

# Bluesletter

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# Paul Green – Straight Shot of the Blues

by Susan Waterworth

Multiple BB Award winner Paul Green is a harmonica player's harmonica player. Fellow players at his gigs can be heard to marvel, "How does he do that?" Green is known for what he describes as "vertical" playing - short, fast phrases with small bursts of notes - as opposed to the more common linear style which features longer, smoother notes. His soulful vocals have also won acclaim. With a long history as a professional musician, he can currently be seen performing in his acoustic duo with James "Curley" Cook (with whom he has been both nominated and awarded BBs) and as leader of his recently reconstituted band Straight Shot, with superb veteran players Tim Sherman on guitar, Howard Hooper on bass, and Conrad Ormsby on drums. The band recently recorded a live CD at the Sunbanks Festival, which is due for release in July; it will be followed later in the year by a studio disc. The interview that follows is an abbreviated version; for the full text, which includes stories about jamming with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band in New Jersey "back in the day," and more about his musical influences, please go to the WBS website at [www.wablues.org](http://www.wablues.org).

Born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Paul's household was imbued with music and art. His mother was a dancer with the N.Y. Metropolitan Opera in her late teens and early 20s, and his father was a lifelong ceramicist who has pieces in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Smithsonian, and numerous other museums. His exposure to music was broad, including classical, pop (Sinatra, Nat Cole, etc.), Broadway shows ("My Fair Lady," "West Side Story"), and jazz (Erroll Garner, Art Blakey), along with the rock and roll he brought home.

Green grew up in an upper middle class white community, where "I can assure you that there were no local blues bars in the late '50s, early '60s. But I was surrounded by towns with a large black population and heard some very hip radio stations, primarily out of Newark, like WNJR. I also remember watching "Jocko's Rocketship," which was like a black American Bandstand. From a very early age I was listening to R&B. Occasionally these shows would also play some blues and I think that's where I got my first exposure. I must have been about 12 years old when I asked my mom if she could get me a John Lee Hooker album that I had heard on the radio. Damned if she didn't find one. It was really raw, just him playing by himself, tapping his foot like he did on his early recordings. I loved that deep blues sound and started looking for more blues resources. I discovered a late Sunday night blues broadcast from nearby Rutgers College. I listened to that show religiously for a couple years. I began to get exposed to a broad range of urban artists like Muddy, Wolf, and Jimmy Reed, as well as country blues artists like Son House and Skip James. I started to order albums by these musicians through our local record shop since none of their recordings were in stock."

The music "felt so good immediately it's hard to define which aspect attracted me as strongly as it did. I think it was the raw energy of the music and the honesty of the musicians expressing themselves so totally uninhibitedly. When you first hear Muddy sing "I'm a Man," or Wolf sing "Smokestack Lightning," you knew there were no pretensions. They were singing from their hearts and meant every word they said. The other thing that I loved, and still

do, was that the music was really tough. It was mean and raw, but very musical as well. I don't know if that makes sense but it's the best way that I can describe how the emotional content reached out and grabbed me. I also liked the fact that it wasn't always totally polished and smooth like most commercial records. That added to the intensity and (here's that word again) honesty of the music."

I wondered what had drawn Paul to the harmonica. "I had been listening to blues for years and always loved the sound of harmonica. In 1968 a friend played an album for me that just completely floored me. It was the first Paul Butterfield album. I had heard harmonica before, but usually on older recordings. I think because this was done in a modern studio, the combination of the clarity of the recording and the raw energy of the band just completely shook me. I decided right then to start playing harmonica, and in fact did. I was 20 years old at the time, so I actually got kind of a late start as a musician.

