

# RETROSPECTIVE

LOOKING BACK ON CLASSIC ALBUMS WITH THE ONES WHO MADE THEM

**Although best known as the vocalist for rockers Mr. Big, Eric Martin has had a long solo career. Releasing 'Sucker For A Pretty Face' with the Eric Martin Band in 1983, he became a true solo artist in a more pop and soul orientated vein, releasing 'Eric Martin' in 1985 and 'I'm Only Fooling Myself' in 1987. Mr. Big came calling the following year, meaning Eric's third solo album 'Somewhere In The Middle' didn't appear until 1998. Featuring a starker acoustic based sound and poignant lyrics, 'Somewhere In The Middle' showed a very different side to Eric's work. With the announcement that he would be performing the album in its entirety at a special gig at the end of January prior to going out on an acoustic tour, James Gaden decided this would be a great opportunity to discuss the album in detail with Eric for 'Retrospective'...**

**'Somewhere In The Middle' was the first solo album you released after joining Mr. Big and it's one of my favourite records. Mr. Big had some down time after 'Hey Man' when Paul Gilbert departed. Was that the reason for making a solo album, or had you had one in mind for some time and this was the perfect opportunity?**

Yeah, I wanted to do a solo album after Mr. Big made 'Lean Into It', truthfully. However, that record blew up, we had no time to do anything after that, it was an awesome time. We toured basically two years straight for that album. I remember both the band and management didn't want me to do a solo record at that point, it was the usual 'Oh, the singer wants to do a solo record, will it take something away from the band?' kinda thing. I tried to explain my direction was going to be completely different and Mr. Big would always be my top priority... but everyone thought that because it was my voice, it might get confused with Mr. Big. God, in retrospect, you look at 'Somewhere In The Middle', the only thing it has in common with Mr. Big is my voice, and even then it's simple. There's no sort of cocksure, swashbuckling... that's not really what I do with Mr. Big, but it's not affected, y'know? More like the real me. Musically, it's nothing to do with Mr. Big...no big pyrotechnics or anything. So when Paul left, it wasn't the perfect opportunity, it was more of a bittersweet opportunity.

Here's the dark part... I was going through hell with a separation with my wife at that time of ten years, her name is Stacy. I'm married to Denise now as you know and all is good, but back in the day there was that period of my life when it sucked. This was the girl who was with me when I joined Mr. Big, this will sound cliché and kinda gay, but she was my big love! The band was on shaky ground, Paul wanted to leave, that was no real shock... unlike my wife leaving! (laughs) It was disappointing, Paul wanting to leave. My marriage had taken the wind out of my sails and looking back, I was really upset. The guys wanted me to call Paul, try and get him back and that was the one call I didn't want to do. I knew Paul wanted to split. I groveled and crawled to Paul, he said no and I went, "Okay, see you later!" I hate it when you put so much work into something and someone just pulls the rug from under you. It's like a marriage. That's what 'Somewhere In The Middle' is all about – me, wearing my dark heart on my sleeve for all to see. Oops. (laughs)

**I kind of figured that was the case - that album has been my break up and therapy album. Whenever I had trouble with girls I used to play it to sort me out!**

(Laughs) Yeah, it was therapeutic – for me, it was like wearing a nicotine patch, it helped out. I put everything I had into that. This isn't like a *boo hoo* kind of thing, but my friends were in the band. The band broke up and I had nobody to talk to. I kinda talked through this album. It was difficult. When I hear it now I think, 'Man, I was a mess!' But I wrote my best stuff, I think.

**You did, I loved it and I thought your voice on it was fantastic. You said it was nothing like Mr. Big, but did any of the tracks maybe start out as potential Mr. Big songs? Or was everything written for your solo work?**

There was one track, it was called 'Restless Individual'. That's a stupid working title, it had a kind of Rolling Stones feel. It eventually became the first track, 'Fly On A Wall'. I showed it to the band back in '89 I think, when we first

met up with Kevin Elson. He was asking what songs we had and we'd just done a collaboration with 'Addicted To That Rush'... we had a lot of the first album because we did most of it in the first eight days. I think I offered that song up then, but it didn't go anywhere. That was fine, when I did use it, it was a chance for me to think, "I wonder if I can experiment now!" The path we were on was straight ahead rock, it wasn't until 'Lean Into It' when we started doing things like 'Green Tinted Sixties Mind' and 'To Be With You' that we widened our boundaries. They looked at me back then like, "Haven't you got any rock in that bag of tricks?" (Laughs) When I first joined Mr Big I'd done solo albums that were completely different; I had to really reinvent myself. When I got this interview request, I wondered... Fireworks is a melodic rock



magazine, and 'Somewhere In The Middle'... it's some dark art! It has rock overtones, but it's different.

