

Pat St.John



Blues

Eric Clapton *Me and Mr. Johnson*
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Pat St.John is heard nationally on Sirius Blues 29 Monday thru Friday 6:00 p.m. to Midnight ET, and he's also the channel's programmer. Pat also does shows on "Classic Vinyl" (14) and "The Vault" (16). On weekends, he's on New York City's WAXQ (Q104.3), the number one Classic Rock station in America. For additional data on Eric's Crossroads Guitar Festival, visit these sites: PatStJohn.com, claptononline.com, ericclapton.com, repriserecords.com, and Sirius.com.

FINALLY, FINALLY, I get to talk about Eric Clapton's new album, *Me and Mr. Johnson*. Composed entirely of songs by the legendary and mythical Robert Johnson, you've probably been hearing "If I Had Possession over Judgment Day," on the radio; it's one of the 14 RJ songs that comprise the CD. And it's a disc you really should have, if you have any feeling for the blues; it's varied as can be, given the fact Clapton focuses in to cover about half of Mr. Johnson's entire output on record. And roughly half of the *other* half of the titles Eric has recorded on different albums in different groups. This new CD, I must tell you, is a wonderful album and I highly recommend it.

I got a hold of the album as part of my day gig at Sirius Satellite

Radio quite a bit ahead of its actual release date, but I couldn't air it until that date — way it works. I was also told that Eric was coming to our studios on February 28 to use our air waves to make the first U.S. announcement of his Crossroads Guitar Festival, which will be held June 4 to 6 in Dallas. This will be a one-time, first-of-its-kind festival with workshops, clinics, and exhibits created for music enthusiasts who will come from around the globe, and it will culminate in a June 6 concert in the Cotton Bowl by the largest gathering of guitar greats ever assembled. Featured artists will include Mr. Eric, Carlos Santana, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, ZZ Top, Robert Ran-dolph, James Taylor, Larry Carlton, Steve Vai, Eric Johnson, B.B. King, Hubert Sumlin,

Sonny Landreth, J. J. Cale, Joe Walsh, and many other fine guitarists. The house bands on the three stages will be none other than Booker T & the MGs, Jimmie Vaughan's band, and The Eric Clapton Band. Not a small event. The announcement of the festival was to be made by Eric and I got to interview him about it. Sounded like a fun assignment, and it turned out that way, I think for both of us. But after we did it, what happened next was *really* something.

Eric doesn't grant many interviews, but he did something next that I'll never forget, joining me as a *guest DJ* on my Sirius blues show to talk about his favorite players of all time, those he idolized, those who influenced him, the ones he knows or knew, and the ones he never met. And it turned

my show for the evening of March 19, 2004, into "Me and Mr. Clapton," a *six-hour* session with the two of us talking about the blues and playing tracks by hot blues musicians such as Freddie King, Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Albert Collins, Johnnie Johnson, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Buddy Guy, Jimi Hendrix, Little Walter, and B. B. King — just the cream of the greatest blues players. I managed to sprinkle in some of Eric's music (since I was at the control board), but it was understood between us that we weren't really there to discuss "Eric Clapton." I did lead him into stories about Freddie King being the first one to really teach him how to play the electric guitar, and he also talked about Jimi Hendrix, for whom truly great blues came so easily. But Jimi lost interest in playing blues, as many of us know, and Clapton thinks that was a tragic loss. He told me about headlining a show with Stevie Ray Vaughan, about being in his dressing room with a video monitor showing Stevie Ray's performance. Eric turned down the sound level since Stevie was so good that it made Eric wonder why it was Vaughan didn't have top billing. Clapton said that to this day, he regrets turning that monitor down. These fine stories all turned the show into the most comfortable radio program I've ever done, no plugging or promoting, no selling or hyping *anything!* Just a

simple, relaxed, and *pure* discussion of the blues and the musicians who play it. (Since Sirius is a subscription based service, there weren't even commercials to get in the way). Yes, we talked about Robert Johnson, but we didn't talk about Eric's new CD. In fact, we didn't even talk about the "Crossroads Guitar Festival" in Texas, even though it's to raise money for the *Crossroads Centre Antigua*, the treatment and education center founded by Clapton in 1997, and now an independently run entity.

**This is one very hot
CD, but Clapton's Crossroads
Guitar Festival is certain to
be even hotter!**

Eric said on the program that as far as the "legend" of Robert Johnson goes, "you really don't know what to believe any more." Eric mentioned a book called "Escaping The Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues" by Elijah Wald, an author and musician, who says in his book that in Johnson's day, Robert Johnson really didn't amount to very much, and if he had never existed, it might not have made a difference in the evolution of the blues or rock'n'roll, except for all these stories about him. Eric took a stand on this, definitively stating that the first time he heard Robert Johnson, he was first "caught by the voice, and what Johnson had that his contemporaries didn't seem to have quite so much of, was an incredible vulnerability." Eric said "I *heard* his feelings through his singing ... he sounded raw to me, and then when I listened harder and looked at what he was doing with the guitar, I was almost repelled by the complexity of it, and I made up my mind that I'd never be able to do that." Eric showed such reverence and respect for Mr. Johnson, calling what he did with his guitar "impossible stuff."

Well, over the years, Eric has indeed recorded many Robert Johnson songs, and now he's done 14 more, so it turns out that he *has* learned to "do" the impossible. He's a modest man, but I'm thinking "this is Eric Clapton telling me these

things, 16 Grammys, the *only* three-time inductee into the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame, etc!" I had to stop and think what it meant when this guy said "when he *first* heard Robert Johnson ..." Eric's had a lot of practice over the years, so he's definitely up to the task.

On this new collection, Eric uses his full band: Steve Gadd on drums and Nathan East on bass. Additional players are Billy Preston on Hammond organ and piano, Andy Fairweather Low and Doyle Bramhall II on guitars, and Jerry Portnoy on harmonica. Drummer Jim Keltner and bass player Pino Palladino make appearances as well. Not a bad group here to record "impossible stuff!"

Co-produced with Eric by Simon Climie, my favorites here are "32-20 Blues," which is given a real boogie-woogie treatment, of course "Possession," and "Last Fair Deal Gone Down," as they're the most "rockin'" tunes on the disc. However, even the tunes that are more faithful renditions just sound wonderful in the fuller sound these songs have with an entire band and modern recording techniques. "Stop Breakin' Down Blues" and "Hell Hound on My Trail" are as satisfying as the rest of the others really, and "They're Red Hot" is an out-and-out honky-tonkin' romp.

But know what? This is an *Eric Clapton* album, with him interpreting the music of one of the small handful of major influences on his music, perhaps even the number one influence from the list, so how could it get any better? It's my opinion that he made this album more for himself than anyone else, either to prove to himself that he could do it, but it could also be a collection of songs he felt should be given an update, done this way, or maybe it's just an album *he* wanted to hear. Either way, I think it's a great album. I had a feeling I would, 'cause I've been a fan of the blues as much as I've been a rock fan, and a fan of Eric's since the Yardbirds days.

As I'm writing, I'm excited about going to Dallas for the Crossroads Guitar Festival itself to provide anchor coverage of the event, as Sirius is now a sponsor of the event.

Get this album!