

IN HIS OWN WORDS

Julian Sas: Bound To Roll

Julian (“in Dutch it’s usually pronounced ‘Yoolian’, but my mum named me after John Lennon’s son so I guess it should be Julian!”) Sas was first influenced by his mother’s taste in rock and roll, “I grew up with Dutch pop music, late 70s style disco music, which was really not my thing.

My mum gave me Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and all that stuff - so I really was ‘raised up on the rhythm’ as John Lee Hooker would say!”

His conversion to blues came when his father came home with a tape including Roy Buchanan and Peter Green, “My dad remembers this really well, the first time I heard Roy I was literally dumbstruck, his Telecaster tone struck me like lightning. Next was Peter Green on a song called ‘Fool No More’ and I was amazed by the first few notes I heard. Buchanan, Green, Stan Webb, Mick Taylor, all those British guys, I started to listen to them very

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quickly! My friend’s family had a big record store near where I lived, so every penny that I got went into the record store to buy blues, rock and heavy metal.” Forays into jazz found him struck by Miles Davis, among others, “With Miles, I think it’s the

freedom in his playing: it’s the same with John Coltrane and later on Kenny Burrell. It’s all music; it can be guitar, piano, horns or harmonica: if it ‘hits my soul’ then it’s alright!”

Despite an early taste for heavy metal, “I always liked that they write good songs, and there is always this high energy level,” Julian doesn’t go at his blues hammer and tongs! Feel, tone and emotion are the most important qualities in his playing, “I can play the Steve Vai or Satriani licks but in my own music I try to find the ‘silence’ of the note that has not been played.’ That’s something I heard in early Peter Green, he could play a note and then two minutes of nothing but that note is still there. On my *Bound To Roll* album I played all this fast soloing on ‘Life On The Line’ but listening back in the studio I thought, ‘No, it’s too much’ and I went back in and played what many guitarists might say was the ‘simple version’ but for me was the better version, because it had more emotion and more space in the playing.” That album also includes the acoustic-led ‘Ain’t Backing Down’, and acoustic playing is an important element of his live shows. Long before Joe Bonamassa did his *Night At The Vienna Opera House* Julian was incorporating acoustic sets within his gigs, “Playing acoustic blues for people is the most intense thing to do. I listen to a lot of old delta blues which is my biggest love in the blues, now I can play that together with my own acoustic stuff and then go on and play a one and a half hour electric set. I’m a big Rory Gallagher fan and when I went to see Rory he always had an acoustic section along with his usual heavy rock blues and that was the best combination of both worlds. I have done it for about ten years now, so it isn’t anything new!”

Bound To Roll also has elements of southern rock running through it, a testament to



more influences from Julian's youth, "Since I was young I've been into the Allman Brothers: Duane Allman and Dickey Betts, with those amazing duo parts, and now of course Derek Trucks who for me is one of the best guitarists I have ever heard. As a 'band' maybe they are the best band around: I read an interview with Derek recently where he said it's like the Duke Ellington orchestra but with guitars! Derek can play really fast, but also play that one note that brings me back to my youth and gives me that Peter Green feeling!" It's not just Derek though who inspires his love of slide guitar, "Going all the way back it's got to be Blind Willy Johnson, then Ellmore James, and JB Hutto. Robert Johnson of course, but I always like to mention more names than just his so that maybe people will go back and listen to them too! As I am a great Fleetwood Mac fan Jeremy Spencer comes somewhere in there too. Duane, and Dickey too, who's also a good slide player, Sonny Landreth and Ry Cooder: I've listened to and studied them all."

Surprisingly, Julian is less than complimentary about his home music scene, "It is all Dutch music in Dutch language, which for me is really bad: Holland is more of a pop country. I take a lot from that southern rock scene, and the Grateful Dead, Little Feat, so I like to get into a groove and see where the music takes us, and that's not a typical Dutch way of making music! The Dutch have to have certainty in their music: "Let's make this jam not that long, Julian, because we don't know where you are going!" Although there have been stand-out Dutch bands like Golden Earring and Focus, Julian rightly points out that they both came out of the sixties, "and we are now thirty five years on and nothing has happened in Holland since!"