**A good type of different though; I think it ranks as some of your best work. Most of the tracks were written by you and Andre Pessis, with Bill Wray producing. How did you hook up with Bill – was he your choice?**

I don't remember the particulars but I do remember hearing a couple of things he produced. He did 'Live From Neon Park' by Little Feat and he did one by a band called God Street Wine. One of the guys in that band wrote the makings of 'Better Day' with Bill. I added some stuff but Bill was saying, 'I don't know if I can give this song up.' I loved it though and wanted to do it, lyrically and musically it spoke to me. I wanted that song and I wanted him. Plus he was from Louisiana – enough fucking said! He had that voodoo magic!

He had a past which tallied with mine; he did some rock stuff but had a soulful thing going on and he was friends with all the Little Feat guys. He worked with some great guys and he was a singer. That helped me a lot. I loved working with Kevin Elson – he had produced Journey, Lynyrd Skynyrd and he did my Eric Martin Band album 'Sucker For A Pretty Face'. He was a musician and fun to work with, but working with a singer was awesome. He wasn't a Mutt Lange type where he'd just sing a part perfectly but he had an understanding of where I was coming from. I'm really hard on myself but Bill would go, 'Hmmm, I know you can do better than that.' I'd have my feathers ruffled, I don't want to be a prima donna but sometimes it happens! (laughs) It was sweet in pre-production; cutting basic tracks we were right on the same page. However, my marriage-go-round was taking its toll. I knew I was a piece of work back then, looking back I really see it. I was demanding, trying to be a perfectionist about every aspect, losing it emotionally – and I didn't really have a plan! I just had all these scribbled poems about me. I was even writing while doing the record - Bill would say, 'Have you got anymore, we're on a deadline!' (laughs) Andre was my muse. I'd cry in my beer to him about what was going on and we'd just write. Eventually I became kinda numb to my problems and Bill had a firm grip on reality, he made me settle down a bit. He brought in all these great musicians he knew. Everyone loves him.

The credits are on the record but I must mention Denny Fongheiser on drums. He had a piccolo snare – I was so used to Pat Torpey's fat snare sound – this had a real crack but it was thin. I was concerned but Bill said, 'Nah man, it's not about that, we're making the bass the feature.' He got Jerry Scheff, a guy who toured with Elvis Presley for years, with this bass with a wall of sound amp. It *did* drive the record. Then we had Tim Pierce on guitar – he's a brilliant player and has played with a lot of great melodic rock acts. He put some magic on there. We also had Marti Frederiksen on there who has gone on to write for Aerosmith and Foreigner, but back then he was just a surfer kid from outside L.A. We wrote together and later on in life would write for Mr. Big. The *coup de grace* was having Billy Payne and the whole of Little Feat play on a couple of tracks though... one didn't make the record! The other one was 'I Wrote The Book'. It was awesome to have them on there.

**I was going to mention 'I Wrote The Book' which was a bonus track on some versions of the album. That was one of my favourites – the European release has it, but I got another copy of 'Somewhere In The Middle' from Japan and the bonus track on there was 'I Love The Way You Love Me' instead.**

I know – bonus schmonus! I cut that for the TV show 'Mad About You'. I don't know why it appears on some versions. When I put that album out, straight up, I would have loved to have some radio support but I never looked to score a hit with that material. I worked hard on it but my intention was not to get rich quick or tell everyone, "Hey, this is my new direction!" With 'I Love The Way You Love Me', it was a formulaic song which I had fun singing. Maybe someone at Atlantic Records thought adding that was the way to sell the record! But I wanted 'I Wrote the Book' on the record, period. Not only was it uplifting with a cocky lyric but it had Little Feat as the backing band. That should speak for itself! I know there's probably a generation of people who don't know them, but... I ask kids on tour all the time, if they listen to old stuff! Sometimes they do, other

times not. Some people think 'Lean Into It' was our first record. When I was a kid, you went back, kinda went to school because the new shit doesn't mean anything to you unless you know the old shit!

