

LARRY GARNER meets MICHAEL VAN MERWYK

Larry Garner – Bluesman from Baton Rouge / USA teams up with Michael van Merwyk who placed second at the IBC 2013 in Memphis for an acoustic show of Downhome Blues.

The paths of these fine Bluesmen & Songwriters crossed several times over the last 15 years and they decided to team up with just two guitars and melt their highly individual styles and songwriting to a soulfull and entertaining Downhome Blues Programm – Louisiana meets Europe. The CD „Larry Garner & Michael van Merwyk – Upclose And Personal“ is out on Dixie Frog Records.

LARRY GARNER

**Vocals, guitar
Bluesman from Baton Rouge / Louisiana**

Larry Garner was comfortable in the 9-to-5 routine of commuting to his day job, and making a good salary working for Dow Chemical. On his drive home one night, he was forced to take an alternate route. “There was an accident on the interstate, and I took a detour to avoid it,” remembers Garner. “I drove by this place that had a sign outside on wheels, with a couple lights that said, ‘Blues Jam Tonight.’ I went in, and they said to be back at 10 that night. I went home and told my wife about it. She said, ‘You know you’ve got to go to work tomorrow.’ I went anyway, played, and got home at 2:30 in the morning. That was Tabby’s Blues Box.”

The scene at the legendary Baton Rouge blues hotbed was a marked contrast to the occasional weekend gigs Garner was playing at the time. It was the early 1970s, and Garner had just returned from an 3 year tour in the army. “There were no gigs,” he remembers. “It was all disco. There were occasionally American Legion gigs or weddings or rent parties. I played in my garage. I took a job with Dow Chemical, and I rarely played in public.”

Garner started moonlighting for the first few years he played out at Tabby’s Blues Box. He met such Baton Rouge bluesmen as Silas Hogan, Whispering Smith, Arthur Kelly and Raful Neal. He occasionally played in New Orleans at Rhythms on Bourbon Street, or with Bryan Lee at the late, lamented Old Absinthe Bar. But eventually he couldn’t keep burning the candle at both ends. He recalls hanging out at Tabby’s one night with Kenny Neal, who’d just finished touring. When Neal pleaded with him to stick around for another drink instead of getting ready for work in the morning, Garner tried to explain. “He said, ‘You got to quit that job.’ I said, ‘I know, but I still got to go to work in the morning.’ I left, but Kenny saying that stuck in my head. I had to quit.”

It was a chance for Garner to play the music he'd loved since his early childhood. Growing up near Baton Rouge in the small town of Oaknolia, Garner heard the music coming from the church near his house. "There were traveling preachers coming through, and I heard that, and I listened to WLAC in Nashville on Friday and Saturday night," he says. "I started playing guitar because I had an uncle, George, who taught me. He was a paraplegic, and he played like Jimmy Reed. I learned through him, and started playing at the church and behind a gospel group that played on the radio.

"My parents didn't want me playing the blues," Garner continues. "They thought it was the devil's music — then I guess the juke joint a quarter-mile down the road was the devil's recruitment office. I never went into the juke except during the day, when it was a store."

Garner continued playing music during his military service, and playing in army bands — while stationed in Korea — steeled him for the life of a full-time musician. Leaving Dow Chemical was initially tough for him, but now he has a devoted following throughout the country and across the Atlantic Ocean. "I'm on tour all the time," he says. "I go to Europe and England a few times a year. Over there they really like my original stuff. They hear guys playing the blues, but when I come in, they come right up and say, 'Thank God — a real blues band.' We take it for granted here. They're really appreciative there, and so am I.

"I'm also on the road here in the US all the time," says Garner. "I have a 2000 Ford van. It's got 365,000 miles on it, and I bought it new. You do the math."

Art Tipaldi- Editor, *Blues Revue*

MICHAEL VAN MERWYK

Vocals, guitar, lapsteel

Life often takes surprising turns. No one knows that better than songwriter and guitarist Michael van Merwyk, who raised five children before he decided to make music the top priority in his life. On his 2012 CD "New Road" he tells of these new paths, which life fortunately always holds in store. And at the moment it appears that the decision to go his very own way with the band "Bluesoul" was a good one. In January 2013 the four musicians returned from Memphis, where they took part in the "International Blues Challenge" along with 124 other bands from all over the world. With obvious self-confidence they played their way through the through the semi-finals of the famous blues competition, to their own surprise. Their fresh and original "American Music – Euro Style" caught the attention of listeners and judges from the very beginning. And then came the sensational result, something which had never happened in the 29-year history of the Blues Challenge: as the first European band ever, they reached the finals and won second place, in one of the finest groups of participants in recent years. The international jurors' reasons for

their positive assessment of the band included, among others, the originality of the self-composed material. Repeated standing ovations from the audience in the finals bore testimony to the lyrical quality of the songs. Also praised were the band's musical performance level, as well as the sympathetic, audience-focused approach to entertainment. Back in Germany, this smashing success was crowned with numerous bookings throughout Europe. The calendar continues to fill up...

The way which led to the development of this over-six-foot-tall giant's unmistakable and emotional style was, however, a long and rocky one. He learned his craft in the house band of the infamous ROADHOUSE in Rheda-Wiedenbrück, Germany, where jams and parties with legends like Jimmy Rogers, Larry Garner and Jimmy Johnson took place. Merwyk's guitar playing has some of the funkiness of Johnny Guitar Watson's and the raw quality of Albert King's. He feels equally at home playing acoustic, electric or lap steel guitar. His voice has been described as a mixture of Dr. John and Johnny Cash. All of that makes him equally popular with international musicians and promoters. He was one of the few Europeans invited to play at the renowned Lucerne Bluesfest in Switzerland, and has played on, among others, CDs by Larry Garner and Big Daddy Wilson, who have asked him repeatedly to tour with their bands. He tours regularly through all of Europe – from Finland to the Mediterranean coast and from Moscow to the Atlantic coast. Michael van Merwyk's previous releases regularly receive critical acclaim. "A smash!", writes "Blues News" magazine. His concerts are celebrated: "...whereby MvM convinced not only with his guitar playing but with a strong voice – which he used not only to sing but to deliver wisecracks." (Waliser Bote, Switzerland)