

A 21st Century Blues Diamond Dozen

By Mike Busby

Introduction

Now that we have had over 100 years of Blues records you might have been forgiven for thinking that the options for such a relatively simple musical format might have been exhausted. Blues roots, as I have explored in other papers in this series, were very thoroughly 'mined' during the Classic Rock era of the late 1960s and early 1970s by great bands such as The Rolling Stones, Cream and Led Zeppelin. Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray helped to revive the genre again in the 1980s.

We have now had the first 20 years of the 21st century and I am glad to say The Blues are 'Alive and Well' as octogenarian Buddy Guy proclaimed with his 2018 album. Keith Richards guests on that album and his band also produced a pure Blues covers album in 2016 to prove the point.

However I have written plenty about the great Blues influenced acts who were born around the same time as me and before. This piece is going to focus on those born since 1975, but who are producing great new Blues rooted music, as well as often covering the standards.

I can remember having to apologise for the paucity of female talent to featured in my early work, but there will be no need for that this time as women are in the majority! For each artist in my Diamond Dozen I will give some background to their development and influences. Further I will give some examples of their Blues rooted recordings to illustrate the veracity of Buddy's assertion.

Both Joe Bonamassa and John Mayer were born after 1975 but because I have already covered them in the 'Diamond Dozen Guitarists and Their Blues Roots' I have not repeated myself in this selection. This is my twelve, in no particular order, and I hope it encourages you to pick your own dozen Blues rooted 'youngsters':

1) Derek Trucks (and Susan Tedeschi)

2) Joanne Shaw-Taylor

3) Kenny Wayne Shepherd

4) Samantha Fish

5) Gary Clarke Jnr

6) Larkin Poe

7) Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram

8) Chantel McGregor

9) Danny Bryant

10) Anna Popovich

11) Dani Wilde

12) When Rivers Meet

There are two duos (if not three) in this selection and an American act dominance of 7:5.

Female artists are in the majority in this 21st century list. That is particularly true if one thinks of my first Diamond as being part of a married duo, which is also the case with my last choice. There are 6 men and 9 women involved in total!

1) Derek Trucks (and Susan Tedeschi)

Derek was born in 1979 into a family with a great Rock and Blues heritage. His uncle Butch Trucks played drums with The Allman Brothers. Butch's band could claim to have sported the best ever slide guitar player in Duane Allman. Many authorities rank Derek second only to his uncle's old band mate as a slide player.

Some reports suggest that the inspiration for Truck's Christian name came to his parents from Eric Clapton's alter ego in Derek and the Dominoes. Eric's band recorded their only album in Truck's home State of Florida, although at the southern end (Miami) rather than in the northern city of Jacksonville where Derek was born. Duane Allman famously guested on this album as one of the Dominoes! Derek Trucks also featured as a guest in Eric's band more than 30 years later! He can be heard playing the most famous Clapton/Allman collaboration 'Layla' both with Eric and his own bands.

Trucks acquired his first guitar for \$5 as a nine year old and by the age of 13 he was good enough to be playing with the great Buddy Guy. His talents were such as a teenager that he played with several rock greats including Joe Walsh and Bob Dylan. He was regularly playing as a guest in The Allman Brothers.

In 1999 he was made a formal member of his uncle's band, in effect taking the role first vacated by Duane Allman's premature death nearly 20 years previously. Unsurprisingly Derek cites Duane and Elmore James as his primary influences on slide guitar. He plays with open E tuning in common with many slide players and favours the Gibson SG model of guitar. This all illustrates Derek's strong Blues roots although he has a broad repertoire including Rock, Jazz, Soul and World (particularly Indian Music).

His performances continued on several fronts with his own band and The Allman Brothers until they finally disbanded in 2014. He had married his musical soul mate Susan Tedeschi in 2001, a great Blues inspired vocalist and guitar player in her own right. They formed The Tedeschi Trucks Band in 2010 and it is mostly through this incarnation of Derek's talents that I will illustrate how his Blues roots are so evident.

I would suggest viewing some of the many YouTube clips of this couple's band playing live if you needed any convincing about Derek's Blues roots. Make a start perhaps with the post made on 21/06/21 called 'The Master of Blues Slide Guitar - Derek Trucks'. This eleven minute plus video features 4 great Truck solos all on the Gibson SG. It starts with a standard 12 bar blues arrangement and is followed by his solo live from one of the band's most famous compositions 'Midnight in Harlem'.

This is truly great Blues inspired slide guitar playing, but also illustrates a common theme we will return to in this paper. Although these 20th century diamonds are known to play 'pure' Blues, their albums tend to broaden the genre and merge it with other forms. 'Midnight in Harlem' has a great Soul feel to it, as with many Tedeschi Trucks tracks. Susan's great Soul melodies and phrasing plus the 'big band' feel with keyboards and brass lead to this merging of Blues and Soul to make a great characteristic sound.

There is no shortage of live 'footage' of Derek playing standard Blues numbers with or without Susan. BB King numbers like 'The Thrill is Gone' (with Buddy Guy) and 'Three O'Clock Blues' (with Susan) are out there. You will also find videos of the famous night in 2012 at London's Royal Albert Hall where the pair joined BB three years before he died to play some classic Blues.

Derek and Susan's first album together, *Revelator* in 2011 featured 'Midnight in Harlem' and won a Grammy in 2012 for best Blues album. This album opens with a very Blues rooted slide part on 'Come and See Me About It' before the Blues/Soul synthesis kicks in with Susan's vocals. The second track 'Don't Let Me Slide' follows this trend precisely. Track three is 'Midnight in Harlem' the classic track which probably summarises the band's talents and Derek's, in particular, beautifully. Played in the key of E major his melodic slide guitar lead compliments Susan's soulful voice perfectly.

From this quite melodic approach to Blues rooted music its time to feature a woman who usually makes a raunchy/rocky Blues sound.

