

# PAUL ASBELL



Paul began playing at age 12, on an acoustic guitar that his dad had “broken in” singing pro-labor and “peoples’ songs” while performing at union rallies and concerts in the late ‘40’s. An entirely self-taught player, Paul used as his early models the music in his dad’s 78 and LP collection— records by Lightnin’ Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, Blind Willie Johnson, Leadbelly, Uncle Dave Macon, Woody Guthrie, Jimmy Driftwood, and Flatt and Scruggs, as well as jazz and gospel discs by Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, The Staple Singers, and Mahalia Jackson. Soon after hearing the music coming out of bars on Chicago’s South Side,

however, he single-mindedly started playing electric guitar, trying to evoke the sounds of Buddy Guy and Otis Rush.

His career began at age 18 “in the trenches” of Pepper’s Lounge, the 1815 Club, Theresa’s, and other haunts, as a sideman to **Otis Rush, Magic Sam, Junior Wells** and other fixtures of the Chicago blues scene. Gigs, tours and recordings followed, with legends like **John Lee Hooker, Earl Hooker, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Sam Lay, Pops Staples, Donny Hathaway** and **Lightnin’ Slim**. During this time he appeared on the milestone recording “**Fathers and Sons**” featuring **Muddy Waters, Paul Butterfield** and **Mike Bloomfield** and also played on “**The London Howlin’ Wolf Sessions**” LP, featuring **Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood** and members of the **Rolling Stones**.

In 1971, needing a “spiritual battery recharge” he made the move to rural Vermont. The idea was to go as far from his “urban music roots” as possible— he bought a tiny piece of land in the shadow of breathtaking Camel’s Hump Mountain, built a geodesic dome, and attempted to live “like normal folks who didn’t live the music life 24 hours a day”. This lasted a couple of years, until he began discovering other musicians who had moved to the area with similar stories. Before long, he was playing 4 nights/week with local R&B and jazz-based groups, doing session work for locally based but nationally known **Philo Records**, and performing regionally with **Mary McCaslin, Jim Ringer, Paul Siebel**, and other singer-songwriters.

The desire to play challenging original music led him to assemble a quartet of like-minded, world-class players. Originally named “The Paul Asbell Quartet”, the group soon changed its name to “**Kilimanjaro**” and recorded two albums of Paul’s compositions for **Philo**, which won “**Indie**” awards from NAIRD for “**Most Innovative Album**” of 1981 and “**Best Jazz Album**” for 1983. Numerous festival dates, tours, and performances followed, including performances at several **Kool Jazz Festivals** in Saratoga, NY, **Montreux Jazz Festival** in Switzerland, and festivals and theatre dates in Atlanta, San Antonio, San Francisco, Denver, etc. In 1984, Kilimanjaro joined forces w/ harmonica legend **Paul Butterfield**, and toured for several years as a double-bill, opening the show with their original music and then “morphing’ into a Chicago-style blues band as Butterfield hit the stage. Appearances included the Montreal Jazz Festival, the Roskilde Festival in Copenhagen, and numerous theatre venues in the US.

While at home, the 4 members of Kilimanjaro joined w/ blues-jazz legend "**Big Joe**" Burrell to form the **Unknown Blues Band**, performing and touring in New England and Northeast. Several albums were recorded, including "**Blue Bottom**" on **Alcazar** w/ **George Gritzbach**. Performances include the **St. Denis Theatre** in Montreal, **Kool Jazz Festival** at SPAC, **Sugarbush Folk Festival**, **Ben & Jerry's One World Festival**, the **Utrecht Blues Estafette** in Holland, etc. This unit, essentially unchanged in personnel since its inception in 1981, continues to perform, and is a regional favorite.

Since the early '80's, Paul has performed regionally with numerous legends of jazz and blues, including **Sonny Stitt**, **Jon Hendricks** and family, **Bobby McFerrin**, **David Bromberg**, **Big Mama Thornton**, **Betty Carter**, **James Carter**, **Kermit Ruffins**, **Michael Ray**, the **Sun Ra Arkestra**, **The Wild Magnolias**, **Joshua Redman**, **John Stowell**, **B.B. King**, **Julian Lage**, **Dave Gripp**, and former students **Trey Anastasio** and **Nick Cassarino**.

Since 1994, Paul has been reconnecting with his original folk-based roots in enthusiastically received festival shows and solo concerts at numerous acoustic venues across the country. His 3 solo acoustic CDs, "**Steel-String Americana**", "**Roots and Branches**", and "**From Adamant To Atchafalaya**" received rave reviews in **Acoustic Guitar**, **Guitar Player**, **Sing Out**, **Downbeat**, **Blues Revue**, and other mags for their highly individualized twists on blues and jazz standards, old-timey country-based themes and original pieces from the "american roots" tradition. The **Flynn Theatre** called them "A genre-blurring, virtuosic waltz through the deep heritage of American folklore, where styles of Robert Johnson, Doc Watson and Dr. John rub elbows with those of Joe Pass and Bill Frisell." Others have said "It is quite the best CD of acoustic guitar that I have heard in years!"

In June, '06, **Kilimanjaro** began a two-year recording project, culminating in the release of "**Homecoming**"; which was picked by **Jazziz** magazine for their "**Best of 2009**" CD, along with tracks by **Chick Corea**, **John McLaughlin**, **Branford Marsalis**, and other heavyweights. In 2019, Paul released "**Burmese Panther**", an album of original jazz compositions performed by a quintet of world-class players, augmented by a horn section on several pieces. Many concert dates and sparkling reviews followed.

Throughout his career, he has found time to maintain a professional teaching schedule. Paul has taught for many years on a university level, including positions at **Dartmouth College**, **Skidmore College**, **St. Michaels College**, **Johnson State College**, and presently at **Middlebury College** and the **University of Vermont**. In addition, he presently sees between 10-25 private students/ week, covering every conceivable age group, stylistic orientation, and playing level.

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