**I've always done that - the first thing I heard of Mr. Big was 'To Be With You' and it was your voice that got me, I thought it was awesome...**

You're too kind – especially over there, you have so many singers... aside from Paul Rodgers and Steve Marriott and Frankie Miller; you have Steve Overland and Danny Bowes! Fuck, those guys are singers!

**That smokiness and sort of gravel always appealed to me, you have that. I bought 'Lean Into It' on the strength of 'To Be With You', I bought all Mr. Big's stuff from then on and went and bought the solo stuff. I backtracked and got your solo records and your Eric Martin Band album. I always go back and check out what the guys in bands I love did prior to that. It's a natural progression but so many people don't bother.**

The other side of the coin is with me doing this show where I'm playing all of the album, I've been researching, finding out what some people thought of the record. I read one comment, oh God, it put a knife in my heart. He said, 'If this is the new direction Eric Martin is going in, I hate it. I don't think this guy is talented.' (laughs) Man, it killed me! I wanted to find this guy... he's probably sixteen, motherfucker! (laughs)

**Paul got the same shit when he did his first solo album 'King Of Clubs', because it was more poppy and nothing like Racer X.**

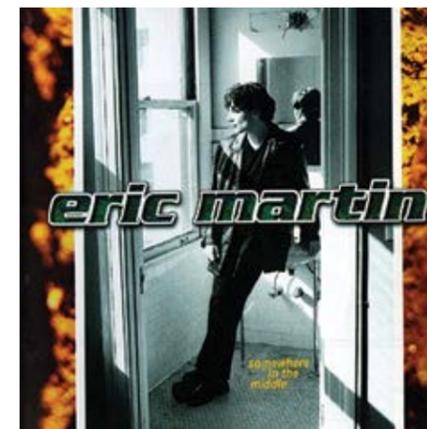
Oh, big time! Look, he wrote 'Motor Man' and 'Green Tinted Sixties Mind'! I totally understand when people do solo albums, I don't wanna sound like Mr. Big. If I was in another band, like when I was in Tak Matsumoto's Group, I brought a lot of Mr. Big to that and Jack Blades brought some Night Ranger to it, while it remained Tak's baby. But if I'm solo, I don't want to run the gauntlet of people saying, "Man, that's not like how Paul Gilbert or Billy Sheehan would have done it!" Those are mighty big shoes to fill! Serafino from Frontiers, God love him, he's helped out so many musicians and bands. He's been trying to get me to do a Mr. Big/Journey style solo record for so long! Maybe one day I will; I heard Joe Lynn Turner's 'Sunstorm' thing – that worked. When I cut 'Somewhere In The Middle' I had no direction, I just made a record of how I felt. My previous solo albums didn't really feature any of my writing. I sang the songs I was given by Don Grierson to get a foot in the door. I found the song 'These Are The Good Times' and Don didn't want me to put it on my first record because it messed up the R&B, Paul Young/Daryl Hall vibe he was aiming at. I said that I didn't want to be pigeon holed because that's the kiss of death. There was a song I cut back then called 'Gonna Make A Lover Out Of You' and I was thinking, 'Holy shit, what am I doing?' I look at myself in the mirror with my sharkskin suits and pointy shoes thinking, 'Oh man, how long is this gonna last?' (laughs)

