

The Charlie Keating Band

by Brian M. Owens

The Blues is a major catalyst behind Charlie Keating's life and personality. He is a consummate slide guitarist, tradition-bound songcrafter and fine singer of the idiom. Fueled by a peculiar set of circumstances that led him to find bassist Lenny Turnquist, Keating and Turnquist entered Wellspring Sound with drummer Dom Micarelli and churned out a superb blues offering entitled, *Slide On Over*. Charlie and I spoke one September afternoon and he entertained me with his take on guitars, amps, recording, and his first true love, the blues...

METRONOME: Your obviously an accomplished slide player. Where are you from and how long have you been playing?

I'm originally from Dorchester. Born and raised in Boston. I spent some time in New York, but mostly here in Boston.

METRONOME: I imagine you've played in bands your whole life?

Oh yeah, ever since I was a kid. For a couple of years I just wrote, but I've been basically doing my main love, the blues.

METRONOME: What got you hooked on the blues?

It was kinda two fold. I heard a lot of Hank Williams. When I was a kid, my mother played that stuff. My older sister was playing a lot of James Brown. Everybody was playing something. I always loved the sound of that old lap steel. I read up on it and one day went and bought an Elmore James record for 99¢, and a B.B. King one for 99\$, and they were in mono.

Friends always ask me, "Why do you play the blues?" I say, I don't play the blues, I have the blues. I don't just play it now because I like the sound, there's things going on in my personal life and it's unfortunate that I express it like that. I have friends who can't. When I have a bad day or a good day, it comes out. I had a neighbor that lived across the street that used to say, "I can tell what kind of mood you're in when we hear you playing." But the blues is not all about being sad. Sometimes it is, but it's also a celebration of life, so when you're happy you want to play that little shuffle and do a little call and response.

METRONOME: How old were you when you started playing slide guitar?

I wasn't playing long when I started playing slide. I didn't really know what I was doing back then. I didn't know anything about open tuning. I was actually using a small, Gerber baby food jar with two fingers because it was too big for one. Then one Sunday I was home, messing around with different tunings. I was probably fifteen. Quite by accident, I tuned it to an E and said, Oh, that's the ticket. That's the stuff. I didn't have a clue. I took lessons when I was a kid and went to Berklee part time while I was still in high school, but as far as slide, that was by trial and error.

METRONOME: You're saying it was all by accident?

Yeah. I experiment all the time. I'll tune to any open strings to see what happens. A lot of times I'll say, Oh, that's terrible. I look at the guitar fretboard as a keyboard. I wondered if you can do this on a keyboard, play these notes and octaves so far apart, but you can't do it on guitar, how can you make it similar? With the open tuning, it gives you more options so you can hit the chord and you still have notes. Also, I'm



naturally left handed. I play right handed so my left hand is more agile. I have more dexterity. Before I started to take lessons when I was a kid, I was playing left handed and right handed. Joe Dimare in Andrews Square, the Dimare brothers, were great guitar players. He said, you're going to have to use a mirror or find another teacher because you're left handed kid. Since I was messing around both ways I said, Fine, I'll go right handed. Being young everybody wanted to place fast, but I had no speed in my right hand. I had no speed at all because I was playing the wrong way, but my left hand had a lot more dexterity. I would do things with my left hand. It was natural for me to do that.

METRONOME: How long has the Charlie Keating Band been together?

In this form, a little over four years. Basically

it's been going on for about ten years under different names. I always loved the blues and it's what I play. I was always getting hired by a classic rock band and playing some blues too. One day I just sat down and said... I was never singing as much as I do now. I would sing a little bit with the band and on my demos, but I was never the lead guy. So one day I said, I want to do what I want to do. I'm going to play the blues and the only way I'm going to take control is I have to have the mic. Even if you don't talk in to the mic during rehearsal, people listen to the guy who has the mic; the bandleader. I sat down with a ratty old acoustic for about six months until it literally fell apart. The bridge was warped but it was great for playing slide because the action was high. I sat down and started writing stuff and doing my thing. It was harder to play, but I wanted

to slow down. I didn't want to do these lightning fast licks and be the "guitar god" and this and that. I played something that was hard to play and playing a lot of slide. I actually wrote some of the tunes off the new CD on that guitar. When that guitar fell apart, I went back to playing the electric.