2) Joanne Shaw-Taylor

Just as one of her great inspirations Stevie Ray Vaughan first reached the wider public eye by playing in the band of a British superstar (David Bowie) the same thing happened to Joanne Shaw-Taylor when she played with Annie Lennox. The occasion was the concert in The Mall to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.

Joanne stepped forward in front of Buckingham Palace to play a prominent solo in 'There Must Be an Angel (Playing with My Heart)'. This song was co-written by Dave Stewart who is credited with discovering his young British compatriot. Apparently Joanne's Fuzz pedal had malfunctioned just before the solo, which therefore ended up as a very Bluesy but 'clean' affair on her Gibson Les Paul, impressing none other than the great Stevie Wonder.

Joanne cites Albert Collins and Jimi Hendrix as her guitar inspirations in addition to SRV, so there is a distinct Blues bias. She has followed Collins in a preference for the Fender Telecaster most of the time. Nevertheless she started off as a child learning classical guitar. She has therefore developed a mixed technique of using finger picking and/or a plectrum depending on the musical passage.

Joanne now mostly uses Telecasters through a Bletchley Belchfire 45 head and Marshall speaker cabinet. Joanne was born close to Birmingham in the UK in 1985, but now lives in Detroit where Danny Russel builds his Bletchley Amps. I can't find a reference to this, but I am guessing that the name might have something to do with the fact that Marshall Amps are built 3700 miles away from Detroit in Bletchley England?

Joanne plays a Telecaster she calls 'Junior' which she purchased second hand in London's Soho area as a teenager (with her grandmother funding 50%) and an Albert Collins signature Tele model presented to her by Joe Bonamassa. Albert Collins was promoted as 'The Master of The Telecaster'!

Dave Stewart recruited Joanne to play in his band when she was only 16. The fact that musicians of the quality of Dave and Annie recruited Joanne speaks volumes about her qualities on guitar. Unlike our first Diamond Derek however, Shaw-Taylor has developed a great vocal delivery too, setting her up for a solo career.

Joanne's solo career had commenced in truth before the Annie Lennox appearance, particularly in the USA where she recorded for the German label Ruf Records initially. I will now pick out just three tracks from her solo career which I believe illustrate Joanne's undoubted Blues roots. All of Shaw-Taylor albums have been recorded on the West side of the Atlantic despite her British birth. Probably a bit of an indictment on how the British music industry seems to have neglected The Blues genre which gave it such a boost in the late 1960s and 70s?

Joanne's first album in 2009 *White Sugar* was recorded in Tennessee for Ruf Records. She wrote all but one track. The 'top' and 'tail' demonstrate her Blues roots to perfection. The opening track 'Going Home' has a lovely opening Rock/Blues chordal riff embellished with Joanne's tasteful and thoroughly bluesy lead fills and solo as the track progresses. All in A flat minor, however Shaw-Taylor will be playing A key chord shapes and scales on her guitar which she tunes to E flat, following in SRV's footsteps.

The album closes with 'Blackest Day' which has a standard 12 bar blues arrangement in B minor. In the solo Joanne takes the solo 'attack' up several notches as the song moves through the verses, in a manner which reminds me of Jimmy Page playing pure Blues. It is virtuoso stuff in your author's opinion. By the time it fades the track reaches a crescendo of improvisation. The track is simply bass, drums, lead and vocal. The album reached No 8 on the USA Blues chart.

At the time of writing Shaw Taylor's latest album is *Reckless Heart* now on Sony's Silver-tone label. Track 5 'Creepin' is again simply lead, bass drums and vocals. A great rocky riff played to a nearly standard 12 bar blues format in E flat. Great roots music to keep the Blues alive in the second decade of the 21st century. We are now going to revert to the male gender and another SRV disciple.

3) Kenny Wayne Shepherd

Kenny was born in Louisiana in 1977. He is the son of Ken Shepherd who was a local radio personality and concert promoter. In 1984 as a seven year old he met Stevie Ray Vaughan at one of the concerts his dad organised and was motivated to take up the guitar. He was self taught in the manner of many of the greats through the technique of playing along to his dad's records and learning the parts note by note. Muddy Waters records were prominent as he learned his Blues 'licks'. Albert King and Robert Cray have also been cited as influences on Shepherd.

This meticulous work paid off because by the time he was 13 blind local Blues legend Bryan Lee invited Kenny on stage to play with his band. In common with Derek Trucks Kenny focuses on his guitar playing and since 1996 has relied mostly on the vocals of Noah Hunt in his band. Kenny is an avid Fender Stratocaster fan and the Company now make a signature Kenny Wayne Shepherd guitar which he has helped to design. He also tends to use Fender amps.

Kenny secured a record deal with Giant Records. His first album *Ledbetter Heights* was recorded in Memphis and released in 1995 while he was still a teenager. Look no further than this first record to confirm Kenny's Blues roots. It made number 1 on the USA Blues chart and offered a high proportion of 'pure' Blues tracks despite the relative unpopularity of the genre at this time. The album had sold over 500,000 copies by 1996!

All but 4 tracks are co-written by Kenny. These are mostly in 'pure' Blues arrangements and the 4 covers include a Bukka White and a Howlin' Wolf song. The stand out tracks, in your author's opinion are 'Shame, Shame, Shame' a great slow 12 bar blues in F sharp

and 'One Foot On the Path'. This is another medium paced 12 bar blues with a nice rocky riff, very Albert King perhaps? In fact on a recent album Kenny does cover 'Born Under a Bad Sign'. The Wolf's cover is a typically great one chord (E flat) Blues song in the same idiom as 'Spoonful' and 'Smokestack Lightning'. The song is 'rocked up' by Kenny who was probably only 17 when he recorded it. Guitarists among you will have noticed from these keys that Kenny sometimes follows SRV in tuning to E flat. Corey Sterling takes the vocals on this pre-Hunt album.