So, years later, I don't really know where 'Somewhere In The Middle' came from... I've always been a three or four chord kind of guy, use a capo a lot and tune in three or four different keys, but I keep it simple. I'm a better guitar player now but those songs I wrote with Mr. Big, I'm sat showing Paul Gilbert and he had the patience to watch and go, "Yeah, I see what you're doing..." to which I say, "Yeah, but check this out!" (laughs). Even bass parts, when we did 'Promise Her the Moon', Billy played this bass lick and I said "No, no, please can you play it like this?" and he said, "But it's so simple!" Trust me, simple is cool! (laughs) I write mellow stuff to begin with and usually when I present to Mr. Big the guys say, "Oh, that's cool, can I do this?" and then they nail what I want and add their two cents, making it awesome. But for my stuff, I wanted to keep it simple and have the musicians play it *exactly* as I had it. There was some frustration, saying, "Um, I wouldn't go to that chord..." but I'd say "No, you have to, please!" I've written plenty of songs with a heavy feel with Mr. Big but my preferred style is mellow. Bill Wray and I agreed when we were doing it that we didn't want it sounding like the stuff out then, nor should it go where music was heading, like grunge. I wanted it swampy and loose, my words to be heard and some tasty blues licks.

**You appeared on Japanese radio with Masa Ito**

**playing some of the music from 'Somewhere In The Middle' alone, playing for the first time with only your guitar for accompaniment. It sounded awesome – was that experience nerve-wracking or liberating after being in a band for so long?**

It was the first time, it was terrifying! Also liberating. (laughs) When the record was released, my marriage was



## ALBUM DETAILS

- Fly On A Wall**  
(Martin, Pessis)
- Wink And A Smile**  
(Martin, Pessis)
- Don't Count Me Out**  
(Martin, Thiele, O'Brian, Roy)
- Kisses Stain**  
(Martin, Pessis)
- No One Said Goodbye**  
(Martin, Pessis)
- Better Day**  
(Wray, Bevo)
- Somewhere In The Middle**  
(Martin, Frederiksen, Pessis)
- That's What I'm Here For**  
(Martin, Pessis, Fanucchi)
- Something From Nothin'**  
(Martin, Pessis, Close, Silver)
- Have I Been Here Before**  
(Martin, Pessis)
- Over My Heart**  
(Martin, Pessis)
- I Wrote The Book (Bonus Track)**  
(Martin, Pessis)

## BAND LINE UP

**Eric Martin** - vocals, acoustic guitar, piano, Wurliizer  
**Tim Pierce** - electric and acoustic guitar  
**Denny Fongheiser** - drums, percussion  
**Jerry Scheff** - bass  
**CJ Vanston** - keyboards

## Additional Musicians

**Phil Shenale** - Hammond A100  
**Dillon O'Brian** - Hammond, Wurliizer  
**Bob Thiele** - guitars, Dobro  
**John Pierce** - bass  
**Bill Payne** - Hammond B-3  
**Marti Frederiksen** - guitars

**Produced by Bill Wray**

**Recorded at:** Track Record, North Hollywood  
**Released on Atlantic in 1998**

long over. I'd gone through my grieving period and when the record was out I had to explain my motives and my heart wrenching lyrics to the media and fans. I was kinda embarrassed that I'd spilled my guts about my personal life all over the CD. Going to Japan, promoting it, the show was really late at night. I got a boost of super voodoo powers or something! The opportunity to play it live

on the radio was scary but like you say, liberating. I was forced to be alone in so many aspects, so rocking these tunes for Masa and the Japanese audience pumped my chest up and gave me a new found freedom.

I'm surprised you got 'Somewhere In The Middle'. It was made, I went to Japan, I played a few gigs in the States and I didn't really bother with Europe. I made the record, it went on the shelf and collected dust, like a few other albums I made! It put something in my craw where I stopped making solo albums, I wanted to and had hundreds of songs in the vault but thought, 'Man, nobody hears it.' I made 'Somewhere In The Middle' for me. I did think people weren't interested but I've had fan letters and emails saying, "When are you going to play these songs? Get off your ass before we forget about you!" (laughs). I've been wanting to play these songs for a long time, it was on my bucket list. I've had a trip down memory lane, re-learning these lyrics... man, I was in a troubled zone back then! Since I've been married to Denise I've not had any of this stuff go wrong, that's why I've never made a 'Somewhere In The Middle 2'! (laughs)

**You'll be doing some solo acoustic shows, including one here in the UK in March – after hearing how well some of these songs sounded on Masa Ito's show, will you be featuring a few from 'Somewhere In The Middle'?**

Oh, most definitely. I'm not learning this shit for one show! (laughs) I got the itch to play it. I'm not saying that when I listen to it, it brings me back to my youth or anything but I feel like I got something else to do. I forgot about 'Somewhere In The Middle' for so long! I was looking at my set-list and thinking, "God, I'm playing a lot of Mr. Big stuff..." I don't care, I wrote those songs so I'll do 'em but when people come to see me acoustic and I'm just playing Mr. Big songs, they're only seeing one side of me. I forgot I had this other side. So I'm doing it – more stuff to say! I hope I don't depress my audience with some of this shit! (laughs) Girls dig it though, girls love stuff like 'No One Said Goodbye'!

