

New River Blues Society



Blues News & Interviews – January 2023

Matthew Stubbs / GA-20

Compiled by Bill Huckle

Matt Stubbs, guitarist/vocalist/songwriter of the hard-driving Blues ensemble [GA-20](#), generously shared part of a recent January afternoon for an on-the-run phone chat with Blues News & Interviews. Matt and his bandmates Pat Faherty and Tim Carman are touring on the heels of the release of their third full-length recording “Crackdown” on [Colemine Records](#), which debuted at #1 on Billboard’s Blues Chart. The music of GA-20 may be righteously celebrated as Blues, but it is much more: it swings, it rocks, it is soulful and funky, and it is delivered with a lovingly-crafted, raw vintage sound utterly untainted by ironic posturing.

GA-20’s winter 2023 performance circuit will bring them to [The Lyric Theatre](#) in Blacksburg on February 9, their only scheduled mid-Atlantic stop between Asheville, NC, and Wilmington, DE, on this tour.

New River Blues Society: Matt, thanks so much for setting the time aside for us, I know your days on tour are full. You’re in Lake Charles [Louisiana] now?

Matt Stubbs: On the way there now – we ended up staying an extra night in Austin, so heading to Lake Charles now...just north of Houston, driving.

NRBS: Literally on the road. To begin, congratulations to you and your bandmates for the critical acclaim and awards you’ve received and for the recent [Guitar Player](#) and [Vintage Guitar](#) magazine write-ups – we’re very excited here in the New River Valley for your upcoming visit.

MS: Looking forward to it!

NRBS: As I see it, you are part of the tradition of dedicated ‘roots music’ artists with New England roots, so to speak. Bob Margolin and Al Anderson come to mind.

MS: I live in Providence, RI, now and grew up in New Hampshire as a kid, as a young adult in Austin, for a short time moved to Los Angeles, then moved back to Boston. Most of my life in New England.

NRBS: As a New Englander – or really doesn’t matter where you’re from, I suppose – what drew you to the type of music you find yourself playing professionally now with GA-20 and [Charlie Musselwhite](#)? [Matt has been harmonica legend Musselwhite’s principal guitarist for 14+ years.]

MS: My father’s a guitarist, so, since I was a little kid, I was always around him playing the guitar, his band having rehearsals at the house, growing up going to his gigs. That was the earliest influence. He was really into early rock and roll and Blues music. Growing up, he had an uncle that brought him to see all the Blues legends in the ‘60s and ‘70s – B.B. King, Albert King, Buddy Guy, all that. So he was always into it, and it rubbed off on me. I started playing guitar around 13 and had gotten really into Blues music by 15 or 16. I was hooked – I love traditional Blues, and have pretty much from day one of starting guitar.

NRBS: I read in one of your recent interviews that you came to your knowledge of Blues not by way of the well-known revivalists like Johnny Winter or Eric Clapton, but from the original recordings. Was that by way of your family?

MS: Partially. At the very beginning, like most guitarists that start out, you do hear other people who were influenced by that music. The first guy I liked when I picked up a guitar was [Lenny Kravitz](#) with his song “Are you gonna go my way?” My father mentioned that, if I liked that, I would probably like this guy Jimi Hendrix. All that happened within about a year of starting. Then in a year I was back listening to early Buddy Guy and Freddy King and so on. And I found myself liking the earlier stuff better.



NRBS: I confess that I came to it in the way perhaps more typical for my peers, learning about Robert Johnson by way of Clapton and John Mayall.

MS: Sure. Doesn't matter how you get there, as long as someone exposes you to it and you like it. My father had that uncle who exposed him to it, he also was a fan in the '60s of Cream and Hendrix.

NRBS: Perhaps GA-20 is the next generation of artists exposing even younger audiences to this music that they otherwise might not come upon – we thank you for that! This is part of our local mission as a Blues Society as well. How would you characterize your audiences in terms of age? At much of the music I go see, there are a lot of grey heads like mine in the room.