Noah Hunt joined The Kenny Wayne Shepherd Band for the second studio album *Trouble Is* and the Blues arrangements continued to feature in the more Rock orientated sound the band created. The big hit of this album, 'Blue on Black' reminds me a little of Bon Jovi. My favourite track "True Lies" has a great rock progression set into a modified 12 bar blues arrangement but including a bridge. The E minor progression suggests that Kenny was on standard tuning for this. All surviving members of SRV's last Double Trouble lineup guest on this album suggesting the great reputation Kenny had built up before the 21st century even started. He has continued the great work into it.

The Blues have continued to be the core of Kenny's output. His live work confirms this. Taking the 2010 *Live in Chicago* as a lovely example Chris Layton from Double Trouble appears in the band on drums and there are appearances from the aforementioned Bryan Lee and the legendary Hubert Sumlin. Hubert had been summoned up from Memphis to join the Howlin' Wolf Band on guitar in Chicago in the 1950s.

Several great Blues covers are produced including The Wolf's classic 'How Many More Years' which was originally recorded by Sam Phillips in Memphis and was his first release

on Chess. Slim Harpo's 'King Bee' gets the Hunt/Shepherd rock treatment to conclude this album which was produced by Ken senior.

Live in Chicago was recorded at a venue we have visited a couple of times, 'The House of Blues'. John Mayer, Kenny's contemporary, also recorded a live album at this venue but we were not lucky enough on either occasion to catch talent of that calibre. Nevertheless in May 2019 we did see a set from my next Diamond much closer to our home at The Stables Milton Keynes, but 4300 miles from hers.

4) Samantha Fish

Samantha's first studio album *Runaway* in 2011 on Ruf Records was solid Blues. In the title track her great vocals deliver the line 'You can't runaway no no no! *Runaway from the blues*' in a lovely rocky traditional turn around of a 12 bar blues format. By the time her 2021 album *Faster* came out Blues purists might argue that she had! Not your author though, they are both great albums. Certainly *Faster* on Rounder Records has a more Rock/Pop/Commercial feel to it, but still some great Blues guitar licks embellishing the tracks. It also topped the Blues chart Stateside.

Fish was born in Kansas City Missouri in 1989. In her early teens she was playing the drums but switched to guitar at 15. Her dad played guitar, her mum played violin, piano and was a classically trained singer. Sister Amanda is also a professional Blues musician. The girls were frequent underage visitors to Knuckleheads Saloon, the famous live Blues venue in Kansas. By the time she was 18 Samantha joined in at the venue's open mic jamming sessions.

Early influences included Stevie Ray Vaughan, Bonnie Raitt, Tom Petty and The Rolling Stones, so, once more, a heavy Blues bias. In the early days Fish was using a Fender Telecaster with twin Humbucker pick ups. She acquired her now famous 'cigar box' guitar in Arkansas in 2012 and tunes it to open G for slide playing in songs like 'Bulletproof'. Her main guitar by the time we saw her in 2019 for a great set at The Stables was a standard white Gibson SG, although she opened with Bulletproof on the cigar box. She usually plays her guitars through Category 5 boutique amplification.

Ruf Records signed Samatha and teamed her up with fellow American Cassie Taylor on bass and Brit Dani Wilde (my penultimate Diamond) calling their album *Girls With Guitars*. Both Dani and Cassie had Blues roots in their careers and you can hear that on their recordings. Samantha was covering Screamin' Jay Hawkin's 'I Put a Spell on You' in this band.

She continued with the Hawkin's cover into her solo career in live appearances. I would suggest googling a clip of her doing that track to hear the great Blues based approach she was taking. Fish was still playing this on her 2019 tour of the UK, but sadly not the night we saw her.

It is Samantha's first album '*Runaway*' that best illustrates her Blues roots in my opinion. The album had contributions from, and was produced by St Louis Bluesman Mike Zito . It kicks off with the swampy blues sounds in E of, well, 'Down in The Swamp'. Then into the aforementioned title track 'Runaway' still in the popular key with Blues players of E. This fast tempo rocker was played out on the road in *Girls with Guitars*.

'Today's My Day' evokes the more melodic Blues sounds of some of the great divas who plied their trade on the old Chitlin Circuit in the 30s and 40s. Some neat slide guitar on this and the next but one track 'Leavin' Kind'.

'Soft and Slow' reveals the Rolling Stone's influence nicely with a bit of a Country feel to it. The same could be said with 'Push Comes to Shove' with Mike Zito making a prominent contribution. There is more than an influence from Tom Petty when his 'Louisiana Rain' is presented beautifully as the only cover on the album.

The mellow soft Jazz/Blues of 'Feelin' Alright' closes the album with terrific 'clean' fills and solos in G. The album offers great variations in tempo and power but it is most definitely The Blues. It won Samantha a 'Best New Artist' award in the Blues Music Awards in 2012. The following year Fish got to jam with Guy (Buddy) who was mightily impressed.

In 2012 the legendary Buddy Guy also jammed with my next Diamond and my first Diamond in The White House with President Barrack Obama taking a verse of 'Sweet Home Chicago'.

Gary Clark Jnr

Gary's 'Sweet Home' is actually Austin Texas, where he was born in 1984. Like Chicago this city is noted for its highly active Blues scene. *Rolling Stone Magazine* reviewed Gary's first EP and they wrote:

'A genuine 21st-century bluesman, raised on the form in all its roughneck roadhouse glory but marked by the present day? That's been as hard to find as a 21st century clockmaker.'

In Austin Clark had come under the direct influence of Stevie Ray Vaughn's bother Jimmie and unsurprisingly cites the three Kings (BB, Albert and Freddie) as inspirations in his highly effective self taught guitar development. Perhaps more than any of my youthful Blues dozen Gary has developed an exceptional vocal style and range which fits with his diverse musical styles. Marvin Gaye frequently comes to mind when you listen to his soulful tracks. He is a hard man to put in a pigeon hole but several authorities have suggested the lineage of Hendrix - Prince - Clark and you cannot give greater praise than that! His roots however are distinctly in The Blues.

