

Rory Block, Premier Acoustic Blues Artist
By Don Wilcock

"I live and breathe music."
Rory Block

Rory Block may not see herself the way her fans, the music world, and the press view her career. But seminal Blues guitarist Robert Johnson's grandson Greg Johnson says, "When I hear Rory Block's music, it's as if my grandfather is here all over again." Rolling Stone Magazine credited her with recording "some of the most singular and affecting Country Blues anyone, man or woman, black or white, old or young, has cut in recent years."

In a career that has thus far produced 36 albums, six Blues Music Awards, and numerous world tours, Rory Block's fabled odyssey finds her at the absolute height of her talents, and at the top of the touring world, while at the same time living life as a music producer, author, ordained minister (she refers to it as "Preaching the Blues"), a music producer, festival promoter, mother, wife and friend to thousands at her ChurchLIVE venue in rural Chatham, New York.

The Blues Foundation wrote "Today she is widely regarded as the top female interpreter and authority on traditional country blues worldwide." It can easily be said that she is the best acoustic blues artist performing today, having been nominated in January 2020 for the Blues Foundation's prestigious Koko Taylor Award as Traditional Female Blues Artist, coming off a 2019 award for the Acoustic Artist of The Year.

Rory Block is the standard bearer for early American roots blues- a celebrated, multi award winning artist, and a songwriter whose originals ring with unadorned power and truth. Everything she performs becomes anointed, whether songs by legacy artists like Son House, Robert Johnson, or Bessie Smith. Asked how she finds the common denominator in the wide ranging styles and experiences she sings about, she responds "No matter what the outward circumstances, we all share in the same universal experiences, we're all essentially rowing in the same boat, which is life. You can be an anointed painter. You can be an anointed writer or musician- it's about doing what you love, and allowing a spirit to come through you that channels something bigger than you." The New York Times called her playing

“perfect, her singing otherworldly as she wrestles with ghosts, shadows and legends.” People Magazine said it simply, “If you like music steeped in tradition and genuine feeling, this is your woman.”

The daughter of a Greenwich Village sandal maker and influential country fiddle player, she spent her childhood surrounded by the likes of John Sebastian, John Hammond and Maria Muldaur who frequented her dad’s Saturday afternoon jam sessions. Bob Dylan lived just a few doors from the Sandal Shop at the height of the folk music revival of the early ‘60s. She remembers seeing the young Dylan visiting with her father and found inspiration in his unique artistic presence.

She cut her first album at age 12 backing her father on The Elektra String Band Project, a folk concept album featuring many of the dedicated musicians who were part of the folk revival of the 60's. At 14, blues guitarist Stefan Grossman introduced her to Delta blues giants Son House, Rev. Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and Bukka White, all of whom she would later honor with her Mentor Series of tribute recordings on Stony Plain.

After running away from home at age 15, she and Stefan hitch-hiked their way to the west coast, which boasted its own unique roots music scene. There she met Mississippi Fred McDowell and a host of other luminaries while continuing to build on the foundation of her own musical inspiration. She recalls playing Tommy Johnson's "Big Road Blues" on stage at the Jabberwoke Caffe in Berkeley, when someone in the audience jumped up and shouted "She plays like a man!" "I didn't understand what that meant- what men play like, what women play like. I didn't see divisions or categories, I didn't separate myself by age, gender, race, demographics or even centuries... those things felt irrelevant. The music and the passion was deeper than anything outward. I was inspired by the powerful forces around me when I was growing up, and that's how it happens.”

Back on the east coast she accompanied Stefan to the home of Rev. Gary Davis, where a handful of fortunate students, including David Bromberg, Roy Bookbinder and Woody Mann, showed up to take lessons. “I remember the warm lighting, the framed 'God bless this home' plaque on the wall, the doilies over the arms of the thread-bare chairs. He and Stefan would start the lesson. The Reverend would play at full speed and you had to leap in. He never stopped to explain, you just had to keep up. That was very typical of the way players learned from each other in the early days. They didn't have

teaching videos- you were never going to be spoon-fed. You had to get really good at learning by watching and working hard."

When her original song "Lovin' Whiskey" became a gold record in Holland, fans repeatedly thanked her for its message of surviving a relationship with an alcoholic, saying that the song had given them the strength to make it through and move on. It was then that she realized she was having an impact. And with this realization came an acceptance that she was not just someone who happened to sing and play guitar, but was uniquely driven by a mission to keep the old music alive, and to write songs about the most intense matters of survival and triumph- this, to her, became the essence of blues, and this is what has defined her musical journey.

Maybe it was the letter from a man who decided not to kill himself after hearing Lovin' Whiskey.

Maybe it was all the letters she received after her son Thiele's memorial album "House of Hearts."

Perhaps it was the moment Stevie Wonder played harmonica on "Gypsy Boy" while she stood next to him in the studio with tears rolling down her face.

Maybe it was when Mark Knopfler played a heart wrenching solo on Rory's song "Faithless World,"

Or when she and Bonnie Raitt played "Big Road Blues" together on stage.

Whatever the moments were, they collectively helped her to realize that she was having an effect on people, that the music that had saved her own life was universal and that she had an important mission to expand on its legacy. And gradually, she became too busy to recognize that she was becoming as iconic as her mentors – and as talented.

