

MIKE GARNER

BY NICK CHARLES

Mike's a mainstay of the New Zealand blues scene and long regarded as an acoustic guitarist and harmonica player of the highest calibre. His songwriting really comes to the fore on his great new release *Why A Woman Gets The Blues*, adding insightful lyrics to a lifetime's passion and musical influence. I've had the honour of performing and reminiscing with him a number of times in his home town of Rotorua.



radio show than a themed album. In live shows, I play lots of standard blues covers but see little point in recording like that. A cover needs to be clearly different from the original. I like to experiment in the studio and I multi-track lots of the parts myself, so some are difficult to perform live! A couple of top shelf NZ musicians guest on it, too.

I suspect it's very difficult to be a full-time musician in New Zealand; perhaps it's

Your formative years in England must have been in an inspiring musical environment!

I was lucky to come up through the 'blues boom' of the late '60s, early '70s. So Mayall's bands, the original Fleetwood Mac, were the touring bands playing the local pubs. Fleetwood Mac lived near me and had their own blues club, the Gin Mill, often with American guests – I still have my membership card! I saw all the big blues names, from Muddy to Son House, when they came through London. I still have all the programmes too! Every musician was learning blues licks off records.

How did you find the musical landscape in New Zealand when you arrived?

It's much smaller with far fewer bands and gigs but there was, and is, a deep love of music and interest in blues. I hooked up with a piano and harp playing musician first, did duo stuff, then had a number of electric bands. It's the same everywhere – plenty of good musicians chasing the good gigs.

Everybody's familiar by now with the usual blues influences, but who were some of the more obscure artists and recordings that had a profound influence?

At first, there were no secrets or gems, because there were so few blues LPs available where I lived. My first love was pre-war acoustic blues. I spent a lot of time unravelling the guitar parts

of Blind Blake, Blind Willie McTell, as well as the jug bands. Casey Bill Weldon, Tampa Red and Memphis Minnie were the source of a lot of inspiration, as well as Sonny Boy No.2 on harmonica. But my most powerful memory was seeing Son House live, on his last visit to the UK. Everyone around me played blues, so people like Jo Anne Kelly and Dave Kelly were impressive as well as many people who never even made an album – and still performing around the clubs in the UK.

I've found the blues clubs in New Zealand towns to be an important support for roots musicians in general. Is there an effort to foster the next generation, perhaps get your knowledge to young players?

Some do it directly. The Rotorua club has had a couple of guitar contests as part of its annual festival, specifically for under 21s. But the regular jams themselves are an opportunity for young players to step up and try some blues – happens quite a lot.

The new album's a beauty, right down to the artwork! Where did you record it and how did it all come about?

I recorded at Aztek Studio here in Rotorua, a good facility, using a mixture of digital and analogue. It was mastered in Wellington. The album is a collection of songs I've written across a range of blues and roots genres from solo acoustic to a five-piece band, so it sounds more like a

not even a necessary stress. Is it something you've aspired to?

There are few who can make a living entirely out of music. Our total population is about the same as Melbourne, across islands bigger than the UK! I stopped playing bars some years back, and mostly do festivals these days – solo, duo, trio and full band gigs, depending on the circumstances. Although I occasionally do an electric gig, my real passion is the acoustic, that's what I do most of these days. I've toured Australia three times and played a number of other overseas countries, including in Europe. It's cool to travel and take your original songs to a completely new audience.

You have some unusual instruments in your cupboard!

My main instruments are two Beltona resonators, from New Zealand. One is a gun metal grey Southerner, and the other a red electro-acoustic. I love the tone of these guitars. For regular playing I have a Takamine parlour size guitar. I play through an AER amp and DI into the PA. I travel with at least two guitars, a regular acoustic and a resonator!

When can we expect to see you in Oz again?

I haven't been over for four or five years, so it could be time for another visit!

Visit www.mikegarner.co.nz 