Gary took up the guitar when he was 12 years old. Through his teens he played in local bands before coming to the attention of Clifford Antone who hosted his own famous Blues club in Austin. The Vaughan brothers had established their reputation at Antones in the early 1980s and, as described above, Clark came under the surviving Vaughan's influence. Jimmie introduced Gary to many luminaries including Eric Clapton, and he appeared at Eric's 2010 Crossroads Guitar Festival held just outside Chicago. BB King, Buddy Guy, Robert Cray, Jeff Beck, John Mayer and Derek Trucks were amongst the performers that

year at this event designed to raise money to fight drug addiction. So Gary was now 'dining at the top table' of my Blues Diamonds and with just cause as *Rolling Stone Magazine* noticed.

Gary tends to use Epiphone or their parent company Gibson guitars favouring the Casino and SG models particularly. The Fender Vibro King is his amp of choice. He has maintained a huge commitment to playing live and gets a great sound when he does so, as you can hear on his live albums or if you google a video. My suggestion is to start with a real roots song 'Catfish Blues' which he usually knocks out on an Epiphone.

I have talked about how Muddy Waters brought this one chord (E) Blues song up from the Delta to Chicago in other texts on this site. Gary does an excellent modern cover. This song is so important because it seems to form a root for songs like 'Voodoo Chile' (Jimi Hendrix) and I would suggest down the lineage Gary's 'Numb' too, more of which below.

The 'Catfish Blues' performances clearly illustrates Gary's roots and it is through his live work presented on Warner Bros *Gary Clark Live* (2014) that I will seek to demonstrate his deep Blues roots. The album kicks off with 'Cat Fish Blues' a Muddy Waters cover as discussed above. It moves into a lovely 'pure' 12 bar Blues with AAB lyrics (when the first vocal line in each verse is repeated) written by Gary called 'Next Door Neighbour Blues' featuring some great slide guitar from Clark on one of his Epiphones and backed up, as usual live, with King Zapata on second guitar.

We get some Chuck Berry inspired 'Travis County' next showcasing Gary's take on Blues baby Rock and Roll. Then, in your author's opinion, Clark's master piece to date with the wonderful 'When My Train Pulls In'. 'Pure' 12 bar Blues in E minor demonstrating why so

many suggest that Gary is the 21st century saviour of the Blues. Terrific guitar work as Gary picks out notes which just fit, without ever trying to join the 'go faster' brigade. Then there are great traditional African American Blues lyrics for the current time and delivered with that excellent voice. Vocally Gary does not have the deep timbre of a Muddy or Wolf, he puts his own excellent 'stamp' on Blues vocals. The song is based around a beautiful thought out pentatonic scale riff.

From this slow/medium paced stunner the tempo goes up featuring fellow Texan Zapata on slide this time in 'I Don't Owe You a Thang'. Pure Blues again and that trend goes down slow with a great cover of BB King's 'Three O'Clock Blues' using the Epiphone on 'clean'. Next is a hint of Marvin perhaps in the soulful 'Things are Changing'. Then we get to 'Numb' which runs 'When My Train Pulls In' in the masterpiece stakes pretty close.

The 'clean' guitar is soon subjected to heavy Fuzz box distortion as the riff of 'Numb' cuts in on a down tuned E string (D) and the wonderful 'Numb' in D moves on the evolution of 'Cat Fish' Blues into the repertoire of the best contemporary exponent of the Blues in my opinion. So, with only a mention of Gary's great Albert King and Jimmy Read covers I will rest my case and move on to two sisters born east of Gary Clark Jnr.

Larkin Poe

Here is a root for you: Edgar Allan Poe had a distant cousin called Larkin Poe who is the great-great-great grandfather of Megan (born 1989) and Rebecca (born 1991) Lovell. The sisters adopted his name for the American roots Rock band they formed in 2010. They are now based in Nashville Tn, were born in Knoxville Tn but raised in North Georgia.

They both have great vocal delivery with Rebecca mostly playing a Fender Stratocaster and Megan majoring on a Rickenbacker lap steel guitar (played with a slide). The live band features Tarka Layman on bass and Kevin McGowan on drums. Rebecca tends to take the lead vocal with Megan providing the harmonies.

Particularly because of Megan's lovely slide sounds they have been publicised as 'The Little Sisters of The Allman Brothers'. Larkin Poe have been known to cover their songs, but like The Allman Brothers they have their own excellent take on Rock music. Their repertoire is quite diverse, but is certainly rooted (as the Allmans were) in the Blues.

You can hear Rebecca tell audiences about this enthusiasm for Blues roots when they play live. They had started out with elder sister Jessica as The Lovell Sisters playing Bluegrass in 2005 but struck out in the new direction, when Jessica decided to quit professional music, five years later. They have developed a great sound and, as usual with my Diamond acts, never better than when live.

The *Observer* in the UK proclaimed them as 'Best discovery of Glastonbury' for the 2014 festival for example. You can Google some great live video of the band to confirm this

prowess. The sisters report in interviews that Robert Johnson, Skip James, Son House, Bob Dylan, and Derek Trucks sit amongst their influences.

Listening to the Lovells explain their affinity with the early Delta and Southern Blues players you hear a journey familiar to so many of us. Starting with The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and The Allmans in their father's record collection, for example, and moving back to see how they were rooted.

In the earlier Lovell Sisters Rebecca had played mandolin (in particular) and also banjo. It was apparently Megan's mastery of the slide amplified technique on lap steel guitar with open G tuning and then Rebecca's switch to guitar which cemented their direction and sound development. The rock and country influences are clearly there but so too The Blues. So I will focus on some Larkin Poe tracks which lean especially that genre.

The album *Peach* on Tricky-Woo Records (2017) is pretty convincing on their Blues chops. They kick off with a lovely lap steel backed version of no less than Robert Johnson's 'Come on in My Kitchen'. Ledbelly's 'Black Betty' takes the Blues tempo up a couple of tracks later.

