

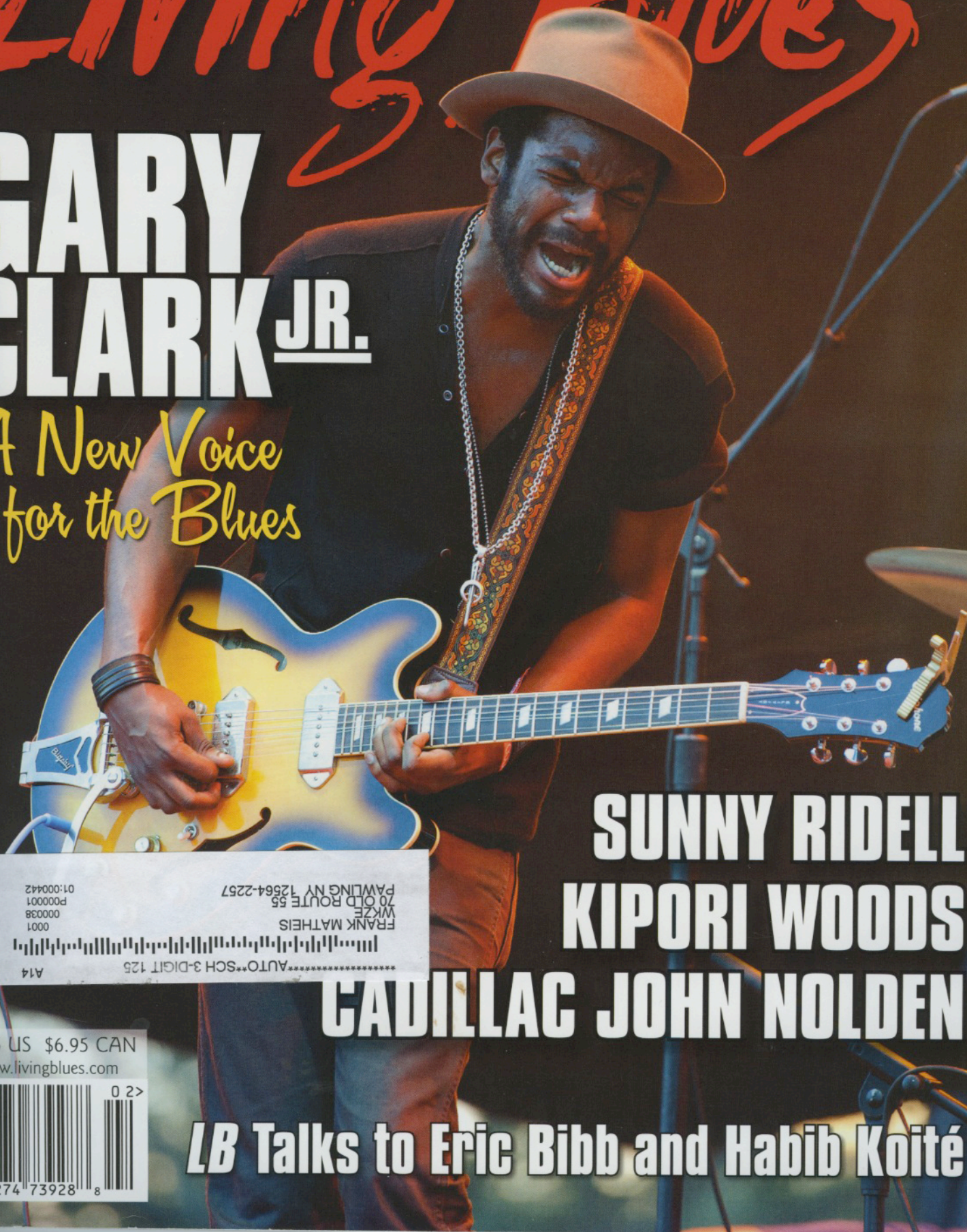
Ben Harper and Charlie Musselwhite Collaborate

Issue #223
Vol. 44, #1
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Living Blues

GARY CLARK JR.

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LB Talks to Eric Bibb and Habib Koité

Ben Harper with Charlie Musselwhite

“A New Way of Being Traditional”

by Frank Matheis

Ben Harper's bold new album *Get Up!* pairs him with harmonica ace “Memphis Charlie” Musselwhite in a duo that juxtaposes the singer/songwriter and guitarist's fiery intensity with the harp player's tender musical sensitivity. This collaboration articulates new ground for the blues.

Charting new paths is nothing new for either artist.

Ben Harper is sometimes perceived as an outsider in the blues, but he isn't giving up his freedom and individuality for any conventions. He has always gone his own way as an artist, sometimes defiantly, and if you can keep up with him, great. If not, he'll pass you by like a Porsche on the autobahn. His musical essence is the blues; but he is rooted in the entire spectrum of African American musical traditions. The mainstream music scene seems to have missed his blues roots along the way. With this new album, Chicago's radio station 93 XRT has announced, “Ben Harper's gone blues,” as if it was a new phenomenon.

Ben Harper is a master of the Weissenborn, a pre-resonator square-neck acoustic lapsteel guitar type that was popular in the 1920s. The Weissenborn, played Hawaiian style flat on the lap with a sliding bar, is a stepchild among blues instruments. Despite the likes of David Lindley, Bob Brozman, and Kelly Joe Phelps, everybody “knows” that “real” blues players play bottleneck slide with the guitar upright. Harper is an international star who is huge in Europe, revered in Australia, and sometimes misunderstood here in the United States. That may soon change.