"As far as my own playing, I've worked very hard to develop my own distinctive sound. When you first start out to learn your art,

be it musical, visual, whatever, you always start by copying (OK, stealing from) the masters. The hard part comes when you try and take the technical tools you've acquired from them and rearrange that knowledge to come up with something a little different. I remember at one point in my learning process in the late '60s and early '70s saying to myself, let's see how many wrong notes I can play. I played all over the harmonica trying to play the craziest things I could think of and finally realized that there were no wrong notes on the instrument. I was starting to explore patterns and phrases that were not quite the same as the other players I'd been listening to. That concept really got me trying a lot of unconven-

tional sounds and different little phrases that helped me get to where I am today musically. It's not about this guy being better than that one; it's about doing something unique. That's what I respect the most in an artist. I can listen to every single blues and jazz artist I [love] and after just a few notes or bars of music I can identify that person because every one of them is distinctive in their singing and/or playing."

Much as he loves the harp, Paul wishes he had pursued other instruments as well. "I tried playing piano, guitar, saxophone, and even vibes (vibraphone), none of which I stuck with or made much progress with. I wanted to play jazz on those instruments as well as blues. To this day I regret that harmonica is my only instrument. I envy a guy like Steve Bailey who plays both harmonica and guitar and plays them both so well."

Paul has played in blues bands exclusively his whole career, starting in the Asbury Park, New Jersey area around 1969/70. "I was going to a club called the Cat's Meow regularly to listen to a great blues duo, Dave Meyer and Paul Dickler. I had only been playing harmonica for about a year, but was getting around pretty good on that old boy for the short time I'd been playing. One night a friend I was with, unbeknownst to me, went up to the band on their break and told them that I was a harmonica player and wanted to sit in. When the band started again they called me up. I was completely shocked and ready to kill my buddy for his little covert action. I was



with Jr. Wells 1981  
photo by Marc PoKempner

terrified, having never played for anyone and certainly not in front of an audience, but I was on the spot. They set up an extra chair for me and stuck a mike stand in front of me and started to play. I joined in tentatively and after a few choruses they cued me to solo. Well, I started playing my ass off, as best as one year of experience allowed. But right from the start, it didn't sound too bad, if I do say so myself, and that was it for me. I mean I really got off playing live for an audience, and people liked it. The band liked it and invited me back to play the next week. The next thing I knew I was in the band, getting paid to do something that I really loved. Can't beat that. Once I started playing regularly with these guys, The Blackberry Booze Band, my playing really started to make progress. Playing in front of a live audience is the best and fastest way to improve. If you play in your room you have a tendency to kind of noodle around as opposed to having to be on and play your best for an audience."

In 1975 Paul left New Jersey and moved to Berkeley; "just packed everything I owned into my VW and headed west. I had always wanted to live in California and moved there sight unseen. Didn't know a soul out there, but it turned out to be just what the doctor ordered. The Bay Area was both beautiful and a cultural mecca. I got a little job and started checking out the scene. Lots of political and social awareness, and all kinds of cultural happenings – music, dance, theater, visual arts, you name it. The University Of California at Berkeley created a very hip atmosphere as well as all the Berkeley street characters. I had never seen anything like that back in old New Jersey.

"The way I really got hooked into the music scene was like this. I had been living there about a year and one evening on Public Television there was a blues show featuring some local musicians. I was absolutely knocked out by their performance and knew immediately I had to hook up with these people. This was what I had been searching for. The two featured artists in the band were JJ Malone and Sonny Rhodes. I was glued to the set but the moment the show was over I flew to the phone and called the station to find out how to contact JJ. Of course they were reluctant to give me JJ's phone number but God bless them, I finally pried it out of them. By noon the next day I had JJ on the phone and persuaded him to let me come over to his house and jam. He was a little nervous about this unknown nut calling him, but when I got to his crib with his knocked up piano and we started jamming everything fell into place like peanut butter and jelly, dots on dice, white on rice. You know what I mean. Within the week I was gigging with him and Sonny. It wasn't until a little later that I even found out that as good as JJ was on piano, he was even BETTER on guitar.

