

SPAGHETTI & Blues

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Mike Vernon: "the Producer" by Gianni Franchi

Interview

SB: Can you tell me something about your beginning in music as artist and then as producer?

MV: I always had had a strong interest in music from a very early age. My father had a War time friend...I only really ever knew him as 'Uncle Charlie'...as a family we used to go their home on a Sunday for lunch. I remember that Charlie had a collection of 78s and he would often pick out a few and play them whilst we were relaxing after eating. The collection was very varied but he had a number of items that really intrigued me...even though I was not even a teenager at that time! Louis Jordan & His Tympany Five; The Mills Brothers and The Ink Spots in particular. Those Rhythm & Blues sounds were to become a very important part of my musical journey in future years.

My mother was a regular Church goer and both my brother Richard and I attended on a regular basis also. We both had decent voices and joined the Church Choir...St. James's Church Riddlesdown, Purley in the County of Surrey. I started out as a treble but once my voice broke I found myself able to fulfill my duties as an alto; tenor (first and second) baritone and even basso profundo...that very much depended on my health! If I had a bad cold then my voice dropped another octave. I suppose I would have to say that the gift of a good voice did help me in the latter years of my life. I love singing and song-writing...they go hand in hand.

During my formative years I continued to delve into all kinds of music. My mother was a big fan of Musicals...South Pacific and Carousel in particular. She was also a big fan of the male 'pop' singers of the day...Dickie Valentine, Matt Monro and Frank Sinatra for instance. I was like a sponge...soaking up all styles of music that spanned jazz (in all its many styles) and Classical Music.

I had an eclectic taste in music...but...when it came down to it I was a 'rocker' at heart. Once the rock'n'roll era hit in the mid-50s that was it for me...I was totally hooked. I would spend far too many hours late at night listening to the likes of Little Richard, Fats Domino and Larry Williams without actually realising that in fact I was listening to a commercial hybrid of Rhythm & Blues. Later on I would rediscover Louis Jordan that then lead me to Amos Milburn, Roy Brown, Wynonie Harris and a whole host of other sensational singers and band leaders...far too many to mention here. Then came the country blues of Lightnin' Hopkins, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Son House, John Lee Hooker and they, of course, lead to Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley and so on!

My brother and I became so involved in this musical genre...let's just call it The Blues...that we even started up our own 'fanzine' magazine...that was in February 1964. The first edition of R&B Monthly proved to be very popular and we continued with that enterprise for two years...the last edition seeing the light of day in February 1966. Our next venture was to be Blue Horizon Records...more on that later!

I left Purley County Grammar School in 1961 and went to Croydon Art College. By then I was heavily into the soon-to-be-known-as The British Blues Boom...following and listening to bands lead by Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies. Soon came The Rolling Stones and The Yardbirds...then the Spencer Davis Rhythm & Blues Quartet and a whole host of others. My one year at Art College proved only one thing...I wasn't that talented in that area and I wanted 'out' so that I could become part of the Music Business. I wrote letters to all the major labels that were in existence (in the U.K.) at that time. Not all responded but I did one letter of encouragement from The Decca Record Company Ltd. They were to put my details on file and when...and if...anything came up in the way of a job they would get in touch with me. And sure enough some months later I did receive a further letter asking me to come to their Head Office in Lambeth, London for an interview. I duly attended and on 12th November 1962 I started work as an Assistant to the Head of the Artist & Repertoire Department at the princely sum of £8 per week! And so my career as a would-be Record Producer began.

As for any career as a singer...that was not even a consideration at that time! With a friend I had managed to pull together a local R&B band...The Mojo Men...but that was not a good experience and the unit folded very quickly. I did not venture back into singing until 1970 when I made a solo album for my own label Blue Horizon. It was, perhaps, only notable for the fact that several tracks featured the talents of both Paul Kossoff and Rory Gallagher. Four years later I made a second solo outing...recorded for Sire Records of NYC. That actually received some good press in the U.S. but

saw no sales of any significance and so I put singing on the 'back burner'. I continued to make use of my vocal abilities...such as they might have been in those days...doing background vocals when they were required. I also continued to work on my song-writing career...that proved to be a lot of fun and very creative too. A lot of my songs were recorded by artists I was producing...Jimmy Witherspoon and Freddie King in particular...and a lot of lesser known musicians. But Record Production was my main focus in life...I was determined to make the most of the opportunities that were offered to me by Decca.

As a Staff Producer at Decca I found myself working with all manner of different acts. At the onset I was working with Frank Lee whose main acts were Gracie Fields, Mantovani and Vera Lynn. Not very rock'n'roll! But you have to learn somewhere and that's the way it was. I did a lot of running around for Mr.Lee and attended many of his sessions where my job was to keep notes on all the various 'takes' of the songs that were committed to tape. I had to make detailed notes of when there was a good and complete 'take' and when there were breakdowns...good solos or bad solos... and so on. All of this information helped the engineers when the time came to edit from one 'take' to another. All very scary stuff in those days...everything was done at once... vocal and Orchestra. If anyone made a bad mistake then it had to be done again... and again!