Ever since he burst on the scene in 1994 with *Welcome to the Cruel World*, he has been a progressive, even revolutionary musical force. Yet, in some very fundamental ways, he



DANNY CLINCH

is a roots traditionalist. His furious evolutions have taken him from soul to rock, from gospel to folk. When he sang Marvin Gaye's classic hit *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* with the original Funk Brothers in the film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* he was touted as the next-great soul-singing wonder. When he recorded with the Blind Boys of Alabama on the double Grammy award winning *There*

Will Be a Light, he was celebrated as a great new gospel sensation, not just for putting down some of the most spiritual and soulful Weissenborn playing, but for the sheer passion he put into the project. Just when they thought they had him pegged, he emerged as a folk-rock-alternative singer with *Fistful of Mercy*, a band with George Harrison's son Dhani and singer/songwriter Joseph Arthur.

Whichever direction he takes, Harper is intense, fiery, and passionately engaged.

According to the Stax press release, Ben Harper calls *Get Up!* "...the best thing I've ever done." That's impressive, given his superb discography both as solo artist and collaborator, with the Blind Boys of Alabama, for instance. The understanding and admiration between Harper and Musselwhite are by now well documented in numerous quotes and in excellent YouTube previews of the album, where Harper asserts his reverence for Memphis Charlie. "I had to earn my way to this chair. I'll make more records in the future but it will never be as good as this one with Charlie."

Mississippi-born Charlie Musselwhite has never had his blues credentials questioned. As an old-school bluesman who was at the epicenter of the blues experience, he is accepted and venerated, even by the strictest purists, for his work with Muddy, the Wolf, Big Joe Williams, Sonny Boy and Little Walter. If anything, he had to deal with living up to the "blues legend" label while trying to stretch out musically. One thing about Musselwhite that most people don't know is that he is also a superb country

blues guitarist and singer with deep blues roots. Maybe it tracks back to his time with Big Joe Williams, but he is absolutely amazing as a country blues singer. Even if he never played harmonica again, he could easily be ranked among today's best traditional singer-guitarists. Yet, as he told **LB**: "People always seek me out to play harmonica. They don't ask for me as a slide guitar player, but I like doing it."

The plainspoken harp ace famously told music writer Billy Hutchison in a 2006 interview, "I only know one tune, and I play it faster or slower, or I change the key, but it's just the one tune I've ever played in my life. It's all I know." While most self-respecting harmonica players will occasionally feel that way, it is of course not true. Charlie Musselwhite's exquisite, understated phrasing and clean and tasteful touch are anything but the same old stuff. He is a master of subtlety who rarely soars over the band. Even his solos are more eloquent than flashy. He is to the blues harp what watercolor painting is to visual art. Light, airy, open, where less is more and finesse trumps. Musselwhite has elevated the harmonica to unprecedented artistic expres-

sion. He explained to **LB** what he really meant with the "I only know one tune" quote: "Yeah, what I meant with that is that I have a style, an identifiable style. Like when you hear B.B. King. You know right away it's B.B. by his signature sound. I got a style of my own when playing the harp. I listen first...I listen and then I respond with whatever the song needs... That's my style." That statement is reminiscent of Michelangelo's words about his famous sculpture: "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

According to Musselwhite, "One of the reasons why me and Ben have such a strong rapport is because we like much of the same music. He has a huge background in all American roots music, especially the blues. His grandparents had a music store. They catered to acoustic and roots music. He is well rounded in all of that. He knows the history. This music he is making now is the blues of today—with this album it is a new way of being traditional. It is still traditional and it carries forth the music, the feeling, and the depth that the blues has always been known to do. It is revolutionary but at the same time it feels familiar. It's current. It's fresh. It just feels really great."

Charlie Musselwhite and Ben Harper met when they both recorded with John Lee Hooker in 1998 on Hooker's famous *Friends* sessions. They have worked together on Solomon Burke's *Don't Give Up on Me* in 2002, Musselwhite's 2004 Grammy-nominated album *Sanctuary*, and Harper's *Homeless Child* on the album *Both Sides of the Gun* in 2006.

This new album, Harper's debut on the Stax label, juxtaposes these two artists, who find their best synergistic groove in an amalgam of blues and related genres. Harper's fierce band, the Relentless Seven (Jason Mozersky, guitar; Jesse Ingalls, bass; Jordan Richardson, drums) makes a strong impact with a primal rhythm section. Charlie Musselwhite told **LB**: "The Relentless Seven are actually only four young guys from Austin. They play with depth, sensitivity, and feeling. They grew up in households where the parents were playing Lightning Hopkins and other country blues. They really know about the history of the music and got the real blues feeling... Here you are participating with these great guys making this new sound that is another step forward for the blues. And that's wonderful. Ben keeps evolving and I like to think that I keep evolving too. We are both excited, like little kids, to take this album on tour. I am a hardcore blues fan. That's where my heart is. I hope *Living Blues* readers will be open to it too. Have fun with it. Let it take you where it wants to go. Come early and stay late. Enjoy the music."

LB

"I had to *earn* my way to this chair. I'll make more records in the *future* but it will never be as *good* as this one with Charlie."

—Ben Harper

