’m Ready” and “Forty Days and Forty Nights” on *Fathers and Sons*.

“**Norman Dayron** was thinking as a producer about an idea that he thought could be very influential and possibly more importantly could do very well in record sales for Chess,” explains Asbell, “and we now see that it’s a huge cultural shift in a good way, a shift that put a spotlight on black artists for white record buyers, and I’m all for that myself.”

If Chicago’s own bi-racial group Paul Butterfield Blues Band and England’s British Invasion bands opened the doors to wider acceptance of blues progenitors, the hippies of San Francisco’s psychedelic cultural revolution made blues part of their “consciousness raising” soundtrack. When Asbell toured California with Earl Hooker, a black guitarist who was pivotal in the evolution of Delta blues into Chicago electric blues, they hung out with musicians who were not just introducing a younger white generation to blues, but fundamentally re-inventing basic concepts about life styles and the melding of cultures in nascent musical gumbos.

San Francisco’s big name rockers admitted to Asbell, “We’re just fucking around honestly, but you guys are really doing it,” says Asbell who was hanging out at the **Jefferson Airplane** house and **the Grateful Dead’s** digs. Hooker’s harmonica player was **Jeff Carp** who also worked with Asbell as a producer on the Wolf and Muddy Chess Records sessions and in 1969 was dating **Janis Joplin**.



Today Asbell has become a musician's musician. He's taught at Skidmore and now teaches at the University of Vermont and other colleges. He's been a principle in **Kilimanjaro** founded in 1978, a band that doesn't conveniently fit into accustomed definitions of jazz although they've played Montreal Jazz Festival, Montreaux Jazz Festival and Roskilde Festival in Copenhagen. From 1981 until 2005 he was in **Big Joe Burrell & the Unknown Blues Band**. He's recorded with acts that run from jazz to folk, and his most recent solo album, *From Adamant to Atchafalaya*, veers from blues standards like "I'm a King Bee" to Coltrane's "Naima" and one original. His style is fluid and crisscrosses much of the American guitar picking legacy. He is a true master.

Asbell does not see himself as a seminal artist. "When I make projects or participate in projects, I don't really think of them in terms like how seminal is this going to be, or how influential or whatever. I do it for the most emotionally fulfilling reason which gets in the weeds sometimes in terms of why did you do that? I don't know. I just really wanted to. Why did you write that tune that particular way? I don't know. The impact on the world stage that a certain band had or a certain tune had or a certain gig had, I guess I've long ago stopped judging its value on how much it changed the world.

"If somebody said, 'What's the most seminal thing you've done since (the Muddy and Wolf albums),' I'd probably say stupidly something like teaching **Trey Anastasio** because look what that led to or whatever.

"My whole thing is about southern music and what is often called American roots music now. When I was a kid nobody had coined the term roots music yet to my knowledge, but it was the music I grew up on because of my dad's 78s and stuff like that. I now realize that that's what it was. It was like **J.E. Mainer & His Mountaineers** 78s, and then there's **Blind Willie Johnson**, and then there's **Woody Guthrie's** *The Dust Bowl Ballads* that he had on a reel-to-reel tape, and then there was **Scrapper Blackwell** and **Leroy Carr** and then, oddly enough, this **Elvis Presley** 45 of 'Mystery Train.' How does that fit in?"



Concerning Sunday's Caffe Lena gig, Asbell says, "I've done a number of gigs with Dakota Dave on the West Coast and several with Andy. In fact, the last time I played at Lena's was with me and Andy doing two sets, and then we played together at the end. So, this is a threesome with the same notion, but we're not peas-in-the-pod identical. We're not far from being peas in a pod as far as the music we draw from and the diverse Americana music that we're trying to render in solo performances."

WHO: [Blues Brothers: Andy Cohen, Dakota Dave Hull & Paul Asbell](#)

WHERE: [Caffe Lena](#), Saratoga Springs

WHEN: Sunday (April 17), 7pm

HOW MUCH: \$25 in advance; \$27 at the door

This entry was posted on Thursday, April 14th, 2016 at 3:00 pm and is filed under [Be Here Now: Previews](#), [Music](#). Comments are currently open.

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- [Normando](#): Didn't he die a few years ago?
- [J. Welf](#): DAMN IM GONNA MISS CHARLES BRADLEY
- [Dave REnde](#)r: In the spirit of National Record Day, I'll share MY picks with you! First 45 ever aquired: Blowing...
- [Ally](#): Definitely would love to check this show out!!

Random Quote

Some critics will write 'Maya Angelou is a natural writer' - which is right after being a natural heart surgeon.
Maya Angelou

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