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Photo: Lester Cohen/WireImage

Clapton At The Crossroads

He's been worshiped as a god, had years of substance and drink abuse problems, recorded some of the most recognisable songs in the rock and pop canon and has now become almost obsessive with keeping his work pure. Welcome to the peculiar world of Eric Clapton

Having started his career jamming on the building blocks of his blues influences with John Mayall and the Yardbirds, before negotiating two classic rock super-group's in Cream and Blind Faith, casually tossing off legendary riffs along the way (*Badge, White Room, Layla* etc.), Eric Clapton has gradually ever since been mellowing out and harking back to his roots, latterly working with many blues greats – and of course recording with BB King – to such an extent that he has now worked his way right back to the source so to speak. Robert Johnson, the great well-spring (or at least one of the mythical few) from which more or less everything we now take for granted first bubbled up. To say the new Eric Clapton album is stripped back however would be an understatement of mammoth proportions, the man referred to variously amongst the faithful as E.C. Slowhand, God or to pub quiz know-it-all's as Ricky Clapp (what his Grandparents, who he lived with whilst growing up, called him) however is unrepentant.

“Well, I think, today, I would regard myself as a musician who plays the Blues. It was something I aspired to for at least two thirds of my career and at some point, I just thought, well, now I'm actually playing with the people that I've admired and I'm able to converse with them in their language and it's become my language too, so I kind of feel like I've arrived at somewhere where I can just relax and not really worry about who I am. This is what I do. Playing the blues really is my first calling as a musician, it's what I do without having to think about it.”

DVD, DVD, DVD

It's hard however not to consider Clapton something of a luddite these days, as even on a project like the *Tribute For George* (Harrison) concert - which in truth was a very fine show indeed - Musical Director Clapton found himself worrying needlessly about the intrusion of the DVD recording crew.

“I have the highest regard for the visual side of the music, and yet this became a big issue with the concert for George, you know? When we were talking about doing it, it never

entered my head it would become an issue. But, of course as it went by, you know, DVD, DVD, DVD [however] and to be absolutely fair to everybody it was really well managed but when I watched it on the DVD, I was so concerned with, oh, I didn't see so-and-so, I was kind of held by the visual side of it, or distracted I suppose, and it wasn't until I heard the CD that I realised how fucking good the concert was.”

It's hard to imagine how someone can become so distracted by what he is watching on a concert DVD that he can't actually hear what is being played, but then it seems the stripped down purity of his projects nowadays have become so all-pervading Clapton is often unable to enjoy the end results, or, as it will later transpire, even the act of performance itself. Also, given Clapton's current state of mind, it's no surprise that

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there is no talk of returning to the psychedelic blues blasts of Cream, or the more upbeat rock classics of yesteryear, what plans he has remain resolutely plugged into foraging around in the past.

“I loved working with B.B. [King] we had a very, very, successful album and my next ambition is to play with Buddy Guy and make a record with him, I mean, there is something about playing with Buddy... I don't believe we've done it properly yet, on record, anyway.”

Then The Audience Came In

Naturally enough, performers, who haven't completely burned out, and have been bashing away at this rock and roll lark for some time will occasionally, and understandably, lose their way or indeed, as in this case, simply want to hark back to the records that inspired them to perform in the first place – see also Bill Wyman's worthy, but mostly dull, Rhythm Kings project. But unless they are bringing something new, insightful,

or previously missed, to the project the question has to be asked 'what's the point?' Surely such reverential re-workings would be better left for impromptu jams with friends and family – because in all honesty there's nothing on *Me And Mr Johnson* that you couldn't hear at any number of good blues nights around the country any night of the week, and if anything Clapton's own theories on playing live prove the point, that it's only ever in the 'sitting around with your mates' part of the equation that things really work for him nowadays.

“At some point the audience is a necessary part of the equation,” he admits. “[but] we always say in amongst ourselves, the musicians that is, that our favourite part is rehearsals, 'cause we haven't got anybody to please. You know? We do whatever we like, and if we're halfway through a song we just

stop if we want. There's a point where the audience comes in, and it all gets edgy and nervy and not as enjoyable. I mean, they gotta be there, obviously. Otherwise we wouldn't be musicians in the first place, but what happens then is never as good as you want it to be, it's like the Holy Grail. That's the thing about the majority of

concerts, I don't remember being there because I was so nervous about getting it right. Now the rehearsals were fantastic, and I can remember all of them, but then you can't just have rehearsals without a tour.”

