

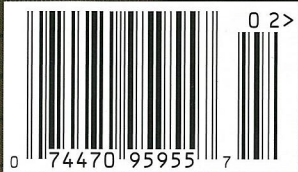
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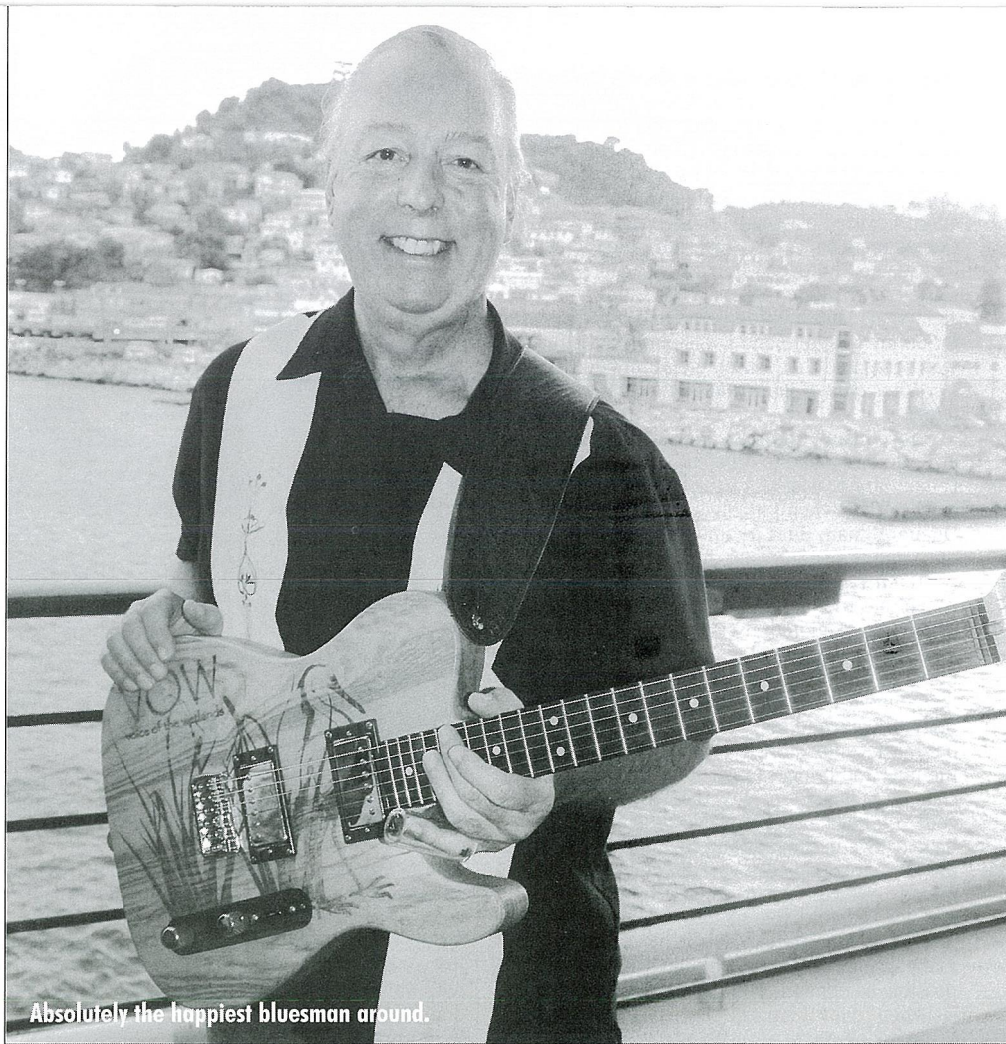
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SLIDIN' in Grenada

Slide Guitar Kings and Queen LRBC #27



Absolutely the happiest bluesman around.

Photo/Shirley Mae Owens

Billy Pierce

The Shape Of His Soul

AS TOLD TO ROGER & MARGARET WHITE

The sound of slide guitar can grab a hold and transport you to a whole different plane.