**Do you have a rigid set when you play acoustically, or do you take requests, go with the flow...?**

I'll do anything and everything! Fans shout out songs and if I can play them, I will. There was one gig in Italy, I didn't know how to play 'Just Take My Heart'. I wrote it on piano and never bothered to learn it on guitar – I just played it to Paul and he nailed it note for note on the guitar. That whole one note attack at the beginning, you can tell those were piano keys originally. So I had to belt out an *a capella* version, with the crowd singing along. I've learned it now but maybe the audience will dig the *a capella* version better, I don't know!

That was an issue with me playing the songs every night, it was like a job sometimes. I had a lot of fun when I first went out – it was scary as shit but the first gig was awesome because it was small clubs, some of the gigs have been like eighty people! The first one though was about three hundred people in Italy. There were two heavy rock bands opening and one of them asked if they could play some Mr. Big stuff that I wasn't doing. I said sure, they said they wanted to do 'Addicted To That Rush'. I told them they weren't gonna hear that from me and my little guitar! (laughs) They rocked out the crowd, the audience are in a frenzy, then here I come with my acoustic guitar... "Are you ready for this?" (laughs) But they were, they loved it! I thought, "Wow man, this is gonna be easy!" Next gig, I'm playing some Swiss chalet gig and it had about a hundred people. I played some solo stuff and it wasn't going over at all. As soon as I played some Mr. Big, it was all hooting and hollering. You have to pick your battles! I have a lot of stuff to choose from... I'll play maybe twenty five tunes because they're all about three minutes long. I'm not doing solos and stuff, I keep it simple. At the end of the show I'll ask how was it and a fan will say, "Oh, fantastic but you didn't play my favourite song!" (laughs) I've learned a bunch of stuff now though – old Mr. Big stuff like 'Ain't Seen Love Like That'. There will be some rock stuff, some bonus tracks. Mr. Big did a tune on 'What If' and it was a Japanese bonus track called 'Kill Me With A Kiss'. I was so bummed that it didn't make the full record. You guys in Europe got 'Unforgiven' instead which Pat wrote, which was cool. I wrote 'Kill Me With A Kiss' and showed it to Paul and he said, "Man, it sounds like Bad Company meets the Black Crowes and The Faces with Rod Stewart all in one song!" I ask fans on my website what they want to

hear, some stuff I just can't do. Paul Gilbert has like twelve fingers - and they're long too! It's funny when someone in the audience shouts out 'Green Tinted Sixties Mind!' Yeah, right! A *capella* Eric comes out for that one! (laughs)

**As you had so much fun doing the acoustic shows, is there a possibility you might record one for release, even if you just put it out via iTunes or your website?**

Everything is a possibility while Mr. Big is on a hiatus. Yeah, I'd be up for anything.

**Is Mr. Big on a hiatus simply because you're all busy at the moment?**

Yeah man, I told Denise I want to work. I don't want to sit on my ass just waiting for Mr. Big to call. I have a lot of irons in the fire now. I was sceptical about doing the 'Legends:Voices Of Rock' thing, that felt weird. I did Scrap Metal years back with Nelson, Jeff Scott Soto, Mark Slaughter and stuff... this, calling it 'Legends', I went 'Oooohhh.... God, I'm a legend? What?' (laughs) I don't sit well with the title but I know Joe Lynn Turner who'll be on some of these gigs I'm doing, including Firefest, and we have Bill Champlain in the Bay Area - I'm happy to hang with these guys so I can steal something! (laughs) I'll suck some of their poison out, make it my own! I'm looking forward to that and I think the acoustic thing will be longer than I've done before.