"We started playing all the little blues clubs in the Bay Area including east and west Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco. Clubs like The Deluxe Inn, Cozy Den, The Thunderbird, The Playboy Club (not Hugh Hefner's, believe me), Your Place, Till Two, Crab Tree Brothers, and on and on. I was having a solid ball. These were little crummy neighborhood bars often tucked away in the industrial districts, which were deserted at night. But once inside, they were full of life and usually quite crowded. People were drinking and hollering and just generally having a great time. Some of these places served ham hocks or chittlins and collared greens, which were always tasty. And dancing, always dancing. The coolest dance moves you'd ever want to see. You'd be playing and because there was no stage the audience would be right up close so there was this very heavy communication between the musicians and the

audience. Often both men and women would be so moved by the music they would come right up to you while you were playing and start waving their hands in front of you hollering something. It was an amazing and intense communication experience. It was almost like church. These were not audiences that sat there quietly and simply looked at you while you played. They were on the ride with every note.

"Once I started playing the circuit I began to meet many other talented local blues musicians like Cool Papa, JJ "Bad Boy" Jones, Johnny Waters, Sonny Lane (Little Walter's cousin), Charles Huff, Hi Tide Harris, Little Frankie Lee, and others who I can't even remember now.

"While playing with JJ I also met Troyce Key. Troyce was something else. He was one of the first rock and roll artists ever signed with RCA in the early '50s. Troyce sang with a sleepy southern drawl and played reasonably good guitar. But he was clean. Always dressed sharp in suits and hats. He also always had a jar of Southern Comfort he'd be sipping on. Troyce and JJ went way back, and both eventually ended up living in Oakland. They reformed their band The Rhythm Rockers, that consisted of JJ and Troyce on guitars and vocals, myself, Charlie Banks on bass and Richard Milton on drums. It was a great blues band.

"What happened was we got hooked up with this bar in West Oakland Called Eli's Mile High Club. We became the house band and started playing there every weekend. Eli's was just a little local club, which was patronized by the neighborhood population. The club was owned and run by Eli Thornton and his wife Alberta. Now what happened next gets pretty interesting. Eli had a girlfriend on the side named, and this is true, Frankie. She was stone cold nuts. One day she came in the bar and got into an argument with Eli and shot him dead as a door nail right there in the pool room. To this day the bullet holes are still in the wall. Well, after that, Alberta, who was a really sweet woman and had put up with a whole lot of shit with Eli anyway, wanted no part of the bar anymore and put



with JJ Malone 1983  
photo by Simo Neri

it up for sale. Guess who bought it??? Troyce Key!

"Now we were set. We had a guaranteed gig. Troyce fixed up the place some with lot's of pictures of his early recording days and with pictures of many famous blues artists he met and knew from his earlier tours and rock and roll shows. He opened a kitchen and Miss Barbara started cooking some scrumptious fried chicken and tasty gumbo. Then this amazing phenomenon occurred. Troyce started advertising in the local papers and a few kids from the University at Berkeley ventured down and discovered how cool and funky the bar was, let alone the great blues going down. Suddenly Eli's became the in place. From this sleepy little bar it suddenly was packed every weekend. Ray the doorman had to keep people standing in line outside until there was room. Troyce was charging 5 bucks at the door, which was unheard of for a little joint like this. Meanwhile I was having a ball playing the best blues I had ever imagined. The band and bar won several "Best Of " awards in local surveys. Troyce brought in some great guest artists to play with the band. I got to back up Lowell Fulson, Percy Mayfield, John Little John, PeeWee Crayton, Johnny Fuller, Joe Louis Walker, and many more. Eventually after about four years the band broke up. You know how all good things come to an end. Sadly, Troyce succumbed to leukemia about ten years ago, and now JJ lives in Hawaii. Eli's eventually was sold and is now a church. But those were some great years for me. Playing consistently with a band of that caliber really

*continued page 13*

Paul Green continued

helped me get myself together musically.”