Parcbench stated: "Rory Block is an interpreter par excellence... she has an uncanny ability to capture the essence of the original while letting her own artistry shine through. Her voice comes with its own, instantly identifiable survivor's rasp, and her guitar work is equally stunning. There is no doubt that someday there will be many a tribute album to the great Rory Block."

"There's a real level of comfort I feel as I get more and more experienced,

more mature, less insecure and more determined," says Rory today. "I know what I'm doing. I'm still here, and I might as well stay the course and do it as fully and completely as possible. Now there's a freedom in it. Perhaps there is a mantle of protection in the realness of blues itself. No matter what else happens or goes wrong around me, the music provides the life boat. I want to use this opportunity to do something of value for others. That right there is the essence of what I need in my life- to be of service. That's why I'm here."

Her latest CD, *Prove It on Me*, is the second in her *Power Women of The Blues* series that began with her 2018 release *A Woman's Soul: A Tribute to Bessie Smith*. This recording is an important step forward. On it she finds a new more mature voice uniquely her own while paying homage to some of the groundbreaking blues women of a bygone era.

On *Prove It on Me* she erases the decades, breathing fresh life into Ma Rainey's version of the title cut and Memphis Minnie's "In My Girlish Days" interjecting them with both a sass and sensibility in a clarion call torn from today's headlines. Plus, she introduces us to some women who got lost in the rewriting of a musical history that figuratively buried some of the best female singers of the '20s and '30s with: "He May Be Your Man" by Helen Humes, who replaced Billie Holiday in the Count Basie Orchestra in 1938; the attitude dripping "If You're A Viper" originally released by a Chicago singer known as The Viper Girl Rosetta Howard; and "I Shall Wear A Crown" by blind gospel singer Arizona Dranes.

"With this recording I decided to celebrate some of the great female artists who were not as well-known (with the obvious exception of Ma Rainey and Memphis Minnie). Women of that era were certainly not given support to leave home, children and families to hop a freight train and go from bar to bar," explains Rory. "Society really would have frowned utterly on that, and women knew it. They didn't have permission to go out there as much as men did. Their recorded material might have been left in the back of an archive somewhere, and perhaps not widely promoted as a result. Some of their recordings probably got swept under some rug somewhere, and many great women artists essentially disappeared. Still other voices did make it through, people like Big Mama Thornton, Rosetta Tharpe, Sippie Wallace, and some of the women who sang jazz like Ella Fitzgerald, and also gospel, like Mahalia Jackson. Knowing the above, my goal with *Prove It On Me* was to bring to light some of these great talents who for whatever reason did not become as famous."

The surprise bonus on Prove It on Me is a Rory Block autobiographical original "Eagles," with its lyric: My parents did not want me/They were just too young/Their lives and dreams were calling/Taking care of number one/So I grabbed a guitar/Touched the strings of steel/Never put it down,/the way it made me feel.

Sure to become a signature song with as much pathos as anything Willie Dixon ever wrote for Koko Taylor, it was the last number recorded, an afterthought that took on a life of its own. "It turned out to be a different tempo and chord progression than the original song I set out to record – in essence it was a whole other song, so I either had to abandon it or create something new. I was listening to it really loud in the studio, and all of a sudden, I got this hair raising feeling about what it needed to say. So I just started scribbling words, and singing. I wondered, 'Is this as powerful as I think it is?' I got swept away, and decided I had to write that song."

Rory Block, today's everywoman, finally recognized for what she's grown to be, the premier voice of today's acoustic blues guitar, renewing the promise of long forgotten blues women of the past and adding new energy that's a piece of her heart. "My husband, Rob and I, we talk about it a lot. We jump into the car every day and listen to whatever we just recorded. That's what gives us energy. That's what gives us purpose. I think to myself if I'm ever not recording, there's going to be some kind of dropout to my life. There's going to be some kind of void. I always have to be surrounded with music to feel the energy I need to live. I mean, its energy, its spirituality. I live and breathe music."

The songs on this recording celebrate the following artists, and are inspired by their original recordings listed below:

- Helen Humes

He May Be Your Man – Helen Humes, EMI April Music (Canada) Ltd

- Madlyn Davis

It's Red Hot – Madlyn Davis, Spikedriver LLC

- Rosetta Howard

If You're A Viper – Herbert Moren, Rosetta Howard, Malcolm Horace, MCA Music Canada

- Gertrude "Ma" Rainey

Prove It On Me – Ma Rainey, Public Domain

- Arizona Dranes

I Shall Wear A Crown – Traditional

- Eagles – Rory Block, BMI

- Lottie Kimbrough

Wayward Girl – Sylvester Kimbrough, Winston Holmes, Spikedriver LLC

- Memphis Minnie

In My Girlish Days – Ernest Lawler, Songs of Universal Inc.

- Merline Johnson (Yas Yas Girl)

Milk Man – Copyright Control

- Elvie Thomas

Motherless Child – ELVIE THOMAS, Elvie Thomas, Boot House of Tunes

Produced by Rory Block and Rob Davis

Executive producer – Holger Petersen

Recorded, mixed and mastered by Rob Davis, in Aurora Productions Mobile Studios

Graphic design – Mark Dutton, Halkier+Dutton Design

Photographer – Sergio Kurhajec

Rory block and “The Rory Block Band”

All vocals – lead and harmonies

All guitars – root & support guitars, slide, bass-played-on-guitar

All drums – guitar bongos, oatmeal boxes, percussion, played by Rory Block

Sounds – Rob Davis