Just a little side note: the original Charles Keating Blues Band was in high school. There was a summer outdoor show people were putting on and they wanted me to play. I didn't have a band together and I didn't know what to call it so they called it The Charles Keating Blues Band and put it up all over the high school. No one called me "Charles!"

I ended up moving out of the South Shore and landed on the North Shore. No one was going to come up here to rehearse and I wasn't going to drive down there with the price of gas. I posted an ad in a music store, but no one was calling. I thought, Are there no blues players up here? Then I get a call from some people jamming in New Hampshire. It turns out the bass player and also the person who produced this CD, Lenny Turnquist, who put in so much work (and that's why it sounds the way it sounds) joined up with me. Then we started the search for a drummer.

After about two years, I was looking for some lyrics and came upon my original ad. Lenny took the whole ad down. She was looking for a good blues player and being as devious as she is (and I say that in a good way. I respect someone who is devious) she took the whole ad down so nobody else could call, hence I didn't get any calls except that one, which turned out to be good! But I didn't know this for two years. She said, "I didn't have a pen." She stole my ad, but I'm glad she did. I think it's funny because I never knew why I wasn't getting any calls at all.

METRONOME: How long ago was that?

About four and a half years back.

METRONOME: How did your drummer Uncle Dom enter the band?

We're actually not playing with him now. We went through a succession of drummers. I like to play the real blues. Some people say they like the blues, but don't really know what the blues is. We don't just go up and jam. Lenny has a very good ear. A lot of people think that just because you're doing an Elmore James tune you can just whip something out. It's not like that. If you're playing slide, the bass has to play in a different octave. There's a lot of work put in to it. But Dom was driving up from the South Shore, god bless his soul. He was driving from Hingham to the North Shore religiously, through rain, sleet and snow like a mailman. Dom was on the CD and he did a great job.

METRONOME: How long was he in the band?

He was with us a good two years. We did a ton of gigs with him.

METRONOME: Who is your new drummer?

Our new drummer is Tim O'Malley.

METRONOME: How did you meet Tim?

I scrounge around the internet and then Lenny picks up that stuff because the drummer and the bass player have to key in. That's real important. So I'm not one to say, I want this guy. The thing I hate about her is that she's usually right. She has such a great ear. She'll say, "Try it like this. That tuning doesn't sound right." Normally I'm kind of stubborn. I won't listen to anybody, but

she's always right which is a pain. Her ear is so good. She produced the CD. It sounded good and I was fine with it. That's why it sounds so damn good, because of her.

METRONOME: You said you were writing music early on...

I started writing music when I was a kid. As a matter of fact, I just got accepted by SESAC. Anybody can join BMI or ASCAP, but for SESAC you have to be asked to join. They also have Robert Johnson. His songs are there. I'm in damn good company. I was shocked, but they heard the CD and the next thing I know I'm getting emails.

I can't write if I'm in a good mood. If I'm too happy, I can't write because the songs are too sweet. Sometimes it's good, but I write better when I'm pissed off. It's not the same process all the time. Sometimes I'll sit down and write lyrics and sometimes I'll come up with this riff and sing whatever sounds right. It might be simple like on the CD, "Please Come Home." There's not a lot of lead licks therefore the lyrics fit and they're easy to remember. I figure if I can remember them, they must have to be there. But it's not always like that.

METRONOME: Does Lenny write at all? Do you and Lenny ever sit down together and collaborate?

No, never, but she does have a lot of input. As a matter of fact, she wanted the title track of the CD, "Slide On Over" on the album. I did that track on a digital recorder in my house not intending to release it or have it be a band song. She heard it and said, "Hey, that's a great song." I said, No, no, no. Then I walked in one day during a mix and she's there already at Wellspring Sound with the engineer of the studio. What do I hear blasting over the speakers that they've been working on for two weeks. That's how the title track came about; by a song I didn't even want,

but she thought that it sounded good. I never intended that to be on the CD, but it sounded good and she's always right! So I said, Okay. When were you going to tell me? When the CD was out? Every rough mix we had, she had that song. Like I always say, truth is stranger than fiction. You can't make that stuff up.

METRONOME: When you play live and in the studio, what are your musical weapons of choice?

