



As one of Nola Blue Records' newest signings, Clarence Spady is thoroughly motivated when it comes to his career. "Here we are in the saddle," says the veteran blues guitarist. "I've got both hands on the reins right now. So I don't plan on letting go."

Excellent news for contemporary blues fans who are well aware of Spady's acclaimed 1996 album *Nature of the Beast* and his equally impressive 2008 followup *Just Between Us*. Clarence's musical career has weathered its share of peaks and valleys, but playing his singularly funky brand of impassioned, electrifying blues—a talent that has taken him all over the world—dominates his time these days as he writes great new material and prepares to record it.

By any standard, Clarence embarked on his musical odyssey at an uncommonly tender age. Born in Paterson, New Jersey, Spady began playing guitar when he was only five years old (his family moved a couple of hours west to Scranton, PA during this period, a town Spady lives in today). Clarence's musical exploits commenced due to encouragement from two guitarists in his immediate family, his father (also named Clarence) and his Uncle Fletchey. "He was a very good blues guitarist, the likes of Otis Rush or Booba Barnes," Spady says of his uncle. "He had that nasty, raw feel. He was from North Carolina originally. And he could sing.

"When I was five, we were sitting at my Uncle Fletchey's. He had a blues jam every weekend. And I would sit on my dad's left knee while he was playing, looking at his hand. And they were playing in E, and I kept putting my hand up on the fretboard. He goes, 'Okay, Clarence, wait a minute! Let me wait 'til after this song!' And Uncle Fletchey said, 'No, let him go! See what he's gonna do!' And he was playing the E and A string, playing the strum, and I started doing it. I started playing it, and everybody was like, 'Oh, my God!' You know? It was like a jaw-dropper there.

"My dad taught me that first progression in E, and my Uncle Fletchey taught me how to play that in other keys, and how to solo. And that was it. He just created a devil. Because I gravitated towards the blues," says Spady. "Coming to Scranton, where there was 0.5 percent black population, all they had were rock stations. There was no funk. There was no gospel. So we brought that with us. My mom with her Mahalia Jackson, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama. My dad with the Bobby 'Blue' Bland, the B.B. King, the Howlin' Wolf. So that was always being played around the house, because we couldn't catch it on any radio stations.

"The British rock explosion opened up doors for me that probably wouldn't have opened living in Paterson, because I would have been stuck on the R&B. The R&B was always a part of my life, and listening to it and the Motown and all that. Diversity was something that I gravitated toward early in life, because I knew I loved the way Motown went and I was in love with the blues. *Hee Haw* comes on—man, I like that bluegrass and country! So I was exposed to elements that as much as being a musician, I was a music appreciator as well. I appreciated music as long as it sounded good.

"In the beginning, I really didn't work hard. God gave all of us a gift," Clarence says. "I didn't really start working hard until after I got out of high school. Because it was just innate. I was able to hear things at an early age. I'm eight years old, and I'm playing major sevenths then, and minor ninths. I didn't know what to do with them yet, but I could hear those chords." In addition to being the youngest member of the family blues band, which continued to jam every weekend at his uncle's pad in Jersey, Clarence played Tommy Tucker's "Hi-Heel Sneakers" for his fellow second graders (one of them, Scott Goldman, later became his manager).

"Fast forward to my junior high and high school years, I could hear those chords, and now I can play them because my fin-

gers are big enough to where I can hit them,” Spady says. “And I can get that stretch.” Clarence continued to expand his musical horizons during his teenage years and found his way into a recording studio as soon as he possibly could.

“I got the opportunity to walk the talk in Englewood, New Jersey,” he says. “I’d moved back out to New Jersey when I graduated. I met Greg Woods, he was Shirley Caesar’s arranger, and he kind of took me under his wing. I would mop, I would sweep, I’d keep the studio clean, but it also gave me the opportunity to see some great sessions, and be able to be around the people that were doing the sessions and eventually record with different groups that came in.”

Spady’s first session came as a sideman for the Johnson Family. “Jerry Johnson, Bob Johnson, and Jimmy Johnson. Bob played bass. Jerry was the drummer. Jimmy was guitar player/manager. Buddy Blackstone was the (other) guitarist,” he says. “They did nothing but Sly, James Brown, Brass Construction, all that early ‘70s funk. The Dazz Band, all that. Buddy Blackstone took me under his wing. And that was the molding that I needed. Because he stressed to me, ‘Rhythm players are gonna be in high demand. Learn your chords. Learn all of ‘em. And stay rhythmic.’ Jerry Johnson was very good, a very good hi-hat technique, and he would do things and he’d say, ‘Listen to my hi-hat. Catch that rhythm. Let your right hand do what I’m doing on here.’ And I was like, ‘I got it! I know what you’re saying. Okay!’”

During the early ‘80s, Clarence joined a touring R&B band, A Touch of Class. “John Pougiese, he was the musical director there. He was the pianist and organist. He was a very, very informative person,” he says. “That was like going to Berklee for two years, because he was teaching me horn arrangements. He was teaching me harmony. He was teaching me rhythm. He was teaching me those chord progressions that I use today that people say, ‘What chord is that?’ I was like, ‘Well, I like to say it’s a John Pougiese chord, but it’s just a variation of a major seventh. But it’s the voicings that you use. Take your third out of there and let it ring open.’

From there, Clarence joined Pennsylvania-based singer Greg Palmer’s band. “For six years, I was with him,” he says (they opened for the Temptations on one memorable occasion). “I was his arranger for six years. Everything that I learned working with the people all the way up to that point, it was a Top 40 R&B band. I was already groomed for it.”