By this time Paul had a family. He left the Bay Area in 1989 and moved to Evanston, Illinois, which is just outside of Chicago. He lived there for two years and heard a lot of great players, including Sugar Blue, with whom he hung out a little, but wasn't there long enough to really establish himself on the scene.

“When I moved to Seattle in 1991 I again was in the situation of not knowing anyone and having to start over as far as integrating myself into the music scene. I did what I think most musicians do in that situation, that is, I started going to jam sessions. It's really the best way to start checking out any local music scene if you're looking for work. I remember Lily Wilde was hosting a session at a club in Pioneer Square, which I attended regularly. It didn't take too long to start meeting people and separating the wheat from the chaff.”

Paul notices a distinct difference in the Bay Area and Seattle scenes, which he attributes to the large black population in the Bay Area that still actively digs the music and goes out to the clubs. “There are still little neighborhood bars that have blues bands as well as a number of larger commercial clubs that feature blues either exclusively or on a fairly regular basis. Since I moved here in 1991, even in that time, it seems to me like there has definitely been a decline in blues venues and support of the blues in Seattle.”

Fortunately the lack of Seattle audiences is somewhat ameliorated by the plethora of talented musicians. “I can't begin to remember all the talented musicians I've played with since I've been here. There is a wealth of good musicians here like there is in any large urban area of the country. The original Straight Shot band was comprised of myself, Veneet on guitar, Tom Erak on bass – one bad boy both instrumentally and vocally – Ken Cole on keyboards, and Chris “Zippy” Layton on drums. Victor Little also played bass. Eventually Bryant Urban played guitar. It was a really good band and was nominated for best new band by the Washington Blues Society.”

One of his longest running musical partners is Steve Miller Band alumnus “Curley” Cook. “I met Curley several years ago. He was doing a weekly solo gig at Bad Albert's. I had heard his name around town and went down to check him out. Curley asked me to sit in with him and we immediately hit it off. Our styles blended together extremely well. Musically, we were both on the same page. After that I started doing the gig with him weekly. I have the utmost respect for Curley. He is a fabulous musician. He has a great feel for the blues, which can be summed up in one word – soul. That's what this music is all about, the emotional content. I always say you can tell when someone is playing *at* the blues as opposed to really playing the blues. In other words some people are playing (imitating) the music like they think it's supposed to sound, as opposed to really feeling it. Does that make sense?

Anyway, I've had a ball playing with Curley. His technical skills are terrific. It's also given me the opportunity to work on my tone since I always play acoustically with him. I've really grown to like playing that way as opposed to playing amplified harp, which was how I used to play most of the time. Occasionally Curley and I do a quartet with drums and bass but I really prefer just the two of us playing together. The music is pure and uncluttered.”

Still, as much as he loves his acoustic gig, Paul recently had to scratch the itch to front his own badass electric band again. “Having said how much I like playing acoustically, I have recently revived Straight Shot, my electric band. I did it because I was missing the different kind of energy you get from that type of music. There is a different type of power generated by each type of configuration, be it an acoustic duo or electric quartet. I've been having a ball playing with this particular group. The current members are Tim Sherman on guitar, Howard Hooper on bass, and Conrad Ormsby on drums. These guys have been living in Seattle and playing together for many years. Each is a consummate musician and it was so easy to just step in and start playing with them. They all are highly experienced and, most importantly, really understand the blues. In addition they are genuinely nice people and easy to get along with and communicate with. They're all in it

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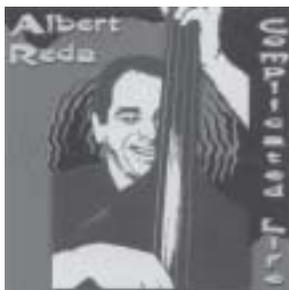
# Juke Box



## Complicated Life Albert Reda

Review by Patrick Lee

Albert Reda is one of the most respected bass players on the Portland blues scene. The Cascade Blues Association has honored him with the coveted "Muddy Award" for best bass player 5 times as well induction to the CBA "Muddy Award Hall Of Fame". A long time fixture on the Portland circuit, Albert has played with Jim Mesi, Terry Robb, Paul delay, Paulette Davis, and Bill Rhoades. Most recently he has been playing with guitarist Robbie Laws and a Trad Jazz septet called "The Woodies".