MS: I think our audience is pretty diverse. It kind of depends on what festival or what tour we're on. We do a lot of co-bills or support tours with other bands, so depending on who we're paired up with and the festival, it varies. We have the older Blues crowd that's always there, but a lot of shows with people in their 30s enjoying it. We just did a big long tour with our label-mates the [Monophonics](#) and [Kendra Morris](#)– they are *not* Blues bands, more like psychedelic soul. Very diverse crowd.

NRBS: Since our [local weekly open mic' Blues jam](#) reconvened about a year ago, we've been gratified to see how many more younger folks have been coming out – to dance, to play, or just listen – much more than 4-5 years ago. All is not lost!

How about venues? Is there a setting that you find is particularly conducive to developing a good rapport with your audience?

MS: We play in all types of places, from small Blues clubs to big theatres or festivals or Rock clubs. We're leaning toward more Rock-style venues with standing and that are a little bit bigger. It depends on the market and who the promoter is. It's been a lot of Rock clubs lately and a lot of theatres.



NRBS: The place you're playing in Blacksburg is a roughly 100-year-old theatre, beautifully renovated in the 1990s, seats about 400. Not a lot of room for dancing, but, knowing how energetic your music and lively your stage presence is, I think there will be plenty of folks up close to the stage, boogie'n.

MS: It's animated, for sure.

NRBS: Your recordings are definitely full of energy, and, for relatively sparse instrumentation and straightforward arrangements, they are remarkably 'full' or 'dense' sonically – there's a lot of sound in the air all at once. I know you and your bandmates share an appreciation for vintage instruments [wonderfully documented in [Matt and Pat's interview in Guitar Player](#)]. Could you elaborate on that a bit?

MS: For the most part, we use vintage gear, especially in the studio. As I said, my father being a guitarist, I've always been kind of a guitar geek, interested in collecting. I've always gravitated toward vintage amps and guitars. They have a certain sound to my ear, maybe because that's what was used on the old records I listened to. So we've stuck with it. We do use newer gear, especially when touring. I have had guitars built based on vintage instruments – I don't want to bring the super-collectible ones on the road, in and out of the van, 200 days a year! It's a sound thing and a 'feel' thing with the older instruments. The early Fenders, some of the first electric guitars ever made – I think they got it right, right away.

NRBS: In the wake of your success and as champions of using vintage gear, has an upswing in interest in older hardware been evident in the marketplace?

MS: I don't think so, not stemming from us anyway. The guitars we like, a lot of people have liked for a long time. We find them everywhere, on Reverb or on Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace, or just by word of mouth – a lot of my friends are also collectors. It might be nice to influence the market, but a lot of the guitars we use are older, cheaper ones, so it's also nice when they're slightly more affordable than blue-chip vintage guitars.

NRBS: In [other interviews](#), you have been asked about the absence of bass guitar from GA-20's instrumentation. It strikes me that there's neither need nor room in the mix for a bass line – the fullness of the sound and the depth of the sustain provide a form of 'bottom' to the musical palette.

MS: A lot of the original recordings historically had two guitars and no bass. I think a lot of people don't realize that. If you arrange the music in a way that fits that instrumentation, we've never missed bass on stage. Pat and I have both done plenty of bass gigs for other people, and we like bass, but any time we've had bass

players sit in, it changes the sound so it doesn't sound like us. In our arrangements, one of the two guitars is always playing a bass-like line to cover that space.

NRBS: Looking ahead to your visit to Blacksburg, what would you most like us – either committed ticket-holders or curious newbies – to anticipate about an evening with GA-20?

MS: Well, when people hear the word 'Blues,' sometimes they think it means the music will be slow and depressing, and I think our show is the opposite of that, pretty energetic and upbeat. People who aren't Blues fans yet, if they take the chance on going to see some live Blues, they might like it.

NRBS: Well put. There's plenty to like, that's for sure. Engaging songwriting, passionate playing and singing, and a rich and raw stylistic variety. Really looking forward to your show. Thank you again for your time. Our best to your bandmates, and please travel safely.

MS: Thanks – see you then.



Opening for GA-20 at The Lyric on February 9 will be the [Isaac Hadden Organ Trio](#), featuring the NRV's own Isaac Hadden. Visit [Live at the Lyric](#) for ticket info.

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