I have a couple of amps that I use. We'll start with that because for guitars, you're probably not going to believe me anyway. I usually use a Fender Hot Rod DeVille with four tens. I also like mid-70s to 80s solid state Marshalls. They sound like a tube amp, but they're a lot lighter. The DeVille is my main one nine out of ten times though. Occasionally in a small club, I have a Bugera with an attenuator. I'll put that on one watt and shove the volume to ten and no one can believe I'm playing through one watt. I've done gigs at the Chickenbone Saloon with that thing. It's damn loud. I also have an old Jess Oliver [Editor's note: Jess Oliver was the vice president of Ampeg during the 1960s and responsible for many of the amplifiers they produced, most notably the Portaflex all-tube bass amp. He recently passed away on June 30, 2011. He was 85 years old] that I've had for years, but it has no master volume.

METRONOME: Where did you find that amp?

I found it in the Want Ad. I paid \$75 for it.

METRONOME: Did you restore it?

No. I was actually talking to Jess down in New York and wanted to have him put a reverb on it and master volume. That was my backup amp. I didn't even know who made it originally. It took me years of going on the internet to find this site called *Dusty Old Amps*. If you see one, they have a unique look to them.

So I finally got a hold of Jess who built it. I

was going to drive down there somewhere around Long Island, but he had a stroke not long after. He designed some great amps. I love that thing. It has a jack for an accordion too. You can plug a bass in to it or whatever you want. It's so cool.

METRONOME: Tell me about your guitars, "which I won't believe anyhow..."

I will go in to stores and spend hours to find a good axe. Name brands don't mean anything to me. The last vintage guitar I owned was a 1963 Jazzmaster that I played slide on for years. I actually sold all my gear and went out and bought a 2000 Squier Strat. I've owned this thing for eleven years and haven't touched the neck once. It was just a good day. I went out the next day and bought one more. I was using that for slide too. Then I picked up a used 1998 Squier Strat. The neck reminds me of the Hagstroms I played when I was a kid. They have a nice thin neck. So I have (2) 2000's and (1) 1998 Squiers.

METRONOME: Were they made in Japan?

No. Two from China and one from Indonesia. I love it when I go in to a store and play an amp. They say, "Boy, you really make that piece of crap Squier sound good? Oh, I shouldn't say that. They might want to give me an endorsement. Now, all guitars are not the same, but I will spend hours in a store. Years ago I was partial to the Les Paul Jr., but now I have two Epiphone Les Pauls.

When I bought the first one I said, I have to get some backup gear. I went to a music store for about three and a half hours. I played a bunch of guitars and it came down to an Epiphone Les Paul or a Gibson Les Paul. The Gibson was a little bit better but not ten times better which was what the price was. Just a shade better. I went to the counter and they said, "You sounded good. Are you buying that?" You have to play them. Name brands don't mean anything. I also have

an old Teisco that I tune like a lap steel, but I don't bring it out because it's the second guitar I ever owned. It has a lot of sentimental value.

I recently did a radio show on WUML, 91.5 FM in Lowell with John Guregian and there were a couple of guys there saying, "This guy is good. Look at what he's playing!" It doesn't matter what you play. Just plug in and play it.

METRONOME: Is Slide On Over the first Charlie Keating Band full length release or do you have other's under your belt?

Under the Charlie Keating Band, yeah.

METRONOME: What made you go to Wellspring Sound to record?

I've never got a good sound in the studio. They always want to add this and that and I say, Who put that crap on my guitar? I'm basically just plug in and play. If it sounds good... if not, do one more take, but never more than three takes tops. You don't beat a dead horse. You have to have spontaneity. In fact there are a couple of songs on the CD that the band had never played before that day. "Dog Biscuit" I made up right on the spot. Lenny had heard me play "Please Come Home," but she had never played it.

We looked around and talked to a few people. Eric [Kilburn] was just a laid back guy. He knows about tone and suggests, but he's not there to record his stuff. He's there to record yours. He lets you go in there and just play. There was no stress on my part at all.

METRONOME: How long did it take you to record the CD?


Not long. I think we did the basic tracks in one day. We went in early in the morning and were done by the afternoon.

METRONOME: Where can people find out more about you on the internet?

They can go to www.charliekeatingband.com. We're all over the internet; CDBaby and iTunes. You can also buy the CD right off our web site.

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