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BiTS

BLUES IN THE SOUTH

MAY 2025

Issue #457

THE BITS INTERVIEW: RICHARD KOECHLI

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Richard Koechli (1962) is a independent roots artist from Switzerland. He has played with well known artists such as Larry Garner, Greg Koch. Philipp Fankhauser, Lilly Martin, Jens Krüger and many more. Richard has released eight albums under his own name, he won the Swiss Blues Award 2013 and the Swiss Film Award 2014 (best soundtrack), and he is known for successful guitar-books released under the German publisher AMA-Verlag (one of them, 'Masters of Blues Guitar', won the Best German Edition 2011) and for music-historical German novels.

Ian McKenzie's interview was conducted by email.

Richard Koechli

BiTS: Richard, why did you become a musician? Was there music in your home as a child? If so what music?

RK: Music was the first great joy in my life, the first intense feeling. As a stutterer, it also gave me the opportunity to express myself and experience self-worth. We were not a family of musicians, neither my mother nor my father played an instrument (my grandfather, however, was a virtuoso harmonica player), but my mother was very musical, she sang a lot when music was on the radio, and she could always intuitively add a second voice immediately. I think I inherited my feeling for melodies from her.

BiTS: When did you start to play the guitar?

RK: I started playing the guitar when I was eight years old (in 1970). I was hooked immediately, and I also had a very good female guitar teacher who taught me individually (without sheet music; I only wanted to play by ear). My first guitar solo, which I learned and performed publicly at a school event, was Hank Marvin's 'Apache'. I was socialised with the music that was popular at the time; rock, folk and pop – Stones, Beatles, Dylan, Cat Stevens, Status Quo, Slade and God knows what else. I quickly started to 'write' my own songs and record them on a cassette recorder. As a teenager, I took a break from music (and did a few years of competitive athletics), and at the age of 20, at the beginning of the 80s, I returned to music and definitely found my life's dream and path in it.

BiTS: How did you 'find' the blues?

RK: My first two conscious experiences with the blues were Stevie Ray Vaughan and Ry Cooder in the mid-80s. Cooder kindled in me a great love for the slide guitar. And SRV remains unrivalled for me today as a blues rock guitarist, although I don't play at all like him.

BiTS: What blues musicians do you admire and why? Have particular blues people influenced you?

RK: At the beginning of the 90s, I began to study the history of the blues intensively, to learn from all the old and wonderful blues pioneers (and then also to write instruction books about them); my personal favourites from that time are: Blind Willie Johnson, Tampa Red, Elmore James, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Muddy Waters, and from the white, younger generation, especially Eric Clapton and Bonnie Raitt.

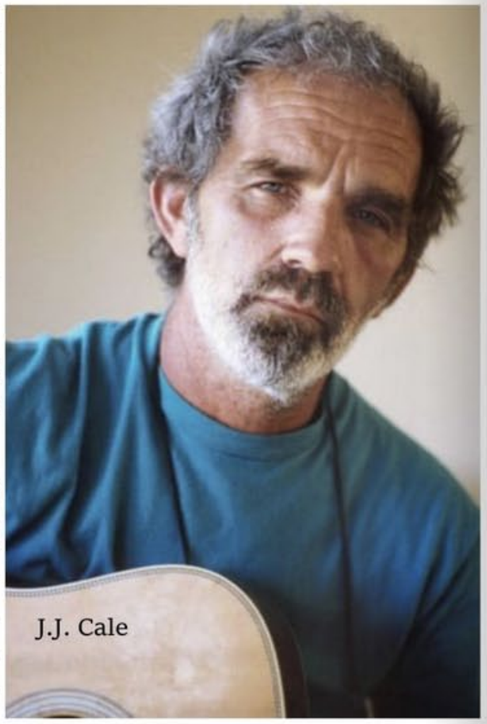
BiTS: Like you (I think) I am a huge fan of JJ Cale. What do you find in his music?

RK: I have a special relationship with J.J. Cale: his laid-back style was for me from the beginning the perfect way for a white man to embody the blues, and his vocal aesthetics were also an inspiration for me. Something similar applies to Mark Knopfler, whom I have admired for this laid-back spirit (which he learned from J.J. Cale) since 'Sultans of Swing'; Knopfler also sparked in me a love of country and the melodic soul of Celtic folk music. So in the end I became a roots musician, anchored in the vulnerable soul of the blues, but not only – I love mixing different styles. But deep down, the blues is probably the strongest identification for me. And by the way, Celtic folk music is something like the blues of the whites for me...

BiTS: You haven't mentioned gospel. I have your "Holy Blues" album (so it is clearly an interest) which I love. I <u>always</u> have a gospel music spot in my main show (Wednesday's Even Worse) and firmly believe that blues and gospel music are closely, perhaps inseparably intertwined.

Actually, in a bit of self revelation, I am an agnostic almost an atheist but I am also (in a former life) a psychologist and accept that people should be able to believe what comforts them (within reason(!)).