The dawn of the ‘90s brought a new musical direction for Spady. “I wanted to get back into my roots,” he says. “After I quit Greg, I moved to Michigan for a couple of years. There were a couple of bands out there I was working with.” Those were funk groups. “I’ve always dug funk,” he says.

“When I came back home to Scranton, there wasn’t much R&B going on. And the people around here, I didn’t have the personnel that would permit me the kind of band that I just left. I would have to move back out to New Jersey, either that or Philly or go to New York. And I said, ‘I want to go back to the blues!’ So, I put the West Third Street Blues Band together. And that was the beginning of it.” Spady held down a day job while playing music at night. “For 16 years, 17 years, I was a union operator. My specialty was excavators. I was a digger. I did a lot of pipeline work,” he says.

By the mid-‘90s, Clarence had accrued quality blues originals that included “Nature Of The Beast,” “Baby Baby Baby,” and “Answer To The Man.” “I wasn’t even seeking a record deal, but I figured, ‘Wow, we’re doing the blues—let me just start writing some lyrics and some originals!’” he says. “Scotty said, ‘We’ve got to do something with these originals. We’ve got to get this recorded, especially “Nature Of The Beast.”’ We did it at a fellow’s studio right here in town. Our friend Bernie, he owned Bernie Honda, he was a car dealer. And he had a studio. He was an avid jazz drummer. He said, ‘I want you to come and record it here at my house. No charge—I just want you to get this recorded so you can shop it to record companies.’ And when we shopped it to Evidence, they bought it as was.”

In addition to the originals, Spady served up some tasty covers on *Nature of the Beast*: the Willie Dixon-penned Howlin’ Wolf classic “Built For Comfort,” Son Seals’ “Bad Axe,” and his childhood favorite “Hi-Heel Sneakers” among them. The set tabbed Clarence as a fast-rising young blues star upon its 1996 release on the Evidence label. “That came all of a sudden out of nowhere. And as fast as it came, mind you, I didn’t think everything that took place, all the accolades that took place from that, were gonna happen. Because I wasn’t prepared for it. But I got myself acclimated with it, and did a lot of nice tours. Scotty booked a lot of nice overseas tours, so we really had a chance to debut that album and do some great things with it,” says Clarence. “How powerful that band was, with Mark Hamza on B-3 and Shorty Parham on drums. That was a small organ trio that made a lot of noise for three guys.”

The success of *Nature of the Beast* was a major factor in Clarence being nominated for W.C. Handy Award in 1997 for Best

New Blues Artist. And the record had legs. “We toured for six years,” Spady says. Not long after that, Clarence began attending the Thursday night open jams at Terra Blues in New York City’s iconic Greenwich Village. The manager at the time, Jay Gordon, soon told him that he could play there every Thursday, and that was the start of a standing monthly rotation of four to five dates per month which continued right up until COVID-19 shut things down, exposing countless tourists in search of an authentic blues experience, both domestic and international, to Spady’s sound.

But apart from an in-concert CD, *Live at Greco’s*, that was never officially released, he had to wait until 2008 to release his next high-profile album, *Just Between Us*, on David Earl’s Severn label. Funkier than its predecessor, it consisted entirely of originals apart from a closing instrumental treatment of Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing.” And once again, blues aficionados took notice: *Just Between Us* was nominated for a 2009 Blues Music Award as Soul Blues Album of the Year.

“After *Nature of the Beast*, I was without a record label for awhile,” says Spady. “We were still pretty much piggybacking off of that, but I was writing in the interim. And when Scotty heard a few of the songs, the originals that we were doing, he goes, ‘Wow! Clarence, we’ve got to get these recorded, like ‘King Of Hearts,’ ‘I’ll Go.’ Wow—the world has to hear this!’ We laid it all down in the Severn studio in Baltimore with a stellar studio band including Benjie Porecki on keyboards and Steve Gomes on bass.

“I ended up writing ‘E-Mail’ there in the studio. I hear music all the time. What I don’t hear all the time are lyrics. What I do hear is that real witty line, that one line, you know? ‘That’s the line! I’ll make that my chorus now! Maybe that’s gonna be my chorus. Maybe that’s gonna be that line in the bridge.’ And I try to develop around that. But being a guitar player, I also think like a drummer, and I’m a fluent bass player as well. So I hear these lines, and I lay down a bass line, and I turn my drum computer on and I lay it down like that.”

Once again, blues aficionados took notice. *Just Between Us* was nominated for a Blues Music Award as Soul Blues Album of the Year.

Spady makes no secret of his intermittent battles with drugs and alcohol, now in the past. “I was in and out with it.” They never got him down for long; until the pandemic hit, Clarence was gigging regularly at Terra Blues and elsewhere.

One thing we can all look forward to when the pandemic ends is a new Clarence Spady album, already in the works. “I want to be energized with this one, but you’re gonna hear a maturity of writing more with what we’re getting ready to do, even though it’s gonna have energy,” he says. “But it’s just gonna have the energy that somebody over half a century would have that’s still hanging on.”

--Bill Dahl, Music Journalist

www.clarencespady.com



@clarencespadyband

Publicist & Radio: Betsie Brown, Blind Raccoon, betsie@blindraccoon.com, 901.268.6065

Label: Sallie Bengtson, Nola Blue Records, sallie@nola-blue.com, 717.208.6807

Management: Scott Goldman, Bluescope Music, bluescopemusic@gmail.com, 570.815.2224