"Complicated Life" is Albert's 1<sup>st</sup> solo recording and finds him in a mellow mood. The CD on Burnside Records is a good mix of blues standards and Albert originals. Albert is the dominant musician on the CD, carrying all the vocals, bass parts, as well as some occasional tasty piano fills. Portland's answer to Mark Riley, Terry Robb plays guitar on most of the tracks, alternating between electric and acoustic instruments. Terry is an outstanding player who doesn't show up around these parts enough. If you have a chance to hear him play, don't miss it as he brings a real feel for the guitar to his shows. On Albert's CD, Terry's playing is typically understated and tasty.

The CD kicks off with the old Blind Blake classic, "Dyin' Blues" and ends with a Ray Davies (of The Kinks) tune, "Complicated Life". In between, the highlights for me included Allen Toussaint's "Brickyard Blues" and a mournful cover of "Long Black Veil". Albert has a great blues voice and strength and cleverness as a songwriter. His original tunes, "When The Lights Go Out", "Pray So Hard", and "Twenty Years From Now", all are very cool songs. The production on "Complicated Life" is first rate and displays the eclecticism of Albert's playing to its fullest. I look forward to his next recording effort.

## One Night in America Charlie Musselwhite

Review by Patrick Lee

One of our national treasures is Charlie Musselwhite. He is one of the nicest and most genuine musicians you can meet. He is always glad to meet his fans and share his stories of life on the road. And his wife graduated from Olympia High School, my alma mater.



"One Night In America" is a recent studio effort by Charlie that is an excellent example of who Charlie Musselwhite is today. While not a true blues CD in the classic "Southside Chicago" style that made Charlie famous, "One Night In America" is instead a collection of tales that cut across genres and hit all the aspects of roots music. There are blues on this CD, there are country tunes on this CD, there are folk songs on this CD, and there is just great music on this CD. Charlie himself writes the liner notes and talks about how this recording came together. He grew up in Memphis and remembers Johnny Cash driving through the neighborhood in his Thunderbird. He tried to capture the sounds and feeling of Memphis in the 50's on this CD and succeeds to a large degree. The production and recording are both excellent showing off Charlie's singing and harmonica playing. Charlie recruited a superb band for the sessions. T-Bone Wolk and Per Hanson make a great rhythm section. G.E. Smith (the Saturday Night Live Band & Bob Dylan) and Robben Ford contribute the various guitar parts and both sound as good as they always do. Marty Stuart also adds some guitar and Christine Ohlman (SNL Band) and Kelly Willis provide some nice harmonies to Charlie's vocals.

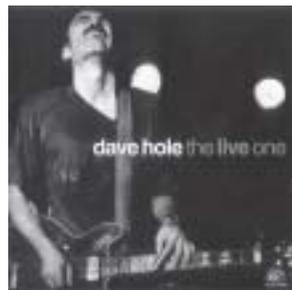
The CD kicks off with "Trail Of Tears" featuring solos by both G. E. and Robben. "Cold Grey Light Of Dawn" is one of two Ivory Joe Hunter tunes in the CD and in Charlie's words "reminds him of all those awful bleak times he had back when he was drinking." "Blues Overtook Me" is a long time Musselwhite standard and stands up well to this reading. "In A Town This Size" has a strong country feel to it and a nice Marty Stuart solo inside. Kelly is especially effective on this cut. "Walking Alone" brings back memories of Charlie's accident in Mexico and was written by his friend Pontus Snibb. "Rank Strangers" is spare piece that reminds Charlie of his lonely childhood. "One Time, One Night," the Los Lobos classic is a fun song for Charlie to cover and also gave him the title of the CD. "Big River" is another highlight of the CD for me. With a loping beat, Charlie brings new life to this old Johnny Cash

nugget. The CD closes with two Charlie originals, "Ain't It Time" and "I'll meet you Over There." Time is a slow blues with haunting Musselwhite vocal and lyrics. The latter, an up tempo piece, features a nice little solo by Robben Ford.