The stand out track for your author on this album would be 'Preachin' Blues' written by Son House. A traditional twelve bar blues with AAB lyrics featuring a nice lap steel solo verse from Megan. I would Google this one for a live video, it is great stuff! Blind Willie Johnson's 'John the Revalator' completes a quartet of covers bringing the Blues sounds of the first half of the 20th century up to date approaching 100 years on.

Their next album *Venom and Faith* still on Tricky Woo went to number one in the USA Blues chart in 2018. Skip James was covered by the sisters with a fine version of 'Hard Time Killing Floor Blues'. However Rebecca wrote much of the music for this album including the outstanding 'Beach Blonde Bottle Blues'. As the title of this track would suggest she allowed her original composition to be heavily Blues influenced.

That continues through into the original tracks on their next Tricky Woo offering *Self Made Man* in 2020. Rock, Folk and even Pop influences however clearly enhance their commerciality this time. Perhaps even a little Eastern influence on 'Every Bird That Flies'? It certainly topped the USA Blues chart once more. 'Tears of Blue to Gold' and 'Easy Street' which is the finale on this album summarising tastefully the more commercial approach. With all this Blues music it must be time to get back to Clarkesdale Ms, and so we shall!

Christone ‘Kingfish’ Ingram

My youngest Diamond was born in Clarksdale at the end of the 20th century (1999) to Princes Pride and Christopher Ingham. Princes was Charlie Pride’s cousin (sadly both are recently deceased). Charlie was, of course, famous on two fronts as a baseball pitcher and as a Country singer. Arguably ‘Kingfish’ has developed into the most ‘pure’ Blues artist of my twelve? No surprise perhaps as he was born right in the ‘cradle’ of 20th century Blues close to the purported Robert Johnson ‘Crossroads’ where Highways 61 and 49 intersect in the City.

Typically his musical education commenced singing Gospel music in church with his extended family. He was only 5 when his interest in the Blues was ignited with a Muddy Waters’s documentary and a trip to the local *Delta Blues Museum* at his dad’s instigation. He was playing the drums by the age of 6 and switched to bass when he was 11 before settling on guitar.

He received tuition from Bill Perry and Richard Crisman through the arts programme of the *Delta Blues Museum* and he also attended The Pinetop Perkins summer workshops. Christone cites Robert Johnson, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Muddy Waters, BB King, Buddy Guy, Jimi Hendrix and Prince as significant influences.

Bill Perry invited his pupil to play on stage for the first time with him at Clarksdale’s *Ground Zero Blues Club*, which is part owned by actor Morgan Freeman. Pity it wasn’t the night we were there in May 2017. It was a little earlier than that! Bill gave Ingham the nickname ‘Kingfish’ and it has stuck. He seems to favour a Peavey Delta Blues amp made in

his home State. As with many Blues players you can often see him using a Fender Stratocaster but not exclusively. He also uses custom guitars made in New York quite extensively.

If you want to see Christone using the custom guitar and confirm his Blues roots in one, I would suggest finding the nearly 20 minute clip of him on YouTube playing The Dallas International Guitar Festival in May 2019 when he was only 20 years old. You will get a medley of the Muddy Water's roots song which we have referred to before 'Catfish Blues' and the traditional song which broke Jimi Hendrix into the UK, 'Hey Joe'. Real guitar mastery including a very melodic instrumental insert of 'When The Saints Go Marching in' and a lovely Reggae treatment of the 'Hey Joe' chord sequence at one point to lend variety to that song. So, when I said Kingfish was the 'purist' Blues artist in my 12 that is all relative. He has variety too.

To date Ingram has produced two great studio albums *Kingfish* (2019) and *662* (2021) both on Alligator Records with, appropriately, their HQ in Chicago. Both albums are blessed with Christone's clear and characteristic Blues vocals, his cutting Blues/Rock guitar riffs and the polished Blues guitar licks he has developed so lovingly. For both albums Kingfish has been supported by the man Buddy Guy has called 'The White Willie Dixon', Tom Hambridge. Tom has contributed percussion, song writing, production and some vocals, so you rather get Buddy's point. Buddy himself lends a hand on the second track of the first album 'Fresh Out'.

This slow/medium paced 12 bar blues in A could have been a Guy track. It's definitely 'Keeping The Blues Alive' well into the 21st century and Buddy takes the last verse vocally with traditional Blues lyrics about lost love and hard times. The next track, further proving

the point, is a faster paced twelve bar still in A 'It Ain't Right' . Billy Branch on harmonica gets Kingfish sounding a bit like The Rolling Stones on the fast tempo 12 bar in E 'If You Love Me' later on the record. 'Hard Times' shows Ingham doing acoustic Delta Blues with the help of Keb Mo.

662 is a more diverse album without losing the clear root. The up tempo Rock/Blues title track proves the point with backing rhythm guitar and lead licks all in the Blues idiom while the track rocks right into its instrumental coda just after you think it's finished. We have some pretty pure Soul from Christone with 'That's All It Takes' and some nice Funk with 'Too Young To Remember'.

The Rock riff of 'Not Gonna Lie' could have been Jimmy Page? Then a few tracks later we actually get 'Your Time is Gonna Come' but not the Page, Jones Folk/Rock song its a slow twelve bar Blues in E. I think Jimmy would be impressed with Ingham's lovely solo on this and how the intensity of the fills build to the climax. I'm looking forward to hear what comes next from Kingfish, a really talented guy.

According to USA magazine *Guitar World* my next Diamond produced a live album with the 11th best guitar work of the decade in 2019.

Chantel McGregor

Whereas my last Diamond, Christone is perhaps the 'purist' Blues player of my selections I would probably accept that Chantel might be the one in my 12 who employs the lowest percentage of 'pure' blues in her repertoire now. But, it is still clearly there at the root of her lovely guitar work. As a teenager Chantel was apparently told that she had a great voice (absolutely true) but that girls don't play guitar like that by a major record label representative! Well, they certainly do now as I am illustrating with my female majority.

McGregor is a Yorkshire lass (Bradford) born in 1986. I'm not sure that the word 'lass' is quite PC in 2022 but it's certainly more PC than suggesting that girls stick to singing, especially when they have this sort of talent on guitar.