With Billy Pierce that sliver of glass and bit of wire has taken him from the Atlantic Coast of Delaware to the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and through a major illness. Through he put his instrument down for years hearing what Sonny Landreth was doing with a slide brought the fervor back, and elevated his playing to dazzling heights. With his new CD "Shapes Of Soul" Billy has stepped up to the forefront of slide players. We caught up with Billy as he was on the road to Nashville to confer with old friend and former band mate Johnny Neel.

Where do you call home?

Delaware born and raised and still live.

What got you interested in guitar?

Something was calling me. In grade school I'd go to bed with a radio hidden under my pillow listening to a station out of New York, and at that time radios had tubes so it's amazing the thing didn't catch fire. (laughs) Then my father took me to his Carpenter's Labor Day picnic and I saw a guitar player and I was memorized. I knew that's what I wanted to do.

What was your first guitar?

My dad got me a Harmony Guitar from a department store. It had flat round strings, the action was high and was almost impossible to play. But I was eleven, didn't have an amp so I hooked wires up to a stereo phonograph player and could make some noise. I was on top of the world. When I was thirteen my parents were going through a divorce and I went to stay with my aunt and uncle in Colorado. They got me a Fender Champion and an amp and signed me up for lessons. At the time I hated practicing but I'm glad now because I learned the fundamentals.

What was the first record that really grabbed you?

The Beatles, the whole British invasion and early Surf music. It wasn't until later when I was playing with the Johnny Neel Band that I realized some of those songs were written by blues guys and I started checking out the originals. That's when music started making sense to me.

What attracted you to playing slide?

In high school I played in Johnny Neel's band, he went on to play with the Allman Brothers but even before that he was leaning towards their sound and I tried to make my playing as close to

Duane Allman's as possible while still being me. I took a break from guitar for fifteen years working as an audio engineer till a friend convinced me I should pick up my guitar again. I quickly realized I was far behind other player's who'd never stopped but I could play slide and that set me apart. I started playing with Garry Cogdell and the Complainers band, he's been attributed to teaching George Thorogood how to play slide. But, I started to gravitate towards Delta blues and about eight years later a girl took me to a birthday party for Sonny Landreth and I was amazed at what he was doing and that started me on my quest.

What type of guitar do you like to play slide with?

Since I can't afford a guitar tech I carry six to eight guitars tuned to different keys and they're all Fender Stratocaster's. I have a few Telecasters and a Gibson for when I'm playing single line like Duane Allman. But I try and hit all six strings at once and the Stratocaster does it for me.

What type of slide do you like to use?

For electric, the glass Dunlop 215, the same ones Sonny Landreth uses. I can hold it flat against the strings and it's just a little longer than the Coricidin Bottle. I prefer glass or Pyrex but they only last a week or two before they start getting little pits and that bothers me. I like to press hard, I have my strings set extra high by raising the nuts and bridges to get some nice vibrato. The slide gives you so many variables with each open cord you have a couple places where you can have octave harmonies and the more you hit them the more it sounds like you're doing something nobody else can, for the longest time I swore Sonny Landreth had a peddle to make those harmonies. I like standing when I play and hit as many strings as possible to play as many notes as possible as opposed to the Duane Allman style. I sit when I play a lap or Dobro-style resonator and I'm working on an acoustic album now which will be with mostly resonator. For that I'm using either ceramic or Pyrex slides but also have some brass, steel and copper for different sounds.

Do you use your fingers or a pick?

I like the Chet Atkins picking style but I'm always trying to improve. I use a pick on my thumb and use my fingers and fingernails or the pads of my fingers for different tones. But a year and half ago I was diagnosed with throat cancer and the chemo treatments have really destroyed my fingernails. I keep them filed or they'll peel and crack and I use nail polish or super glue so they don't fall apart. I'm good for about three days of hard and vigorous playing before they start to get torn up.

Do you have any tuning that you prefer?