"One Night In America" is one of those CDs that grows on the audience with repeated listening. Charlie and his producer obviously spent a lot of time thinking about the sessions and we get to enjoy the results of their efforts. This CD joins the list of great Charlie Musselwhite CDs.

## The Live One Dave Hole

Alligator Records 2003



Review by Robert Horn

While necessity is the mother of invention in the sciences, often accident in the pursuit of entertainment is the mother of invention in the arts. Dave Hole however, created an innovative style of slide guitar playing out of necessity. He injured his left hand so he slipped the slider to his index finger and draping it over the top edge of the neck, created an extraordinary technique. The vibrato got an enhanced expressiveness that is now his musical fingerprint or signature. The first time I heard his music was on an earlier CD called Steel on Steel. Just a few seconds into the 1st song I said aloud, "Wow! What the hell was that?" It had a profound powerful sound.

Slide guitar has been around a while and its history is interesting. W.C. Handy first saw it done in 1903 in a Tutwiler, Mississippi train station. Soon Charlie Patton, Blind Willie Johnson, Son House and Robert Johnson added their licks and style to it. Sometimes people refer to slide guitar players as "bottleneckers" because many have used a whiskey bottle or a beer bottle as the slide. Last year I caught Nick Vigarino's act a few times, and it was fun to watch him walk around in the bar picking up any object in the place (beer glasses, a fork, an ashtray, maybe an eggplant, or a coffee cup), and using all those things as a slide. While Charlie Patton, Son House, (and others) were early pioneers of slide guitar, the post-war period transformed the sound. After WWII and the migration from the rural south to the northern cities (like Chicago) and the introduction of electricity to the guitar, Elmore James and Muddy Waters made the sound what it is today.

Some of today's slide guitar players, however, continue to innovate and Dave Hole is one of them. This is his latest CD. It is his style doing mainly his own stuff but it also includes a rendition of Purple Haze here that I like it better than Jimi's. The rest of this is Dave's original stuff, and that was is the best. Songs like Demolition Man, Short Fuse Blues, Every Girl I See, Up All Night Thinking, and Take Me To Chicago are were all slide guitar songs I enjoyed.

When Dave Hole comes to the Northwest to play at a festival, BE THERE.

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*Paul Green continued*

for their love of the music. With so many egomaniac wanna bes running around, that goes a long way."

Paul is frequently asked to give harp lessons, but his family and his job as a vocational rehabilitation counselor don't leave him sufficient time. "I do enjoy teaching. I wish I could make a living teaching and playing. I do see some people occasionally on a very limited basis. One young player is Sheldon Ziro who is making rapid progress. He and I meet sometimes to talk about music and theory. I can teach people technique and licks to play but I think it's just as important to teach them the concepts related to playing and improvisation. It's like that saying, "I give you a fish and you eat today. I teach you how to fish and you eat forever."

When asked what keeps him hooked on playing the blues, his answer is straightforward. "Simple. I love to play. Playing music gives me something that is unique in my life. I'm driven to it. Something about improvising and creating music on the spot is such a powerful force that it compels me to keep reaching out to express myself. It's a strong part of my identity that I don't want to lose if I don't have to." His fans hope he never loses that impulse.

To find Paul with Curley or Straight Shot, go to the "Gigs" page of [www.cookengreen.com](http://www.cookengreen.com) or the [www.wablues.org](http://www.wablues.org) calendar page.