No you can't, especially if you want to flog a few records, but there's nothing to stop a performer of Clapton's pedigree saying, sod it, I've had enough I only want to play for fun (he can't be short of dosh), especially if the live experience is now such a trial. There is absolutely no doubting the fact that Eric Clapton has had just as many dreadful calamities in his life as wonderful breaks, and people often find solace clutching at the past rather than facing the future, but let's hope these journeys back to his youth finally bring him full circle and lead him back to the present and beyond because on his current course he is in very grave danger of losing himself entirely.

Timeline

Born March 30, 1945, and raised by his grandparents – thinking his grandmother was his mother until age 9 when he learned that his 'sister' was actually his mother – Clapton became fascinated with the blues and playing the guitar after receiving one as gift for his 13th birthday. By age 17, he had dropped out of Kingston College of Art to focus on a music career in London.

1960's

Joins The Roosters and then The Yardbirds before moving on to John Mayall and The Bluesbreakers, where he picks up his nickname, 'Slowhand' (due to his ability to bend, and often break, strings). He soon becomes the major focus of the band and, in 1966, forms Cream with Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker, an influential, if notoriously unstable trio that breaks up in 1968 when Clapton creates one of the first-ever 'supergroups', Blind Faith with Steve Winwood, Ginger Baker and Ric Grech – it proves to be yet another unstable line-up and ground to a halt in 1969. Clapton also finds time in the '60s to work with John Lennon (both in concert and on 'Cold Turkey') and Delaney & Bonnie.

1970's

Goes solo with the release of *Eric Clapton* and hit single 'After Midnight' before forming Derek And The Dominos with Bobby Whitlock, Jim Gordon and Carl Radle. This union produces yet another hit single, 'Layla' (about his friend George Harrison's wife Patti Boyd who he later marries and divorces), but heroin puts paid to this line-up and ensures Clapton more or less disappears until 1973 when he resurfaces to work with George Harrison on The Concert For Bangla Desh and records his own *Eric Clapton's Rainbow Concert* with, amongst others, Pete Townshend. 1974 brings the release of *461 Ocean Boulevard* and Clapton has a hit single with the Bob Marley cover 'I Shot The Sheriff'. In 1975, releases *There's One In Every Crowd* and live album *E.C. Was Here*. In 1976, releases *No Reason To Cry* but also prompts the birth of musical pressure group Rock Against Racism with an inebriated speech at a concert in Birmingham where he aligned himself with the UK politician Enoch Powell, infamous for his 'rivers of blood' speech opposing mass immigration. In 1977, releases *Slowhand* (containing hits 'Lay Down Sally', 'Wonderful Tonight' and his take on JJ Cale's classic 'Cocaine'). In 1978, releases *Backless* and ends the decade with major drinking problems.

1980's

Kicks off the decade with double live album *Just One Night* and follows that one year later with *Another Ticket*, before collapsing during a concert in Wisconsin, which leads to his treatment for alcoholism. In 1983, releases *Time Pieces – The Best Of Eric Clapton*, and *Money And Cigarettes* for his new record label, Warner Brothers. In 1985, releases *Behind The Sun* and then the following year, *August* (including the hit song from *The Colour Of Money*, 'It's In The Way That You Use It'). In 1988, he releases the lavish 73-track box set *Crossroads* and winds up the decade with critically-acclaimed studio album *Journeyman*.

1990's

The decade begins dismally as Clapton loses several members of his road crew and friend Steve Ray Vaughan in a helicopter crash. The following year, he releases another live album, *24 Nights* (recorded at the Albert Hall), but tragedy is again not far away when his four-year-old son Conor dies in a freak accident during which he falls from a high-rise building. In 1992, releases his biggest-selling album, *Unplugged*, and then spends the next few years filling his shelves with awards. In 1994, releases *From The Cradle*, a collection of old blues standards and, the following year, *The Cream Of Eric Clapton*. 1996 sees another 70-track box set, *Crossroads 2: Live In The Seventies*. In 1998, he releases *Pilgrim* and ends the decade by opening The Crossroads Centre in the Caribbean, a rehabilitation centre he has funded with over \$6 million partly financed by auctioning off 100 of his guitars, and issuing two albums, *The Blues* and *Clapton Chronicles: The Best Of Eric Clapton*.

2000-2004

In 2000, releases *Riding With The King* – recorded with B.B. King – and, the following year, *Reptile*. A year later, releases yet another live album, *One More City, One More Car*. In 2004, releases *Me & Mr Johnson*.