There's just nothing like the minors tuning. This last CD I did a couple in A minor and D minor, and C tuning on a couple, but I play in darn near every key. When someone asks me to put slide on their country music I'll use C6 tuning, and I don't know many who are brave enough to do that standing up. C6 is interesting because automatically half of it is a major cord and the other half minor depending on what strings you hit.

Who has influenced you the most?

Sonny Landreth, he's been a friend and major influence.

When I heard your CD "Shapes of Soul" I thought you were from Louisiana.

I love the music and culture and don't pretend to be from there but if people think my music has that feel I'll take that as a good thing. I had planned to call the CD "Acadiana" but producer



Duelin' Slide Brothers, Billy Pierce and Jimmy Adler.

Photo/Robert Jr Whittall

Charlie Wooton thought "Shapes of Soul" was the song everybody seemed to favor and he thought it made a better title. I'd written "Shapes Of Soul" for the drummer from the Johnny Neel Band who has passed away - Johnny actually helped me with the chord changes on the guitar solo but I don't know where that song came from except from my heart.

One standout for me is "Tears Of Joy."

Thank you, I wrote that for anyone working through personal or medical problems. I asked Mike Zito to play on it because he's such a special person and he's healed himself through his music. But again, who knows where that came from? I had the title and some chords written, and right before we started Doug Balote asked me what kind of groove I wanted and Charlie suggested the finish for it, so it was a combination of everyone working together, more than everyone just playing some hot licks. It was done in one take and that's the kind of magic that happens at the Dockside.

Dockside Studio in Maurice, Louisiana?

Yes, originally I was gonna record at another studio, but when I got sick and had to delay the project plans changed. That studio wasn't available so we did it at Dockside, right across the river from Lafayette. The second day, Michael Doucet dropped in and ended up playing fiddle and boy was that a treat! We did the whole album in just four days and some tracks we did on the first or second take. We did twelve-hour sessions and it became difficult to stand, think and play just coming off cancer treatment. I believe the success of the record has a large part to do with Charlie, but he says it's a combination of everybody working together and it's certainly been a big healing process for me.

You're very open about your cancer, how are you now?

Great, and I don't shy away from the truth. Cancer is one of those life changing events and I wouldn't be the person I am today if it hadn't happened. So many good things have come out of

this. Guys like Robert Jr. and others who've gone through it have been a big support. Last October I was scheduled to go to Louisiana and record but couldn't because I had to go through treatments. Charlie Wooton or Doug Belote called me every week and offered help and in turn I've started helping others who are going through it. The thing with cancer is, you just don't know what's going to happen and the unexpected is scary. Talking to someone who's been through it helps. Music is important but it's also good to have your feet firmly on the ground.

Right now you're on the road, what are you up to?

I'm heading to Nashville and want to do a little recording with Johnny Neel and I'll be playing with him when he comes up to my area in February.

Do you have a favorite festival?

The Voice of the Wetlands is fantastic, I had a chance to sit in last year with Tab Benoit on drums, and Chubby Carrier and Mitch Woods. I can't say enough about the good work Tab Benoit does for wetlands awareness, it's a seven-day a week job for him.

How about a favorite venue?

The most fun I ever had was playing the Rock 'n' Bowl a couple years ago, so many of my mentors and heroes have played there.

Is there someone you haven't played with yet that you'd like to?

There's nobody I wouldn't want to play with.

Final thoughts?

I want to get out and play, a bunch of radio stations around the country and Europe are playing my "Shapes Of Soul" CD and my goal is to find management that can get me to these places.

Last thoughts?

I can't thank Robert Jr. enough for all the support he's shown through my healing process and for the exposure the magazine gives to us struggling musicians. You're like family.

www.billypierce.com

**In The Caribbean with
Front: (l-r) Super Chikan, Ana
Popavic, John Hammond, Paul Nelson
Back: (l-r) Jimmy Adler, JP Soars,
Damon Fowler, Tinsley Ellis
and Billy Pierce**

Photo/Robert Jr Whittall

