



BLUES TRAVELER

John Popper: Vocals, Harmonica
Chandler Kinchla: Guitars
Ben Wilson: Keyboards

Tad Kinchla: Bass
Brendan Hill: Drums, Percussion

It's not every band that's still staking out new musical territory and embracing fresh challenges more than 20 years into their career, but that's the case with Blues Traveler. Having long ago graduated from the jam-band underground to mainstream stardom, the iconoclastic combo has consistently stuck to its guns and played by its own rules.

For their new release (and Verve Forecast debut) *North Hollywood Shootout*, the quintet ventured out of their creative comfort zone to explore some adventurous new horizons. The resulting album is a landmark in Blues Traveler's large and widely loved body of work, demonstrating the enduring strengths of the band's songwriting while capturing the spontaneous spirit of their legendary live shows.

The aforementioned body of work encompasses eight studio albums and four live discs, six of them certified Gold or Platinum, with combined worldwide sales of more than ten million units. The band's best-known single, "Run-Around," was the longest-charting radio single in *Billboard* history. Along the way, the band has played more than 2000 live shows in front of more than three million people.

"We're still trying to reconcile the different things we do, and cultivate what we're individually good at into something that's bigger than the sum of its parts," notes frontman and harmonica-slinger John Popper. "When we're all playing and it's working, it becomes this separate entity, and that's still the thing that we're chasing."

North Hollywood Shootout — produced by Grammy-winner David Bianco, whose diverse resume includes work with the likes of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Ozzy Osbourne, Mick Jagger and Teenage Fanclub — makes a strong case for Blues Traveler's timelessly vital writing and performing abilities. Such memorable tunes as the uplifting road-trip anthem "You, Me and Everything," the playfully romantic "Love Does" and the elegant, evocative "Orange in the Sun" boast infectious melodic hooks while showcasing the interactive instrumental chemistry that originally endeared the band to its rabidly devoted fan base.

The new material also makes a strong case for the introspective side that's always been a key element of lyricist Popper's persona. The heart-tugging lyrics of the opening track "Forever Owed" were inspired by the singer's recent USO trip to Afghanistan and Iraq, while the poignant "Borrowed Time" is a bittersweet meditation on mortality and transience, inspired both by the recent passing of

bandmates Chan and Tad Kinchla's father, and by Popper's feelings for his beloved and aging dog. The album's biggest sonic curveball is its closing track, "Free Willis, Ruminations from Behind Uncle Bob's Machine Shop." The six-minute spoken-word sound collage finds the band jamming over an insistent drumbeat, while actor Bruce Willis, a longtime fan and friend, delivers a colorful freeform monologue/rant.

"Free Willis" is a particularly aggressive embodiment of the creative risks that the ever-restless quintet took in writing and recording *North Hollywood Shootout*. Rather than fall back on established routines, the musicians challenged themselves by adopting some new working methods.

As guitarist Chan Kinchla explains, "On the last few records, we concentrated so much on the craft of the songwriting and arrangements that we started losing some of the live spontaneity that the five of us created on stage. So on this album, instead of doing the usual pre-production process, where we really worked out the songs before taking them into the studio, we decided to go straight into the studio and do the songwriting there. We recorded all the parts as we were working them out, and then build the songs from there. We'd find a cool little pocket and jam on it, or there'd be a drumbeat or a guitar part that was really happening, and we'd take the best part of that and use it as the foundation of the song."

"That was a completely new way of working for us," Kinchla asserts, "but it was also taking what we do live and bringing it into the studio. For a long time, we thought of the studio as a completely different creative process than playing live, because we've never had much luck in trying to incorporate the stuff we do live onto a record. But this time, all the live improvisation we were doing in the studio inspired the songs."

North Hollywood Shootout also found the band ceding more authority to Popper to create melodies to carry his lyrics. "The main thing that we wanted to emphasize on this record was melody, and I think that that aspect of it turned out really well," Popper states. "The guys took a real risk in trusting me to run with that."

Their knack for evolving musically has been a hallmark of Blues Traveler's output ever since the group's four founding members — John and Chan plus bassist Bobby Sheehan and drummer Brendan Hill — began playing together as high school friends in Princeton, New Jersey. The musicians moved to New York City after graduating, and Blues Traveler quickly earned a local reputation for its high-energy, heavily improvisational live shows, with Popper's soulful singing and flamboyant harp-blowing matched by Kinchla's inventive combustible guitar work and the rhythm section's propulsive punch. Their inspired performances placed Blues Traveler at the forefront of an emerging movement of rootsy jam bands, a vibrant community that also produced Phish and the Spin Doctors. Blues Traveler soon took to the road and won a reputation as a tireless touring act, winning a fan base up and down the East Coast before they'd even released an album.

After signing a deal with A&M Records, Blues Traveler released its self-titled debut, including the hit track "But Anyway," in the spring of 1990. The album won the group a national audience that continued to grow with the following year's *Travelers and Thieves* and the live EP *On Tour Forever*, and 1993's *Save His Soul*. In 1992, Blues Traveler founded the touring H.O.R.D.E. festival, which became an influential outlet for bands associated with the jam scene. 1994's *Four* became a quintuple-platinum breakthrough for Blues Traveler, spawning the Grammy-winning smash single "Run-Around" and the followup hit "Hook." The in-concert collection *Live from*

the Fall arrived in 1996, followed by the 1997 studio effort *Straight On Till Morning*. The 1999 release of Popper's debut solo project *Zygote* was followed that August by the shocking news of bassist Bobby Sheehan's sudden death at the age of 31.

Blues Traveler eventually bounced back from the loss of their comrade, regrouping as a reenergized five-piece with the addition of Chan's brother Tad Kinchla on bass and Ben Wilson on keyboards. The new lineup made its recording debut with 2001's *Bridge*, followed by the live *What You and I Have Been Through*. The acclaimed studio album *Truth Be Told* arrived in 2003, followed in 2004 by *Live on the Rocks* and its companion DVD *Thinnest of Air*. 2005's *Bastardos!*, produced by ex-Wilco member Jay Bennett, reasserted Blues Traveler's experimental edge. 2007 saw the release of *Cover Yourself*, a set of acoustic reworkings of Blues Traveler favorites. Also in 2007, Popper stepped out again to tour and record with the John Popper Project featuring DJ Logic, which also included Tad Kinchla on bass.

As their history demonstrates and *North Hollywood Shootout* confirms, Blues Traveler have consistently managed to avoid stagnation and continue moving forward. "It's unavoidable that if you're around long enough, you're gonna fall into ruts," Popper reflects, adding, "We've been in several over the years, but you fight through that and you overcome it. We were little kids when we started, and we approached this like little kids, and I think we've held onto that. We've made mistakes, but we've never allowed ourselves to do anything that we'd be embarrassed about now."

"I think you have to be constantly reinventing things and discovering new aspects of what you do in order to keep things fresh," Kinchla adds. "This lineup, with Tad and Ben, has been together for eight years, playing over 100 shows a year for eight years. We've spent a lot of time sorting out everyone's role and learning how to listen to each other and get out of each other's way. It's funny, but right now the band is feeling a lot like it did in the early days, when we were just playing for the sake of playing and we were hitting on all cylinders and the communication was fresh and alive. The shows have been really kicking, and the new songs have been going over great."

"You have to be smart enough to know that you don't know what you're doing, and so you give it your best shot by trusting your instincts," Popper concludes. "The great thing about knowing that you don't know what you're doing is that there's more to learn. And I think that as long as we have more to learn as a band, we'll be all right. What makes it work is honesty. As long as you mean it, you've got the potential to come up with something really good."

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