I'm also doing a project with Tobias Sammet called *Avantasia*, a heavy metal theatrical story. It's mega, man! It's this big melodic rock thing and I did a duet with him on that record. He liked it a lot and asked me to tour with them. I didn't know what it was about but he told me and there's like sixteen singers rotating on that tour. I checked out the voices and a lot are sort of screaming, high alto rock singers, with strong Bruce Dickinson or Helloween type voices. I was thinking, "Where the hell do I fit in?" but he said I'd fit great and put some soul into it. So I may well do a bunch of shows with these guys. That would cover most of Spring and Summer.

Billy Sheehan is busy working with Richie Kotzen and Mike Portnoy; they have a record in the can. I saw Richie in Austria and we played some songs together. We did 'Shine' and '30 Days In the Hole'. Paul's got his 'Vibrato' album which he's touring. I got a Christmas card from Pat Torpey so I know he's still alive and kicking... but when we got back together I used to wait for the band. I really like playing with Mr. Big now, it's frustrating when we aren't playing but I'm gonna be ready when the Bat-phone rings. In the meantime, I'm gonna work! I'm not gonna sit on the couch watching kids shows with my children - they've even asked me, 'Dad, don't you work, don't you do something?' (Laughs)

**Finally, going way back to the beginning, the Eric Martin Band performed on King Biscuit in 1983 - I have four songs from that performance on a bootleg and they are absolutely awesome. Is there a full show recorded somewhere, and if so, will it ever come out?**

I have that same record, it's on vinyl. I got it in a used record store, it only has a few songs on it. There is a recording of the full show but unfortunately I don't have it. When Mr. Big's manager Herbie Herbert retired, he gave the masters, demos and videos of that early stuff away to some rock 'n' roll auction house. He was my mentor and my gift horse but that was a bad move. I got back some of the stuff, but not all of it. The live show was taped at the Blaisdell Arena in Honolulu, we were opening for Journey. The set was about thirty five minutes I believe, from 'Sucker For A Pretty Face'. We had some other songs, one called 'Fools' and another called 'Blue Angel', that weren't on the record. Those are some Eric Martin rarities.

I have a recording when I was in Japan, as a joke I did Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Sweet Home Alabama' at a show and the crowd loved it - they thought I wrote it! I kept getting interviews saying "We love that song, what album is that from?" Er... 'Second Helping'? Although I think at the time I said 'Pronounced 'Léh-nérd 'Skin-nerd'. (laughs) My wife told me to clear out the shed and I kept all my old stuff in there, tons and tons of Mr. Big stuff, but under all that is stuff from Eric Martin Band. Old VHS tapes - I want to put stuff out at some point, not for a get rich quick thing but I think I need to put it out there. It was cool to watch all these old recordings from back in the day - God, I could rock a bolo tie back then! (laughs)

# ROBBEN FORD

*Robben Ford has nothing to prove. Favoured by Charlie Musselwhite to be his backup when he was 18, the six stringer then joined jazz fusion combo LA Express and supported George Harrison. He worked with the Yellowjackets, the seminal jazzers and also with the legendary Miles Davis. He has a successful solo career too, producing albums which touch all parts of the Jazz/Blues area. He does what he wants. And now he has delivered 'Bringing It Back Home', doing exactly what he wants to again, a sumptuous, brilliantly played collection of covers which lay back and contain some surprising sounds. It really is a quite stunning. Steve Swift was keen to know more...*

"I couldn't be happier," he states in confident, laidback tones. "Things always start in one place and end up in another. Originally I kinda wanted to do something along the lines of Lonnie Johnson, that very pure Blues, pure electric Blues guitar, a certain consistency to the sound. And as well, I had in my head a little bit of Miles Davis' 'Kind Of Blue'. It's a consistency to the dynamic. That was the basic concept."

This album settles into a gentle, expensive, Steely Dan groove and shows how good players must be tight to get loose.