My three remaining female Blues Diamonds all studied music formally. In Chantel's case that was in Leeds emerging with a first class honours degree in Popular Music. Her dad had played guitar and she received encouragement on the instrument from an early age. Home influence included listening to her father's Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac and Free records in particular. Blues a plenty then!

Chantel has quite a collection of guitars to choose from including several of dad's. If the evidence of YouTube and her web site photos is reliable however she seems to gravitate on electric guitar to a white Music Man JP6 Piezo through a Legacy Amp.

There are plenty of YouTube clips demonstrating McGregor's Blues licks impressively. My suggestion would be to Google her appearance at the Cambridge Rock Festival in 2014 and look at her on the Music Man knocking out 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Purple Rain'. Back to

the Hendrix to Prince lineage then! Great voice and even better guitar Mr Big Record Company executive!

Before we completely forget the comment though it is worth focusing on Chantel's voice and then cover the Blues roots. During the Pandemic in 2020 and 2021 she started to perform weekly shows on line from her shed. Unsurprisingly they have become known as 'The Shed Sessions'. Many feature McGregor on acoustic guitar to accompany that lovely voice. The guitar work is excellent too!

Such Rock greats as Neil Young, Fleetwood Mac, Jimi Hendrix (yes, acoustic Voodoo Chile), James Taylor, Bonnie Raitt, Peter Gabriel and Blind Faith were covered. It takes some ability to pull off that lonely experience of solo sets on just vocals and acoustic guitar but she does it to perfection. Not too much 'pure' Blues on the acoustic 'Shed Sessions' vol 1. That would also be true of Chantel's studio albums but the root is clearly there as I will now explore.

McGregor's first album on Tis Rock Music in 2011 (which seems to be owned by Chantel's family) was *Like No Other*. We have a haunting slow Blues in E minor called 'I'm No Good For You'. The last track on the album is 'Help Me'. It is a medium paced 12 bar blues also in E and based on a similar standard chord progression to Booker T's 'Green Onions' (although that is in F). Both well phrased vocally and with perfectly executed fills and solos. 'Help Me' seems to be a popular one when Chantel plays live, which is no surprise to me.

In 2015 still on the family label Chantel released '*Lose Control*' which is ironically what they are not doing! Indeed 'tis rock music with great variety. The sort of variety of influences associated with one of the family inspirations, Led Zeppelin. Now that is real praise!

You have Hard Rock 'Your Fever', 'Burn Your Anger' and the title track for example. Then there is great acoustic music such as 'Anaesthetise' and 'Home'. 'Eternal Dream' has the sort of Eastern influence Zeppelin also allowed from time to time. But, we still had great Blues/Rock with 'Southern Belle' in E. Great riff driving the song, I can almost hear Page, Plant, Jones and Bonham playing this, but I am very happy listening to Chantel's music. A real mystery to me why she isn't even more popular than she is.

If you travel down from Chantel's base in Bradford south on the M1 and then head east at about the level your author lives in north Buckinghamshire you might come to Royston (Hertfordshire) home of our next Diamond who also started out in music as a family business.

Danny Bryant

You are about 15 years of age in Royston Hertfordshire and you have just got your first guitar. You have a liking for the Blues after listening to Eric Clapton, Walter Trout and Rory Gallagher in your dad's record collection. So, how do you get a decent personal tutor to support your enthusiasm. Easy, you write to Walter Trout, he phones you up, and you then meet him regularly when he is in the UK for one to one tutorials on Blues guitar.

It might sound a bit fishy (Walter hates those 'jokes' apparently) that American Walter Trout of John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, Canned Heat and a successful solo career would do this for a British teenager? It is absolutely true and shows the measure of Trout when confronted by a genuine passion for the Blues. Danny Bryant ended up with scores of these lessons when Walter was over here in the UK.

So then how do you now get a power trio together when you are 18 to practice your developing Blues craft on the pub circuit. Easy again, you recruit dad Ken on bass and Trevor Barr on drums and off you go as The Danny Bryant Red Eyed Band. Dad eventually retired in 2013. In 2014 Danny fronted Walter's band on tour while Trout got the liver transplant he so desperately needed and so repaid some of the favour. Walter happily recovered after a very long period of recuperation and re-learning his guitar technique and even how to walk and speak!

Danny Bryant was born in 1980 in Royston and still lives in Hertfordshire. He now tours the world with a bigger band to get musical variety (keys and brass) and a bit of a rest from the pressure on a guitarist vocalist in a power trio. He favours the Fender Stratocaster for live

work generally, although he has a large collection of guitars. Danny plays the Strat into a Blackstar amp usually pedal free.

It is going to be pretty easy to evidence his Blues roots because 'pure' Blues is still so apparent even on his latest album. Not only that but he is about (as I write) to chronicle Blues roots and history on his website. Your author might have got there first but I am never likely to get the same following as Danny or the same ability on Blues guitar, so I will concede 'defeat' on that one.

As with so many of us, Danny explored the reported influences of Clapton et al and worked back to the three Kings, Son House and, of course, Robert Johnson. But he went further back in his research to Charlie Patton and the more obscure players like Willie Brown (mentioned in 'Crossroads Blues'). It will be great to see how he chronicles this on his website.

So how did all this tuition with Walter Trout work out? Your author would suggest with Danny sounding not unlike Mr Trout, particularly in his early days. That is meant to be a great compliment and I guess it would please Walter too. With both players the Blues roots run very deep. Even with Danny's latest album in 2021, *The Rage To Survive* on Jazzhaus Records more than half of the tracks lean towards a 12 bar blues arrangement or a modification of it. Great playing of his Blues licks with the bigger band is evident but I am going to use earlier work playing live with dad Ken on bass as the primary examples of Danny's Blues roots.