Oh yes, I haven't talked about gospel yet; so far we've been talking mainly about my youth and the beginning of my career as a musician. Today, gospel means a lot to me; but in my youth I didn't really have a relationship with it. Musically, I was touched by gospel choirs even back then when they sang 'Oh happy day' or stuff like that with passion. The melody of 'Amazing Grace', for example, inspired me even back in the 90s; I recorded an instrumental version on my very first album ("Envole-toi", 1997 [Trans: "Fly Away" (ED)).



J.J. Cale

I always had respect for this music, but I didn't know the true dimension and depth, and all the music-historical background.

How could I have known? – gospel in the context of music history is hardly taught in modern Western culture, gospel is not trendy, is considered old-fashioned, pathetic, even reactionary. Even as a passionate blues musician, it took me a long time to understand how closely gospel and blues are related, how much gospel and church music in general have decisively shaped our entire (!) Western music culture. These lights only really dawned on me when I myself gradually became a devout Christian about 20 years ago, as a result of deep personal experiences. And when I was researching for my book 'Holy Blues: the 400-year trip of a musical soul' (also available in an English edition) in 2021, I recognised these historical connections even more intensely. I almost felt ashamed of having known so little about it.

RK: It's great that you regularly play gospel music on your show, Ian K., despite your background as an agnostic or atheist. This shows your openness and sensitivity. In any Christian (depending on the form of the day) there is anyway also an agnostic or sometimes even an atheist – only that we are, each in his or her own way, touched in certain moments of life by something even greater, we hold on to that, that is our global direction in the stormy sea of life. But Christians must always remain humble, not be too sure of themselves (and their direction). The great saints always doubted until the end, until their last breath, and suffered a lot because of it. Anyone who considers themselves a saint is not one for that very reason...

Since then, I have been mixing secular blues, roots music and gospel; I don't think I'm cut out to play only gospel. Others can do that better [than I]. I admire people like that; Bryn Haworth, for example, who I had the pleasure of meeting in the net – he is incredibly good and, in terms of his skills, he could well have achieved a career similar to that of Ry Cooder, in the secular music world. But for decades he has consistently made only Christian music – and that is precisely why hardly anyone outside the Christian scene knows him. On the one hand, that's a shame, but on the other hand, it's a reality. Bryn is happy anyway, but he would deserve much more recognition in the music world. Gospel is not trendy...

BiTS: In your live performances you work with a wide range of musicians, Are they a formal, already constituted orchestra or do you hand pick them? Tell me about them, please.

RK: I have had my own band since 1997; the drummer (Fausto Medici) and the bass player (David Zopfi) have been with me from the very beginning, and the other

musicians (keyboarder Michael Dolmetsch, acoustic guitarist Heini Heitz and multi-instrumentalist Dani Lauk) have also been with me for more than 20 years. We understand each other perfectly. They are wonderful musicians, among the best in Switzerland in their genre, and they are a perfect match for my music and my working concept.

We rehearse as little as possible, almost never – not even before the concert during the sound check, because if you play it before the show, the magic of the moment is gone in the actual show. I want that risk, we never play songs the same way twice, I want to feel that uncertainty every time, remain vulnerable (even in the blues, false security is detrimental, just as it is in faith). Of course, this only works with musicians who can go along with it, who can react on stage. It's a great privilege.

I also want this uncertainty in the studio; I never have a precise vision in advance – usually I have no idea which direction a song will take, we try out a lot of things, let ourselves drift and are surprised at the end by how the idea turns out.

BiTS: Tell me about the making of "Laid Back Universe". Why the title? What was / is the aim of the album?

RK: It's a best-of album, so to speak, a compilation of 28 songs (including a few instrumentals) from my 35 years, all more or less in the laid-back and roots music genre. The whole thing came about in connection with my current book about Mark Knopfler (Volume 1, Dire Straits). I just want to show the worldwide Knopfler audience what I have done as a singer-songwriter in the laid-back genre from all these inspirations (J.J. Cale, Mark Knopfler and many more), so that readers get to know me better as a musician.

I also tell specific anecdotes about some of my songs in the book, always in the context of Mark Knopfler's life's work. Five years ago, I wrote a book about J.J. Cale (with a tribute album), and this book is now available in bookshops (and not just in music stores) too. The album "Laidback Universe, Remembering J.J. and Mark" rounds off these two works, complements them, I hope.


Mark Knopfler

BiTS: The album is, I think selected tracks, how did you choose them. Do you have a favourite?

RK: Selecting the tracks was not that easy; it's usually quite difficult to judge your own music. I simply tried to create a big arc, a dramaturgy, with contrasts, so that it sounds like a concept album – and yet shows my full range.

BiTS: Do you have a favourite?

RK: My personal favourites? Well, my interpretation of the Cale song 'Sensitive Kind' has been the most successful so far (6 million streams/video views), but our interpretation of the Charlie Rich gospel song 'Feel Like Going Home' also means a lot to me.

