Michael Bloomfield: An Appreciation

BY RALPH HEIBUTZKI

irst things first: I never met Michael Bloomfield, nor did I see him live. Growing up in the provinces does that, I guess.

But that’s OK: I feel like I’ve known Michael through his music. Like many listeners, I remember when the first lightning bolts struck, and the insights that flickered across my synapses, triggering something I wouldn’t have experienced otherwise.

My passport to Michael’s music came through my high school college prep teacher, who’d been a card-carrying denizen of the counterculture, and was now doing his best to reconcile those memories with the teeth-gritting realities of making a living.

Neither did he miss a chance to point out what he saw lacking in today’s music – which intrigued me, since the Doors (“Strange Days”), MC5 (“Kick Out The Jams”), Lou Reed (“Take No Prisoners”), and the Velvet Underground (“1969 Live”) already formed a major part of my listening diet.

Finally, the wise guy in me couldn’t hold back anymore, and I simply had to ask: “OK, if everything sucks so bad, tell me what you like!”

The next day, my teacher returned with a copy of the ’60s-era Columbia comp, “Heavy Sounds” ... and even let me take it home! Amid the day’s other great names (Big Brother & The Holding Company; Taj Mahal; Laura Nyro; Johnny Winter), I found “Albert’s Shuffle,” the gutsy tour de force from “Super Session” (1968), Michael’s “anything can happen” summit with Al Kooper. The track provided a perfect bookend to “Killing Floor,” the Howlin’ Wolf standard that Michael waxed with the Electric Flag.

Once you heard Michael in full flight, shooting out those spitfire clusters of notes, string bends and sustains that defined his style, you couldn’t settle for anything less. Hearing his grasp of melody and improvisational derring-do exposed the ’80s chart sounds for the paper tigers they were – staggering without spark or spirit from one lightweight idea to the next.

I naturally bugged my teacher for a copy of “Super Session,” which he duly lent out, too – and joined a growing pile of blues-related tapes scoured from the local library, or some dusty eight-tracks that I’d snap for $1 a pop.

My knowledge of Michael’s tragic death in February 1981 – accompanied by Rolling Stone’s four-page tribute – didn’t slow down my quest to find out more. Far from it! The mythology of his insomnia, bouts with alcohol and chemicals, and readiness to tackle any major or marginal project only deepened my drive for hearing more, and finding out more, too.

Not everyone shared my enthusiasm, as I learned during a wintry ’81 bus ride to this one-act play competition. To ease the prospect of a three-hour-and-then-some trip, I took cassettes of “Disraeli Gears” (Cream) and “My Labors,” Michael’s joint venture with Nick Gravenites.

I sat back, while “Gypsy Good Time” flowed through my cheapie headphones, but inevitably, somebody behind me must have not computed those stinging volleys of notes: “Hey, man, don’t you have any music that isn’t bizarre?”

Suitably annoyed, I turned around and said, “C’mon, man, these are your roots! Where do you think all that stuff you take for granted today comes from?”

Naturally, the notion of idols like Styx’s Mr. Roboto being related to my “bizarre” music – however improbable, or absurd, that seemed – yielded little but folded arms, and rolled eyes.

I understood all too well: sweater-clad pods had reclaimed the airwaves, so many ’60s icons (Michael included) had already been relegated to the “Whatever happened to ... ?” file with indecent haste.

But I continued the quest, wearing out three bargain bin eight-track copies of “The Live Adventures of Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper” (I never got past sides one and two until I finally scored its vinyl relation in the late ’80s), and another of “Live at Bill Graham’s Fillmore West.” “The Best Of The Electric Flag,” on the other hand, survived unscathed in eight-track form, and I still have it today: go figure.

In 1983, Ed Ward’s book (“Michael Bloomfield: The Rise & Fall Of An American Guitar Hero”) rekindled all the excitement I’d ever felt about the Bloomfield mystique, even if the central question (“OK, why didn’t he break out, exactly?”) hung in the air, tantalizingly unanswered. (I finally sold my copy on eBay for $110 – to somebody in Italy, appropriately enough, where Michael’s last tour occurred.)

So what happened, exactly?

