

Interview with Danny Caron – by Kevin Downing

My good friend Danny Caron has a long background playing the blues. He has played and recorded with some of the world's best artists including John Lee Hooker, Van Morrison, Charles Brown, Maria Mulder, Donald Fagan, and many others. Many of the recordings he has appeared on have been nominated for Grammy Awards.

I am glad to say that Danny has agreed to do a short interview with me so hopefully you can take something from it and improve your blues playing. Throughout this interview there are many tips and words of advice you can take and use yourself. Here it is.

Were you born into a musical family?

My mother played piano when she was young, and was quite good, but I never heard her, she quit before I can remember. She also sang to me all the time and had a lovely voice. I think she really wanted to be a singer. My dad sang too, but wasn't musically trained or anything.

What was your first instrument and what influenced you to begin guitar?

My first instrument was the accordion, which I picked up when I was about 7 years old. I had regular lessons for a couple of years and learned to read music, bass and treble clefs, circles of fifths, chord types, etc. Crucial stuff! The Beatles probably influenced me to play the guitar as much as anything.

What type of music did you set out playing?

I started playing folk music, actually. My mom had all these old "Sing Out" folk music magazines and books with the Weavers songs in them, old Child Ballads and sea chanteys. So I learned that stuff and some Appalachian stuff from summer camp, also some ragtime. Then of course Beatles tunes, then later Dylan and Peter Paul and Mary and Simon and Garfunkle and The Band. I also heard BB King and even Coltrane, Mingus, Miles, Bill Evans and others-Joe Pass and Wes and Kenny Burrell, when I was still 13 or 14, but the jazz stuff was a mystery to me playing wise-way too advanced and mysterious. Loved listening though, and started collecting jazz as well as folk, blues and rock etc.

What sort of music education have you had?

I had lessons on the accordion, then a few guitar lessons when I switched to guitar at age 11, mostly chords and stuff from someone's big brother in the neighborhood. Then I just listened to records and read out of songbooks and tried to imitate what I heard so I could pretend I wrote all of Dylan's songs and give little imaginary concerts in my bedroom. It was a blast for me. I was

hooked. And girls liked it! In college I studied guitar more seriously, and jazz theory. I played in the college jazz ensemble and some small groups. The university was Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, which is also known for its music conservatory. So that kicked my ass. There were students who could really play. It was intimidating and inspiring. After college, I went back to the Washington DC area where I grew up and played in a professional trio that played hotel lounges 6 nights a week. It was a great education, including the fact that I didn't like it! I found out you could actually play music for a living and hate it. Then I decided to get better on the guitar, so I went to Los Angeles and studied at Howard Roberts Guitar Institute (GIT), which had just started. Great players taught there: Howard Roberts, Joe Diorio, Don Mock, Ron Eschete, Tommy Tedesco, Howard Alden, Jamie Findlay, and others. Good bass players, too. And we had workshops with Pat Martino, Pat Metheny, Lenny Breau and others. So that was a good year, and the last serious study that I did.

You have performed with many top names in the world. Many guitarists will never get the opportunity to perform at that level, what do you like about it? What don't you like?

Of course the best thing is to work with great players who are also nice people. And that's certainly been true in many instances for me. And working with people who's music I absolutely love, like Charles Brown, Clifton Chenier, Dr. John, Van Morrison, Bonnie Raitt, Barbara Morrison, Clark Terry, Major Holly, John Clayton, Paul Humphries, Teddy Edwards, Clifford Solomon, Gerald Wilson, Etta Jones, Houston Person, Red Callender, Gaylord Birch, John Wiitala, Robben Ford, Charlie Musslewhite, John Lee Hooker, John Hammond Jr, Carla Thomas, just to name a few who come to mind who's music I find really inspiring, well, I feel like I've had more than enough good fortune for any one guitar player of modest talents to be sure!

Really, what's not to like? Artists can be difficult, but it's usually OK in the end, and I'm no prize myself. I've been fortunate to have mostly great experiences.

You were the MD (Musical Director) for Charles Brown before he died, how did you come to meet and work with him?

I knew Charles Brown's music, but I thought he must be dead and gone since I didn't hear anything about him playing concerts. This was in the early 80s. Then a friend of mine in Berkeley told me Charles Brown lived around there. Then he played me a CD Charles had made in 1986 called "One More For The Road" on Blueside records. It was great and featured Billy Butler on guitar. (It's available now on Alligator Records.) I thought, if he can make music this great, he should be well known. My friend Michael "Hawkeye" Herman-a country blues and slide guitar player-hired Charles to play on his CD. Charles asked him to do a Christmas show with him in Oakland and he didn't feel up to the jazz Charles wanted to play. He told him he knew someone who would love to do it, and gave him my number, and I his. I went to Charles Brown's

apartment in the fall of '86 in Berkeley and he played me lots of great songs. We really hit it off, so I rehearsed with him for about a year and we hired musicians and that became a 10-year association.

How did you come to meet and work with Van Morrison?