Frank Lee finally retired and I then started working for Hugh Mendl. He was much more open-minded and gave me the chance to show what I could do as a Producer. I was given permission to record such artists as Otis Spann...along with Muddy Waters, Ransom Knowling and Little Willie Smith. And there was also Curtis Jones, Champion Jack Dupree and Mae Mercer. Then I started getting into recording 'demo' sessions with the likes of Spencer Davis (with a very young Stevie Winwood); The Graham Bond Orgazination; John Lee's Groundhogs; The Artwoods and yes, The Yardbirds too. Most of those sessions were rejected though...much to my annoyance. Finally, I got the chance to bring John Mayall's Bluesbreakers back to Decca...he had previously recorded 'Mayall Plays Mayall' as a one off release. The band were resigned and that's when the infamous "Beano" album got recorded... now part of Rock'n'Roll History!

Those were very exciting times... and still they live very vividly in my memory... even 50 years on!

SB: You was one of the first producer of British blues, the technology from the '60 changed so much. From analogic to digital, everything is changed in the way of recording music? What do you think about and which do you prefer?

MV: We got used to recording in the analogue format... that's all there was on offer so we knew nothing different! There were many limitations in those early days and you had to be creative to get great results. Having the opportunity of working with creative engineers was a big bonus...you had to work as a team to get the best results. I was very lucky to have been able to work with a number of excellent technicians at Decca's Studios in West Hampstead, London. I made friends with Gus Dudgeon and we did a lot of sessions together...including David Bowie's early material; John Mayall or course and Ten Years After, Savoy Brown...too many to list. But it was frustrating working with 4 track machines and then having to mix down to 2 tracks to make it possible to transfer back to 4 tracks giving you the extra 2 tracks to work with! Hard work and tedious too...but that was the way it was. Then 8 track machines appeared...and then 16 and then finally 24 track! Yes the format has changed now...but in essence the way you actually record has not. You still have the same processes to go through...for me digital is fine. I am not chasing the analogue and valve sound and certainly not to analogue tape! Waste of time and money as far as I am concerned. Of course, by all means make use valve microphones; compressors of whatever... no problem and often great results...but record digitally. That gives you so much more room and a myriad of options when mixing and overdubbing. Easy too!

SB: Today the music is available in mp3 from digital stores, you can listen free from Spotify and others, why do you think a band have to produce a CD?

MV: Primarily for selling at gigs! You would, perhaps, be surprised how many people actually want to own a physical hard copy of the music from their favourite act. You can only do that with a CD. Sales are, generally, quite good in these current times. Not sure if that works for the mainstream marketplace... Beyoncé et al. But for the specialist market... and blues and blues/rock are included in that category... you are foolish if you do not have a CD available. I also notice that there is an ever growing number of fans who are now also buying vinyl copies too... hey hey! All good stuff... still like to have vinyl around.

SB: How important is the role of producer for the success of a recording project?

MV: In my opinion a Producer is always an important ingredient in the making of a successful record. There are those who say that having a Producer is a waste of time...maybe they didn't have the best Producer for their particular project? No way to tell. But from experience...and I have had much of that...a Producer can be the extra member of a band who will see and hear things that might escape the attention of the band members. A Producer should always have an objective viewpoint of where the project is heading and not have a subjective one...there will be plenty of that viewpoint from the musicians themselves. They do tend to be precious about their songs and always have an opinion of how *they* want it to sound...and that might not be best for the final results. Having someone from the outside looking in can be a big bonus...but it has to be a marriage! You all have to get along well and work as a team...if you don't do that then the project will suffer in one way or another.

SB: You have worked with many artists, which was the artist you worked with who gave you the most satisfaction?

MV: Not an easy question to answer...there have been many thankfully. Freddie King was great to work with...such a professional and always listening to the ideas being offered up. I am very proud of the one album I made with him..."Burglar". Actually, perhaps the most satisfying has been Sari Schorr. She is the consummate professional...totally 100% on her game and always looking to the Producer to get even more out of her! We've worked very hard on her debut album "A Force Of Nature" and for me it rates very highly in my Top 5 favourites. If it proves to be successful commercially then it might well become my personal #1 all-time favourite. I am hoping... fingers crossed!

SB: Which artist would you rather wanted to produce and you could not?

MV: I had always wanted to work with B.B.King and that never happened. I was involved in helping to bring together various musicians to work on the "In London" album but was not asked to produce. Disappointing. I would have loved to work with Buddy Guy...again, I was not approached. There are other...Bonnie Raitt would be another. For some reason I seem to fly below the radar when it comes to finding Producers for Blues projects. It is not intentional...I would love to be asked more frequently. But then I have to want to make the record because of the artist...not for any other specific reason. Laurence Jones asked me twice to work with him...but the time was not right. I said 'yes' this last time and the results are very good..."Take Me High" is a very strong record. But I will lay odds that someone else with a higher profile will come along and offer to do his next album and I will lose out...that's nothing new to me...it's almost the norm. But I am posting a warning right now...do not expect to steal Sari Schorr from me! She and I will not even think about it! She and I are like brother and sister and it will take some effort to break up our eworking relationship. We are a force to be reckoned with...and hope to prove it long term!