Self-sabotage remains a favored explanation, one voiced by compadres like keyboardist Mark Naftalin in Jan-Mark Wolkin’s laudable oral history, “If You Love These Blues” (2000):

“The spotlight or the pressure or something just pushed him over the edge. There was no aesthetic of creation or ethic of friendship that could withstand it.”

In some ways, this makes greater sense than blaming the trust fund that allowed Bloomfield to chase his muse full-time. Don’t forget, this is the guitarist whose sleep-deprived collapse necessitated the recruitment of guests (Carlos Santana, and Elvin Bishop) to round out that “Live Adventures” LP.

As early as 1966, Michael’s colleagues found themselves having to make these little adjustments, prompted by the host of demons that he battled throughout his life – from arthritis in his hands, to substance abuse, insomnia and depression – yet fueled his muse, for better or for worse.

Yet it’s also worth recalling that his most memorable work, from his improvisational showcases (“East-
West,” “Another Country”) to albums like “Super Session” and “If You Love These Blues (Play ’Em As You Please),” occurred with inspired, like-minded collaborators. This policy worked wonders when the credits included Kooper or Naftalin, less so when the likes of Beaver & Krause crashed the party, or when Michael and Norman Dayron agreed that a slide guitar instrumental remake of Leo Sayer’s make-out ballad, “When I Need You,” just couldn’t stay in the can (as happened on 1978’s album, “Count Talent & The Originals”). It’s not hard to fathom how the latter decisions impacted the Bloomfield mystique.

The prevailing image dogging my mind is some collegiate Valhalla where the bean bag chairs are always dented, the Pabst Blue Ribbon is ever-overflowing, and drug testing for even the most mind-numbing jobs reads like a neo-Nixonian pipe dream.

Now, imagine the frizzy-haired roomies’ moods plunging south, once needle and turntable intersect for the arid landscapes that characterized an offering like “The Band Played On” (1974), the Electric Flag’s comeback attempt.

Forget the authority of Buddy Miles’ fatback percussive attack; these drums sputter along, as dead as rubber buckets.

Never mind the swirling Hammond organ that made the likes of “Sunny” memorable; it’s been hijacked by the harmless plinky-plonk-plonk of an airbrushed Fender Rhodes.

And, finally, where some Morse Code-signal leads should shred the speakers, there’s only the stutter of a dampened rhythm guitar.

Furrowed brows turn to frowns. With nary a string bend in earshot, comes the anguished plea for mercy, as in, “Dude, what do you see in this guy? Take it off, ‘cause this music sucks!”

The imprint of the Electric Flag experience, and the lasting distaste it created in Michael’s mind towards the business realities of his chosen profession, cannot be overstated. The fate of other Bay Area bands – such as Moby Grape, whose classic debut lost momentum when Columbia Records released all 10 songs as singles – provided all the confirmation that Bloomfield needed to avoid settling in one place too long.

Then and now, however, such notions amount to signing a commercial death warrant of sorts. The path of least resistance is the preferred option, plowing the same furrow without a wink of deviation, and the early ’70s were little different.

The counterculture’s anything-goes experimentalism lay in full retreat – and the “nice, clean sound” that Michael’s longtime producer/running buddy, Norman Dayron, recalls him battling to keep out of the Electric Flag mix had become the industry norm.

That sound, as Norman so memorably and succinctly phrased it in my 2001 TAPE OP interview with him, boiled down to one major fault: “Recorded all clean, all the same way, all through the same microphone, with the same EQ and everything – so that when you combine ‘em,” he recalled, “you get this sterile result.”

You don’t have to be a techie to recognize what’s going on here: It’s the sound of sameness, wrapped up into a suffocating, gauzy little bow that falls dead on arrival into your ears.

As Dayron recalled, when confronted with these hassles, Michael did his best to counter them during the mixing process – but, sometimes, the damage had been done, leading our blues guitar hero to say, “You can’t make gold out of shit.” Amen.

Scuffy guys playing roots music on beat-up Telecasters would no longer be invited to this particular party, especially when the principal concern focused around buckets of money.

Given those little hitches, Michael’s desire to shun hype at any cost is understandable (imagine Elvin Bishop starring in a reality-show train-wreck: “I’m Paul Butterfield’s Next Red Hot Guitarist!”); yet this same policy works against him nowadays.