Van came to see The Charles Brown Band at The Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco and loved it. He invited us to his show across the street at the Masonic and then we went back to the Fairmont and drank some wine. Then he came to see us in Birmingham, England at Ronnie Scott's and we drank some more wine. Then, when he was producing John Lee Hooker's "Don't Look Back" CD he asked Charles and myself and Ruth Davies to play on it. So we were in the studio for 4 days in Sausalito. Got some great moments on there. I loved it.

How did you come to meet and work with Robben Ford?

I first met Robben at GIT in Los Angeles in 1979, but that was just at a workshop. Later when Rodger Fox put the tour together, I met Robben and played with him for the first time. And for those shows. It was great.

What guitars do you use?

For blues and R&B I use my 65 Stratocaster. For jazz and swing I use my 63 Gibson L-5 CES. I have others-a 72 335, another handmade Strat, a 53 Gibson ES150, an Ovation slim line acoustic, my old Gibson B-25 acoustic, a mandolin and some other stuff. But I play my guitars till they fall apart. Literally.

What effects do you use?

None

What strings do you use?

On the Strat electric 10's, GHS or Ernie Ball, whatever. Sometimes an 11 on the high E.

What amplifiers do you use?

Around town I've been using a new Fender Blues Deluxe with one 12 I like fine. I've got a '63 Deluxe that sounds great; it's on the John Lee record-listen to the solo on Red House. That's just the Strat through the deluxe, volume on maybe 3.

What picks do you use?

Fender Mediums for blues or Pickboys for jazz.

What albums have you done under your own name?

My first and only so far is "Good Hands" out now on the Danny Caron Music label.

Where are they available?

From my website www.dannycaron.com/recordings.html or CD Baby www.cdbaby.com/cd/dannycaron You can also listen to samples of the tracks from these links.

What are some albums you have done with others?

With "Clifton Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band:

Alligator Records; "I'M HERE" (Grammy Award: Best Traditional Blues Album, 1980)

With John Lee Hooker:

Point Blank Records (Virgin): "CHILL OUT" "DONT LOOK BACK" Produced by Van Morrison, with Van Morrison, Charles Brown (Double Grammy Awards for Blues Album and Collaboration 1999)

WITH Charles Brown (Danny is Musical Director on all sessions):

1990-1999

Rounder Records: Charles Brown

"ALL MY LIFE" With Dr. John and Ruth Brown (Grammy Nomination 92).

"SOMEONE TO LOVE" With Bonnie Raitt.

(Grammy Nomination 93)

"LUCKY SO AND SO"

"COOL CHRISTMAS BLUES"

Verve Records: Charles Brown

"THESE BLUES".

"THE HONEYDRIPPER" with Etta Jones.

"SO GOES LOVE" with Teddy Edwards, John Clayton, Gerald Wilson, Paul Humphries.

Muse Records: Charles Brown

"BLUES AND OTHER LOVE SONGS" with Houston Person.

Warner Brothers Records: Charles Brown

"NEW YORK ROCK AND SOUL REVIEW" with Donald Fagen.

A & M Records: Charles Brown

"A VERY SPECIAL CHRISTMAS" with Bonnie Raitt.

Point Blank Records With John Hammond Junior:

"TROUBLE NO MORE" with Charles Brown, Little Charlie and the Nightcats, others

Point Blank Records With Hadda Brooks:

"STAIRWAY TO THE STARS"

With Maria Muldaur

"MEET ME WHERE THEY PLAY THE BLUES"-Telarc Records 2001

"SWINGING IN THE RAIN"-CHILDRENS ALBUM 2002

"ANIMAL CRACKERS:SHIRLEY TEMPLE TRIBUTE" 2003

"A WOMAN ALONE WITH THE BLUES: SONGS OF PEGGY LEE" Telarc Records 2003

With Barbara Morrison, 2002

"Live at the 9:20 Special" Springboard Records.

What are some major obstacles you have had to endure along the way of being a professional guitarist/musician?

Hmm-not playing as well as I'd like is numero uno.

What advice could you give to anyone who is at an intermediate level and wants to play blues?

Listen to the old records, look at films, and be passionate about it, otherwise, forget it. There are too many shitty blues players already. The real blues are just about dead anyway. It's a cultural thing, not just a guitar thing.

What about someone who is just staring out?

Same thing

You been to New Zealand many times before, what do you like about this place?

What's not to like? Great people, lifestyle, environment, far from most of the world's madness...love it.

Thanks very much Danny for sharing some of your thoughts with us.

At the moment Danny's CD is receiving 5 stars reviews at www.cdbaby.com/cd/dannycaron so I recommend you have a listen to the tracks and look at what others are saying and what I already know. This first solo outing of Danny's is HOT blues played by one real great and special guy.

To visit Danny's website www.dannycaron.com

Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher, and author. He can be contacted at www.guitar.co.nz For some FREE guitar lessons or to study with him in person visit <http://www.guitar.co.nz>

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