SB: Actually are you working on new productions?

MV: Well, yes and no. I have already mentioned Laurence Jones and Sari Schorr...but I have nothing else planned other than my desire to make a CD with my road band The Mighty Combo. I am hopeful that 2017 will see an increase in the band's popularity on the Blues Scene and that I will be able, finally, to make a solo album of new original material that will, for once and for all, show all the doubters that I can sing and that my intent to become a regular performer on the Blues Circuit is not just an old man's whim...or dream. I am deadly serious about this project and will not let go until I have given it all my absolute best shot.

SB: Can you tell me something about your band ,Mike Vernon and the Mighty Combo, the lineup, the kind of music, where you play and if you have recorded an album with this band?

MV: We now have a regular line-up and are hoping to be undertaking a further short Tour in late November/early December in the UK. Another Tour...European wide...is already being set up for March 2017. The new line-up will be Paulo Tasker (tenor sax); Paul Garner (guitar); Matt Little (piano); Ian Jennings (upright bass) and Mike Hellier (drums). Our style of music is heavily based in the 1940s and 1950s when Rhythm & Blues ruled...think Amos Milburn, Joe Turner, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Little Willie John, Johnny 'Guitar' Watson, Wynonie Harris and so on. We feature quite a number of these artists' songs but I am gradually cutting back on those to feature new original material. I have been a songwriter most of my working life...when I get the time...and certainly am capable of coming up with new material. This change seems to be working...two or three of the current songs get very response when we play them 'live'..."Old Man Dreams", "Jump Up" and "Hate

To Leave (Hate To Say Goodbye)" being the favourites. By the time we get to cutting our first CD we will be ready with 14 topnotch originals...watch out! MIKE VERNON & THE MIGHTY COMBO...remember the name!

SB: Did you find differences in producing an English blues artist and an American? If so, what?

MV: Not really...no two artists are the same, nor bands. It doesn't really make much difference to me. I treat everyone the same. I am there to do a job and do it to the best of my ability and help them get what they want.

SB: Why, by your opinion, the generation of English kids in the 60's found his way playing blues, a music so far away from them ?

MV: The search for something new and hitherto unknown. The rock'n'roll 'boom' was with us...and had been since the mid/late 1950s. Rhythm & Blues gave birth to the hybrid rock'n'roll style...Joe Turner, Little Richard and The Treniers gave way to Elvis Presley, Pat Boone and Bill Haley...amongst thousands of others! The British Traditional Jazz fraternity...headed by Chris Barber and Ken Colyer...championed the American Folk Music revival by helping to bring over the likes of Lonnie Johnson, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and Memphis Slim. Chris Barber in particular toured Muddy Waters, Little Walter and Sister Rosetta Tharpe at a time when no one else showed any interest at all. And then one or two of major record labels...Decca, EMI and Pye...started releasing compilation albums and singles by some of the leading Black (now Afro-American of course) artists to the record stores...John Lee Hooker, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry and Fats Domino started to turn up on the Pop Charts! Teenage music fans began to discover all forms of 'the blues'...CBS/Columbia released an album of Robert Johnson material. There was a huge explosion of interest for this 'new' musical genre...effectively already 30 years plus old! It wasn't just in the UK either...other European countries jumped on the bandwagon. The Americans fell behind...remember that the Racial issue there had been deep rooted for centuries and predominantly 'blues' music was there as an entertainment form for the Black people of that country. 'Race Music' had its place...but often it was trapped behind closed doors. Not so here in Europe...we welcomed the tradition and perhaps more importantly, the artists who played it!

SB: "Burglar" is in my opinion one of the finest albums of Freddie King, how was it working with him and how was that his sound turned to funk in this album?

MV: Freddie King was a dream to work with...very professional and gave his full attention to the work in progress. The record label...R.S.O...along with Freddie's management team wanted to bring a new dimension to this project...open up more doors. He was already established as a top Blues act...but was still to 'break' into the more commercial Soul marketplace. We all thought it would be possible to combine his undeniable talents and a singer and guitarist to make a mark in another more rewarding place. I made use of a London-based band called Gonzalez...and searched for strong songs as well as commissioning new songs for the proposed sessions. It paid off...the Howard Tate song "I'm A Burglar" did really well; the Gonzalez song "Pack It Up" is dynamite...Freddie loved that song and gave his all when recording it. Perhaps one of his best ever studio performances? The album, when released, got mixed reviews. Many said it was too funky and not bluesy enough...I didn't agree and is still don't! Now, most people accept this release to have been one of his best ever...and I am not going to disagree! I love it and am very proud to have been in charge of the production.

SB: What advice would you give to a young musician who looks at this job?

MV: To want to be a blues musician? Or a Producer? With one of the other the same rules apply. You have to believe 100% in your abilities to do the job well and focus TOTALLY on what you plan to achieve. And always have a regular paying job outside of the music business because you will find it very hard to survive on music alone!

SB: Your future projects?

MV: Making a second CD with Sari Schorr & The Engine Room and my own album with The Mighty Combo. Other than that I don't have any plans...will wait and see what transpires!