"It has everything to do with the people you're playing with. So I got lucky and hired the right guys; I wouldn't change a thing about what these people brought to the record. It's casting, you know? I had one day with the rhythm section, I got together with Harvey Mason, the drummer and David Piltch, the bassist; I had scheduled two days of rehearsal, but everything went so well that we cancelled the second day! There's just a lot of experience behind this record and then creating the proper setting for the experience to shine through. I brought the songs, did rhythm arrangements on all of these songs, very simple, little in the way of suggestion. Once you presented that, counted to four and the guys started playing, really letting them find their own way was definitely the right approach. There are times when I have very definite ideas about what I want to hear; in this case I knew that letting it evolve out of just playing together was the way to go. I wanted that group feel. We had about a four hour rehearsal, bass, drums and me, took the next day off and went into the studio for three days with the full band; I brought very simple rhythm charts and we cut four songs a day!" he sounds very satisfied. "It made me proud, of all the guys and proud of myself; there was a very high level of musicianship, a tremendous amount of experience that had really paid off, I could just see what they'd done and they were playing their asses off right now in this room! Don't care if anybody ever heard it, you know? The joy of music was present, I can't think of anything I've enjoyed more. I don't remember ever feeling quite that proud."

But this is not just blokes showing their chops. Oh no, Robben has gone out on a limb, to set himself a conundrum of how a certain instrument would sound; one that doesn't necessarily settle into the Blues comfortably, an instrument beloved of Messrs Rowland and Shorty...

"I really like the trombone and I've thought of using it in the past, but I always thought about it in context of two horns, a trombone and a tenor sax." He recounts slowly. "But my early thoughts for this record was always upright bass, drum kit that was not a Rock kit and of course the guitar, and initially I thought I would use two tenor saxophone and no keyboards. But the closer I got to the sessions, I know how I am when I'm making a record - I'm thinking about what everybody else is doing. I worry about myself later. In that context I would have been the only harmonic instrument, so I would have had to have been really on my game so that the others felt comfortable! So I thought 'I gotta make this a little easier on myself!' I immediately thought of Larry Golding's B3 organ and having made that choice, the two tenors no longer made any sense to me. And I went 'One trombone!' I wanted a different colour, you know, that was a final little epiphany about how the record should sound; it can't help but be soulful and kind of playful!"

This perhaps indicates that he doesn't really concern himself too much about what people think; maybe he knows he has a fan base he can rely on. But he also knows what the implication of such a decision is.

"Well, I must say that a friend of mine Rick Wheeler, my tour manager and he does front of house sound, he asked me what I was planning on doing and I said 'I'll probably do something with my trio; what I'd

really like to do is a straight-ahead Blues thing.' He said 'If that's what you feel, man, you should just do it.' He really encouraged me to do it. I thought about it for about two weeks and then... 'Yeah!' However record companies would feel about it, that's one thing, a person can be a little concerned about how his audience is going to take it, you know? You have to have nerve. There is courage in the making of this record. Having a trombone!" he chuckles. "These are major decisions. I've done about 50 interviews last week and they always wanna talk about the going back to the roots; yes, there's some of that here, but the reality is, I've made a record that's shiny! This thing is not an homage - I hate that fucking homage word!" he spits it out. "It is covers, but most of these songs were new to me!"

Aynsley Lister, Philip Sayce, Joanne Shaw Taylor, the list of new Blues guitarists is burgeoning. Not to mention new/old stagers like Bonnamassa. This could make established artists look to their laurels, look over their shoulders or even get a musical nip and tuck. Robben is unmoved.

"I don't even know any of the people you just mentioned! I don't even listen to Blues that's considered contemporary and I especially don't listen to guitar players because I don't want to sound like somebody else. Originality is far too important to me to allow that kind of thing to come into my life. I listen to Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter; these people are not guitar players, that's really helpful in developing your own style. I'm a better musician too! The album comes out February 18th and I'll be here [UK] in April. This is my last interview; refreshing way to end, you weren't asking the same questions as everybody else."

Well, there you have it. 'Bringing It Back Home' is released on 18th February and Robben will see us around April. Of course, he will be an incendiary live event, but the album is a bit special. Great players, as expected, but some of the best laidback Blues you'll hear for a long time and a trombone too, just to confound your expectations. Lazybones may call it Steely Dan with a bit of bite. Or blart, perhaps. It's actually a great, relaxed, sumptuous listen and something that extends the Blues vista. And we can surely all welcome that.