I think we managed to create a strong version of it, especially thanks to guest singer Bruno Amstad. We sang the song as a duet, my friend Bruno, a fantastic soul and jazz singer, has since passed away, and his widow listens to this song every day to find strength and comfort...

BiTS: What are your plans for the future? Albums? Do you have a library of unissued recordings. Any big gigs coming up. Collaborations?

RK: My next project will be another music album with new songs. For the past few years, I have been working in a dual role; as a musician and as a music-book author, so you can't release a new album every year. I have been working intensively on my 500-pages book about Mark Knopfler for 14 months now; 'Mark Knopfler: Celtic Bard, Guitar Mystic, Melody Maker, Superstar (Volume 1, Dire Straits)'. Not to mention the occasional concerts, and then I also have a family, I'm even a grandfather, yeah. On top of that, there are the translations (the book is being published in three languages, German, French and English); now I'll take a break, catch my breath in the spring and summer, and see what new songs life brings me.

I just have to press a button and be ready to make new music. From that point on, I try to capture the ideas and turn them into songs. Music is basically always in my head and in my heart, sometimes even too much – melodies come to me all the time, which can be a blessing or sometimes a curse (if you can't switch off). Either way, I'm looking forward to this time; no idea how long it will take. Maybe a year. I'm not the fastest. I want to make one more real roots album with nothing but my own songs; this time it can be something in the direction of blues rock, I'm not just softy and laid back.

It could be the last album at any time, especially since it's uncertain whether it will be worthwhile to make albums at all in the future. The times in the music business have changed completely, an album always has to be financed, I work on a low budget, and it's almost impossible without sponsors. Let's see what's in store for me; if there's no money, I'll just do a solo album, all by myself, which also has a tradition in the blues. But a really powerful and complex album with the whole band would be cool. After that, a few more years of more or less regular concerts – before I finally let go, maybe. There are so many young musicians who are incredibly talented and passionate, we old folks don't have to occupy the scene until our last breath, there are more musicians than people who can listen to them anyway...

When I was young, I dreamt of a career, of course; today I am realistic and grateful that I have been able to make a simple living from my music and work as an author for more than 35 years. That has to be enough; I almost only play concerts in Switzerland, in smaller clubs, about 30 a year at the moment (it used to be more), that's my audience, and it's a pleasure! Travelling to neighbouring countries or even to the USA just to be able to play and losing money in the process (I'm not a star, no club can pay me enough to cover my travel expenses) is something you do when you're young and hungry. Today there are other ways to share your music with the world. In the past, most people spent their whole lives in a single village without conquering the world – and believe me, they were not at all less rich inside. You can live an incredibly rich, fulfilled and colourful life as a recluse in a monastery cell – and the successful world traveller can remain poor, unfulfilled and thirsty inside.

BiTS: Do you have a collection of guitars? I see a Telecaster, a resonator, a beautiful arch top and some others. Is there a favourite?

RK: Oh yes, in the past I did accumulate quite a few instruments; I own three Strats, two Teles, a PRS, a Guild, a Les Paul and a Relish (a Swiss brand that unfortunately no longer exists), and among the acoustic guitars, a Martin, a Dobro, an Ovation Adamas, a Höfner Classic Guitar and a Palomas, which a good friend (Hans Peter Holzer, 1954-2021) built especially for me.

That's more than enough guitars; they remain toys and tools that I still have to bring to life (unfortunately, no one can do this job for me, hehe). I haven't bought any new instruments in recent years, but there have been wonderful people who have given me guitars as gifts (the Guild, the Les Paul, the Relish and the Palomas are gifts). If I could only play two guitars, I would choose the most versatile workhorses: the PRS (one of the first from the early 90s, it can do almost anything from Strat to Les Paul), and the 70s Telecaster Custom (with a humbucker pickup!) with that incredibly fat sound for slide and open tuning.

BiTS: If you were to pass away tomorrow, how would you like to be remembered?

RK: Yeah, it is the most difficult and at the same time the best question, it forces you to concentrate on the very essence. First of all, I would be glad if people remembered me at all; that is by no means a matter of course, we constantly forget what our ancestors have achieved, and we think that we know and can do everything much better today. If they do remember me, then hopefully as someone who, until the last breath, concentrated as much as possible on the two key points: love (in all its aspects), music (including writing, even a text is music for me), and then also on God (well, that's three key points...). I only manage to concentrate on these three things to a limited extent and actually insufficiently (especially at the moment, when the world situation is once again causing so much unrest and conflict), and I have certainly not done everything (unfortunately, I am too lazy sometimes) to fully develop my talent. But people should know that I at least tried – and that it makes sense to try.

I think I've already said enough and way too much here; I thank you very much, Ian K., and your readers and all music lovers in England for the interest and attention. You really have a great culture and music history in England – it's a constant inspiration. God bless you!