I felt this way while watching VH1’s 40th anniversary look at the Monterey Pop Festival, in which the Electric Flag played such a prominent part. Imagine my amazement at seeing airtime being donated to the likes of the Association – pondering over the nuances of that decision would be an act of cruelty, so let’s just say the ignorance involved didn’t surprise me.

What did surprise me was the blink-and-miss-it footage of Michael speed-rapping for the audience, as well as bopping in place during someone else’s set, without so much as an ID tag to his name, no talking head to explain his significance to the folks at home. This is how we immortalize our fallen musical heroes – not terribly well, as it happens.

At some point, I imagine this stereotypical bald guy with an oversized stogie jutting from his lips, barking out, “Hey, kid, what’s your point? Does it really matter?”

My retort is, hell, yeah, it does matter, because there is a connection between understanding your history, and using it to pull off something truly creative: if nothing else, Michael’s work should teach us that lesson, and the need to take chances.

Sometimes, he succeeded gloriously – as on “East-West,” or “Another Country” – and other times, didn’t appear to be in the firing range (“KGB,” anyone? “The Band Played On”? I think not). As many of Michael’s associates have so aptly observed, some of his albums were better realized than others, but all bear his imprint, regardless.

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I feel the same way about qualities like Michael’s famously off-kilter vocal style – which is often enough to make me laugh out loud, and say, “Wow, he thought this was a great take?” – but I’ve never had a problem picking it out of the proverbial police lineup.

In today’s scene, where everything is pitch-blended and processed to an awesome state of mechanical perfection, this is definitely a radical concept.

I find myself revisiting these points again, now that I’ve begun performing “Frankie & Johnny,” one of the standbys of Michael’s final years as a one-man band, and traveling salesman of American music. My own arrangement of “Frankie & Johnny,” one of the standbys of Michael’s final years as a one-man band, and traveling salesman of American music. My own arrangement and performance is a variation on Michael’s more traditional version, as I always tell the folks in the house ...

Now I picked up this song from Mr. Bloomfield

Off a bootleg or two on CD

Did it come from somebody in Sausalito?

No, it was sent by somebody in Italy!

... but that’s part of the point, too: the baton is ours to grab, and adapt, as we see fit.

That’s another critical lesson to take from albums like “If You Love These Blues (Play ’Em As You Please),” the all-star guitar instructional LP that Michael conceived as a rebound from his disastrous KGB experience – and that was
nominated for a Grammy. A more improbable concept is hard to imagine, but thanks to the magic of CD reissues, it’s more widely, rightfully available than ever before.

And yet, something happens when I’m navigating “Frankie & Johnny,” vamping that C-F-G or B-flat/E-flat/F holy trinity of flatted chords, improvising lyrics to drop in a little wisdom about Michael’s life and times, some rhyming, some not, as willful as the man himself might be ... 

Michael, now, was a master
He was a master of American guitar
It’s too bad more people don’t know him
Except in interviews by the likes of Mick Mars
He is the man if you want a little blues,

**HIS style.**

Now Mike had a habit of doing this song, ’78 to ’80,
Would he show up, baby, or wouldn’t he?
There’s bets goin’ around all among the barflies,
‘Cause he was their man, but he’s doin’ them wrong.

During these highly-charged moments of my own playing, I realize that Michael’s music is more than just a legacy. It is a living, breathing creation that survives outside the constraints of trends and fads, confronts you on its terms, and dares you to find out something more than what you heard last week.

Michael Bloomfield is like an old friend who remains perennially late, but is always a pleasure to see on scratchy old vinyl albums, live bootlegs or CD reissues. And whether we experienced that force of nature firsthand or not, it’s safe to say that we’ll never stop renewing our acquaintance with the guitar hero known as Michael Bloomfield, for decades to come.

If you love these blues ... indeed.

Ralph Heibutzki is a reviewer and author whose work has appeared in a variety of music publications including Discoveries, Goldmine, Guitar Player and Vintage Guitar. His latest book is “Unfinished Business: The Life and Times of Danny Gatton” (Backbeat Books 2003). His web site is www.chairmanralph.com. His music can be heard at www.nextcat.com/chairmanralph.