So, it is some of the tracks on *Danny Bryant's Red Eye Band Live* from 2007 on Continental Blues Heaven that I will use. He might not use many pedals now but the opener 'Heart-

breaker' (not the Zeppelin track) seems to employ a lovely tone and a bit of wah wah too. It thumps along in A with a standard Blues bass line and a typical Blues riff on lead producing a great Rock/Blues track. 'Slow Blues/Sweet Little Angel' follows which is precisely as heralded in the title in the key of C. Even Danny's good vocals sound a bit Trout like.

The third track sees Danny utilising Freddie King's instrumental Blues standard 'Hideaway' within 'Bring Your Fine Self Home' the Johnny Copeland song which Albert Collins and Robert Cray have covered too. Some readers will know that the Freddie King track nudged Eric Clapton into playing electric Blues leads. Danny does it full justice. The album goes on in this lovely vein with a 12 bar blues medium pacer 'Good Time Woman' finishing it off in great style with dad Ken even getting a name check. This is not The Rolling Stones track which is 'Good Time Women' - plural. It's all pretty 'pure' Blues.

My next Diamond is the only one not to be born in the USA or the UK but she has been 'adopted' by the USA now.

Ana Popovic

Ana has her home in Los Angeles CA. She arrived there via Belgrade (now Serbia) where she was born in 1976, Amsterdam, where she studied Jazz guitar and Memphis when she first migrated to The USA. Her initial musical experience was on keyboards at about 8 years of age. She settled on the guitar when aged 12.

This story is becoming familiar, because it was her father's record collection and influence which stimulated her deep Blues rooted development. Initially that was expressed by jamming with her dad's Blues band on Elmore James and Bukka White slide guitar licks. Stevie Ray Vaughan and Albert Collins were also prominent in that record collection.

Ultimately Ana says how she was determined to create her own sound, which has happened. That was helped on the way with tuition in Belgrade on Rock guitar and then formal Jazz tuition in Amsterdam. If you listen to Ana practicing her art today using Fender Strats, an array of pedals and a Fender Bassman amp you will hear this excellent fusion of the Blues, Jazz, Soul and Rock.

From 1995 to 1998 Ana's development in the band Hush was around her home country live on stage a couple of times per week. These sets featured the band's own compositions, but also plenty of Blues standards. You won't find Ana performing too many Blues standards today. However her excellence on guitar, which unquestionably kicked off in Belgrade with 'pure' Blues playing, still resonates beautifully with influences from the genre and its key exponents. Apple Music still categorises her latest album *Like It on Top* (ArtistExclusive Records) as 'Blues'.

Ana's early career gives the clearest insight into her Blues roots. I will therefore illustrate these using her first solo album '*Hush*' on Ruf Records. Self penned 'Hometown' is a good starting point perhaps? Some great slide guitar on this drawing on those early experiences with her dad's band in Belgrade?

There are a couple of Blues standards on the album. "The Hustle is On" gives us a straight up beat 12 bar blues in C, originally released by T-Bone Walker in 1950. A very bluesy solo from Ana on the album recorded in Memphis. Johnny Copeland's 'Bring You Fine Self Home' makes an appearance with my second Diamond in succession, this time in duet with Bernard Allison. The Blues slide guitar is out to great effect again. There is a lovely blues solo on the self penned 'Mended' too.

The slide has another notable outing on Buddy Guy's 'Man of Many Words' although Ana does change the gender! It is all great Blues playing just around the time she was about to give up her Jazz guitar studies at The Utrecht Conservatory of Music. The Jazz influences were soon to become pleasantly prominent in her work as they did to some extent for one of her great inspirations Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Before we leave the great guitar work of Ana Popovic it is well worth a listen to the Jazz and SRV influences in action on the instrumental 'Navajo Moon'. This appeared on her next Ruf Records album but well worth catching a live version on Youtube.

It's now back to Britain and another one of those 'Girls with Guitars' as Ruf billed them

Dani Wilde

Dani was born into a Blues and Soul loving family in Wiltshire, England (1985). She graduated with a first class degree from the Brighton Institute of Modern Music just over 20 years later and set out on a recording career with Ruf Records soon after. From the outset there was a strong Blues Root to Dani's music vocally and on guitar. She now lectures in music history and vocal performance in addition to her recording and live career, so feeding the next generation of potential musicians with these roots.

Her musical journey started, like her band mate to be, Samantha Fish, on drums. She was taken to plenty of live gigs, but it was apparently a Susan Tedeschi performance that inspired Dani to want to sing the Blues professionally. Her studies have left her in great awe of the female African American greats like Ma Rainey and Big Mama Thornton. Brother Will plays a great Blues harmonica sometimes with his sister's band and so we have another family 'business' .

Dani started to seek live work supporting established artists in clubs while still a student. Her studies were focusing on vocals and she was seeing the guitar mostly as a song writing tool initially. She impressed Jools Holland's brother at one of these gigs which led to an early booking supporting Jools at no less than The Royal Albert Hall London!

In contrast to Chantel McGregor's experience Ruf records actually wanted 'Girls with Guitars' and so Dani started to work hard on guitar techniques. A very busy period during this collaboration with Samantha Fish led to Dani performing at BB King levels (250 plus gigs per year). BB King was indeed one of her inspirations. So, her guitar technique was really honed on the road.

You can catch photos of Dani using a Fender Telecaster with a capo in recent years. It's nice for your author to be in such impressive company with that idea. I suspect she picked it up from key inspiration Albert Collins.

If we are looking for Blues roots in Dani's music we need to go no further than her second solo album on Ruf Records *Shine*. This 2010 offering was produced by the Mike Vernon who has legendary 'previous' with John Mayall and Peter Green's early Fleetwood Mac for example. There are no Blues standards covered, although Jagger and Richards 'Miss You' is. A bit like her hero Susan (Tedeschi/Trucks) there is a lovely mix of Blues with Soul, but I am going to focus most on the strong Blues offerings.

Track 2 'Some Kinda Crazy' is medium slow classic 12 bar blues in B. Solos with a sparing number of notes which all count. BB King would have been impressed I'm sure. Will adds the lovely Blues harmonica to fill the sound. Great climax to the song too.

