

ERIC BIBB CHANNELS DELTA GUITAR MASTER BOOKER WHITE TO CRAFT BLUES FOR A NEW ERA

***Booker's Guitar* set for retail on January 26, 2010**

The story is as legendary as Robert Johnson at the crossroads, as old as the blues itself. A traveling musician has a chance encounter in the most unlikely of places with something mystical and powerful, and everything changes. Suddenly, everything is up for grabs, and the music – already rich and historically resonant – takes a whole new direction.

So it was for itinerant troubadour Eric Bibb one night in a London hotel after a gig just a few years ago, when he was approached by a fan carrying a guitar case. Inside the case was a relic from the past that made the hair on the back of Bibb's neck stand on end: a 1930s vintage Resophonic National steel-body guitar that had belonged to Delta blues legend Booker White. In a moment that could only be described as intoxicating, Bibb found himself holding Booker's guitar, and catching a brief but revealing glimpse of all the stories locked within it.

The encounter inspired a song, and the song became an entire album – one that captures the spirit of the original Delta blues of the early 20th century and reinterprets it for a new era. ***Booker's Guitar*** is set for release on January 26, 2010, on Telarc International, a division of Concord Music Group.

“Holding the guitar that Booker White had played for so many years,” Bibb recalls, “seeing his actual handwriting on a set list that had been taped to the side of the guitar – it all made me feel like the time was finally upon me to make a statement about my relationship with the Delta blues tradition. It was like a rite of passage, an initiation. I felt like this guitar finding its way to me was a signal that I had journeyed far enough to be able to make an honest tribute to the music of my heroes.”

Born in rural Mississippi in 1909, Booker White – an older cousin to B.B. King – was a Delta blues singer and slide guitarist who made the bulk of his recordings between 1930 and 1940. He was imprisoned in Memphis in 1937 for allegedly shooting a man, but he jumped bail and made it all the way to Chicago before being captured and sent to Parchman Farm, a notorious Mississippi prison. He was released two years later, but after recording a few more songs, his music career faltered. He disappeared into obscurity for the next two decades, but was rediscovered during the folk-blues revival of the early '60s.

“Booker White was someone who I was aware of and listened to while I was growing up,” says Bibb, who was a teenager when White resurfaced. “I followed his career from his earliest recordings to the time when he was rediscovered during the folk movement of the '60s and started touring not only in the States, but also in Europe – which is how my friend, Keith, met him and eventually came into possession of his guitar.”

The encounter inspired the album's half-spoken, half-sung title track, which Bibb recorded in England using White's guitar. The remaining tracks, although recorded in rural Ohio on Bibb's own guitars, sprang from the same well of inspiration. “Once I had written that song, I really wanted to make a complete statement and document my connection to the Delta blues tradition,” says Bibb. “I really wanted to put myself in the position of my heroes, but in a contemporary context, and create songs that I feel could have been part of their repertoire

and could have come from their own experience.”

“Booker’s Guitar” opens the set, and is followed immediately by the spiritually charged “With My Maker, I am One,” a song that Bibb describes as a reflection on the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. “The guitar riff is very funky,” he explains. “It reminds me of something Muddy Waters might have done, like ‘I’m a Man,’ one of those really declarative kinds of songs where you’re saying something very personal and powerful. But this song really opens it up lyrically. It talks about being both the slave and the slave master, both the warden and the prisoner. To me, it kind of speaks to the whole universal quality of the blues.”

“Wayfaring Stranger,” one of only two songs on the album not penned by Bibb (the other being Blind Willie Johnson’s “Nobody’s Fault But Mine”), is an old hymn of obscure origins that was taught to slaves in America and was gradually absorbed into the folk canon of the 18th and 19th centuries. “It’s not a blues song as such, but I felt like it belonged in this collection,” says Bibb. “The song itself is so powerful, and it seems to evoke so much of what was the experience of so many people from that era. I’m happy with the way it turned out.”

Optimistic and rousing, “New Home” is one of several places on *Booker’s Guitar* where harpist Grant Dermody – Bibb’s sole accompanist on the recording – shines brightly. “The solo he plays here is a perfect example of what a phenomenal musician Grant is,” says Bibb. “What’s so wonderful about his playing is that it’s obvious that he’s well versed in the blues idiom. He does a fantastic job of avoiding tired clichés. His sound comes from a place so deep in the blues well.”

“Turning Pages” is Bibb’s whimsical – and somewhat autobiographical – ode to the joys of reading, both as a child and as an adult. “This song was truly a heartfelt expression,” says Bibb. “I was able to mention a few of my favorite writers, Walter Mosley being one of them. Considering that some of my musical heroes were actually illiterate, or nearly illiterate, I thought it would be interesting to record a bluesy tune about reading. It was just another way of making the blues as personal and as honest as possible, and not getting into the trap of becoming a caricature or a parody.”

The chugging closer, “A-Z Blues,” is a musical travelogue of the countless places where Bibb – and so many troubadours like him, past and present – have stopped on their endless blues journey.

That journey is one that crosses generations as much distances on any map. In the end, *Booker’s Guitar* – mystical and powerful – is the instrument that connects Eric Bibb to another era, and at the same time connects the blues of another era to the human experience of the modern day. “Writing a country blues song that draws on the traditions but is not rehashing old material from another era – writing something that’s both connected to that tradition but is contemporary as well – is hugely challenging,” says Bibb. “It’s tricky, but I was so happy that I was able to do it for a whole album, and really feel like I could stay focused on that whole sound and that whole culture. It was an achievement that I had been wanting to pull off, but hadn’t been able to do until now.”

Eric Bibb’s *Booker’s Guitar* (TEL-31756-02) is due at retail on January 26, 2010.

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