

ROBBEN FORD

“Every day more and more/I’ve got peace on my mind” “Peace on My Mind”

“The blues is a leaving, breathing art form,” explains Robben Ford, who has been playing them for most of his adult life. “They have always been sociopolitical.”

The veteran musician, who has received four Grammy nominations, a nod by *Musician* magazine as one of the “100 Greatest Guitarists of the 20th Century” and has played with the likes of Joni Mitchell, George Harrison, Miles Davis, Greg Allman, Phil Lesh and Larry Carlton, puts that observation into practice on his third and latest Concord Music Group album, *Truth*.

While recognized by his peers and critics as a superlative instrumentalist and technician, Ford insists writing songs has kept his career on an upward trajectory. *Truth* features superb playing, but more importantly, it tells a story.

“On this album, I am speaking out about the things I believe in, using the language of the blues, but updating it in a modern, evolutionary context,” he explains, with new songs like the first single, “Lateral Climb,” and “Peace on My Mind,” dealing with such issues as the faltering economy and the war in Iraq with a fresh, personal approach.

Ford employs an all-star cast which includes guest vocalists Susan Tedeschi (on Paul Simon’s “One Man’s Ceiling is Another Man’s Floor”) and Siedah Garrett (backgrounds on “You’re Gonna Need a Friend” and “River of Soul”), keyboardist Larry Goldings, bassist Chris Chaney, drummer Gary Novak along with keyboardist Bernie Worrell, and drummer/bassist Charley Drayton, both from Keith Richards’ Expensive Winos. The album also includes songwriting collaborations with Keb Mo (“Riley B. King”), Nashville tunesmiths Gary Nicholson (“How Deep in the Blues [Do You Want to Go]”) and Danny Flowers (“River of Soul”), his wife Anne Kerry Ford (“You’re Gonna Need a Friend”) and his nephew Gabriel Ford (“Too Much”).

“The songs I wrote for this record were naturally inspired by the times,” says Ford. “I once covered one of Willie Dixon’s songs, ‘It Don’t Make Sense, You Can’t Make Peace,’ which he wrote at the time of the Vietnam War. But it’s obviously applicable today.”

“Lateral Climb” is typical of Ford’s approach, a personal song set against a churning blues backdrop; it deals with such modern-day problems as credit card debt and the treadmill of the 9-to-5 rat race.

“That’s about something from my own life,” he laughs. “I make a lot more money than I used to, and I got rid of all my credit cards, but it doesn’t seem to make any difference. That’s the blues today.”

The ominous, post-9/11 “Peace on My Mind” is as up-to-date as today’s headlines, with lines like “Who can make sense/Of problems in a distant land” and “When fire meets

fire/You burn away the common ground,” Ford creates his own version of a protest song for the times.

“It’s an anti-war song without being too preachy,” Ford explains. “If you’re pointing a finger, no one wants to hear it. It’s a portrait rather than a sermon. The truths I describe are self-evident.”

Ford also tries to subvert and bring new meaning to blues clichés like the evil woman who bedevils her victim in songs like “You’re Gonna Need a Friend” (ironically, co-written with his wife, singer Anne Kerry Ford and “There’ll Never Be Another You,” which expresses that uneasiness with a 7/4 tempo that segues into 6/4 for the guitar solo over lyrics like “Will she poison my coffee/Sweeten my tea?”

“There’s a lot of repetition in the blues, so just a subtle shift can make all the difference,” he says. “That small change takes you to a different place.”

Ford pays tribute to one of his primary influences in “Riley B. King,” an homage to B.B., whom he first saw at the old Fillmore in San Francisco opening for another of his favorite guitarists, Mike Bloomfield’s Electric Flag. He wrote the song in Sedona, AZ, responding to the city’s spiritual energy, then gave it to Keb Mo, who recorded a version of it with Ford and Robert Cray for his album, and made some suggestions to help freshen the chorus.

Two covers help define Ford’s love of southern R&B. His faithful version of Otis Redding’s “Nobody’s Fault But Mine,” a B-side to an early single which spotlights the punchy horn section of sax player Dave “Woody” Woodford and Dan Fornero on trumpet, while his funky take on Paul Simon’s “One Man’s Ceiling is Another Man’s Floor,” featuring a duet with Susan Tedeschi, recalls the original’s use of the Muscle Shoals rhythm section.

“I thought I could do a good job with it,” says Ford of the Simon song. “Susan really sings her ass off. Because I didn’t write it, that made it easier for both of us to do our own thing with it.”

Ford maintains the raw, live sound he prefers on the grinding “Too Much,” featuring Larry Goldings’ distinctive Hammond B3 organ, though he also shifts stylistic direction for the deliberate “River of Soul” and “Moonchild Blues,” a song inspired by a line from a Howlin’ Wolf song.

“The blues is where all my songs come from,” Ford admits. “It just feels good to work with a classic musical art form and keep it alive. I feel part of a tradition, as opposed to being out there all alone trying to create songs out of thin air. It’s unfortunate that people would think of the blues as something that’s ancient. The blues is pretty universal, but there’s a boldness to this record, a language I’ve used to make it new.”

“I want my music to be about something,” concludes Ford. “I have come up with new contexts for my playing... that’s what gives it a purpose.”

Ford speaks the *Truth*... not just with the sound of his guitar, but the vision behind his music.