'Red Blooded Woman' sees Will get a solo in a modified 12 bar arrangement at medium pace again in B. Lovely quiet first verse on guitar and vocal before drums, bass and harmonica enter.

'Abandoned Child' in A minor is another slow Blues with harmonica complimenting a spaced solo with plenty of that BB style emotion and clean tones to match. 'Where The Blues Begin' in E minor finds that Tedeschi/Trucks blend of Blues with Soul having kicked off with lovely electric Blues guitar.

If you want to see Dani playing The Blues with brother Will I suggest Googling 'Don't Quit Me Baby' on YouTube. A great 12 bar blues in B again featuring their talents. The techni-

cians amongst you will be fascinated with Dani's finger picking style on guitar which reminds me of how many bass players pluck their strings. She gets a lovely tone in this manner.

I am going to conclude with an emerging duo from the UK. To indulge in the irritating pastime of 'twinning' groups, some of their songs remind me of Larkin Poe.

When Rivers Meet (WRM)

Aaron and Grace Bond are not siblings, they are married. They come from rural Norfolk in the UK. There are similarities with Larkin Poe in their musical roots. Some of their songs catch a similar vibe to the Lovell sisters with WRM giving the lead vocal most of the time to the excellent Grace and slide guitar often features from Aaron. He leads on a few vocals and adds harmony on many however giving something very different to Larkin Poe.

Aaron's guitar drives the music on with Grace's mandolin adding an unusual layer on some songs. She also plays violin. They add friends Adam Bowers and Robin Breeze to provide bass, drums and keys in the studio.

They are not a copy of Larkin Poe any more than the Lovell sisters are a copy of The Allman Brothers. WRM are creating their own great sound. They have only recently (2021) released their first album *We Fly Free* (on their own label One Road Records). It has grabbed your author's attention and that of many others. They report being influenced by John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Free and Led Zeppelin, for example, which explains why they grabbed my attention!

It was as recently as 2019 when the duo gave up their day jobs and hit the road in a VW tourer. They literally slept with their gear, a couple of valve amps, the mandolin and Aaron's Gibson Les Paul included. They had been playing a lot of acoustic music but seeing Tyler Bryant and The Shakedown backing Gun's N' Roses was a wake up to the more electric sound they really wanted to achieve.

The VW camper tour was stopped in its tracks by the Pandemic. During lockdown the duo transmitted regularly on Facebook to great acclaim and *We Fly Free* was a Lockdown release. It won several Blues awards and got played on Planet Rock in the UK (where I first heard them on my wife's recommendation). As I write the second album *Saving Grace* is just released.

'Who Wants to Be a Free Man' (from the EP 'The Uprising 2019) with its very deep south start on a quiet slide guitar and then the raunchy slide riff with Grace coming in on excellent vocals gives a similar feel to Larkin Poe initially. Grace's vocal intonations sound like those of Rebecca Lovell, but then in comes Aaron with a different type of harmony to Megan. We also have the mandolin solo to add a unique feel. It is their own sound and its great Blues/Rock!

'Battleground' from *We Fly Free* is a great rocker with nice varied dynamics and an almost pop style hook. We get a bit of Blues style stop time to enjoy the vocals of Grace to a driving Aaron chord progression in D.

The title track of the first album 'We Fly Free' brings more great dynamics, stop time, Blues roots and Led Zeppelin influence I would suggest. Another killer track in my opinion, nothing terribly complicated musically, but all in a great groove which must have taken some hard work. Sums up good Blues for me rather nicely. What a great voice Grace has! In my view probably the best female voice I can recall for a while in this genre and there have been a few on these pages!

My only concern for bands like WRM in the UK is if there is a big enough market for them to thrive. They certainly deserve to, but perhaps some of our European neighbours and

our American 'cousins' are much more appreciative of this great Blues rooted music than we are now in the UK? A little ironic when we produced two of the biggest bands of all time (Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones) with their roots firmly in this camp?

Summary

Buddy Guy is right 'The Blues are Alive and Well' and the music is evolving as it always has. 'Girls with Guitars' is not a new concept. Memphis Minnie was one of the first Blues players to 'go electric' around 1941. However your author's all time Diamond Dozen had no female representation. Once I limited my choice for the 21st century Diamonds to those born after 1975 I have suddenly selected a big female majority. Only one man's choice though, and given my 'previous' I might have adopted an unconscious and unfavourable bias against men this time? If I had not picked Joe Bonnamasa and John Mayer in my all time Dozen they would have been in this group making it a near to a 50:50 split.

There seems to be a perceived 'wisdom' in the current British music industry that you will never come to fame and fortune majoring in The Blues genre? If this is the case perhaps it is a self fulfilling prophecy? The Blues is the root for so much of our contemporary music but in its 'pure' form only one track has become a number one single in the UK. That was Willie Dixon's 'Little Red Rooster' preformed by The Rolling Stones. Nevertheless, The Rolling Stones, Cream and Led Zeppelin all started off playing a lot of 'pure' Blues in the UK and made their fortunes when they took their music across the Atlantic back to where it came from!

It is interesting that three of my British Diamonds have signed to German record companies. Joanne Shaw-Taylor did that initially (with Ruf Records) then moved to live in the USA and has now contracted to Sony. Dani Wilde teamed up with two Americans under the wing of Thomas Ruf's label. Danny Bryant is now with German company Jazzhaus Records. Parts of Europe seem to present a better live market for UK Blues artists than

their own country? Thomas Ruf should be given a lot of credit for helping to keep the Blues alive.

More than two thirds of my 20th century Diamonds are American citizens. If Joe and John had been included that ratio might have become even more in favour of Americans. My all time selection was more like a 50:50 split with the UK 'punching' well above its Blues 'weight'. You might recall that Blues rooted Jimi Hendrix had to come to Britain to launch his career in the 1960s. The exact opposite occurs now. I get the impression that, in the UK, we are now perhaps neglecting the very root of our tremendous success for such a small country in Rock music?