That's the thing with Dutch music, 'play what you know, and let's not get out of the box because then we don't know where we're going!' When I started playing my music I was told 'What are you doing? That music is from your dad's era, it's not going to be commercial: you should stop and finish your schooling.' But this is my heart, I need to follow it and, just like a jam, see where it takes me.

On British radio and TV you have blues programmes, whereas in Holland that isn't possible because 'the blues is old man's music' and who wants to listen to old man's music? Here we know everything about Beyoncé but nothing about BB King! We played last week to about 600 people, and they told me there that blues rock music is 'getting popular'. Getting popular?!

I've been doing this for twenty years! For me, blues rock is a typically British thing: I am the only blues rock artist in Holland, but when I go to England I can name five or six guys playing the same style as me. It's your music, a British invention. When we play at blues festivals here they ask 'But is it loud Julian?' and I say of course it's loud, it's blues rock! That's how it is in Holland everything has to be labelled and put in boxes: blues, rock, jazz, soul. I like combinations of all those styles and I think that British people are more open to that."

Something that helps Julian's reach outside of Holland is his exceptionally good English, spoken as well as in his writing and singing, which comes from a surprising source! "My booking agent in England asked recently if I had been born there in some other life, I said I don't know, but I do know that I know every single episode of Only Fools And Horses, Bottom and of course Monty Python. My dad worked in London, so he was coming home with Beatles records and everything of course, but he also brought a lot of British comedy back. When I was six or seven, I was watching Monty Python not really understanding any of it but thinking that John Cleese walking round with a parrot is crazy and beautiful! I like the rhythm and feel of the English language, it's wonderful to speak and very easy to listen to. There is a rhythm in English that you can put music to, whereas German and Dutch are much more staccato. Also if you look at the history of English folk music there is a lot of three or four part harmonies and that is not something we really have in Holland."

With eleven albums of mostly original material writing songs is a constant process, "I am very fortunate to have a quite creative mind, and I can relate to things that other people go through in life, it's not very hard for me to put emotion into music when I see things on television, for instance all the crises that are going on now. My wife and I lost a child three and a half years ago so it's very easy to relate to the pain that such things bring. I saw this Willy Dixon interview once and he said blues is things from real life, and for me that is the truth. That is how I write my songs: they're songs about the everyday life of everyday people. Everybody in this world goes through the same things sometimes. Right now I have about 28 new songs, some finished, some not, the lyrics are everywhere across the house! I always have these small notepads in my bag and guitar cases so for instance we did

this gig last week and I was looking up at the really high ceiling and saw a bird there, so I started writing a song about a bird flying away. Maybe just a few words to start with but it will be lyrics after a few weeks, when I've thought about it, reworked it. For me it's fun to do: I like to write music, lyrics and poems and see what comes out of it. It's not hard: I've had musicians say to me, how do you do it, how do you write so many songs? It just comes naturally and I think the well is not yet dry!"

While Julian writes all the lyrics, the whole band contribute to the eventual creation of the songs, "Tenny (Tahamata, bass) and Rob [Heijne, drums] don't want to write lyrics, they say, 'You have to sing them!' and that's OK by me. But when I come with a riff or an idea, again it's 'let's see where it goes from there'. On all the albums we've made the demos have been like twelve long jams, and then our manager says 'OK guys, where are the songs?!' It always leads to a song in the end, but we have to explore everything around that song until we know what it will be. So when I say we 'write' the songs together that is the truth."

The classic blues rock trio format aids that process, "When I started playing I felt I had to do lead, rhythm and vocals all combined, so that's where I come from. That's what Rory did, what Jimi, Alvin Lee and Johnny Winter did. I did think we should have a second guitarist once, but that was only for half an hour! When I brought him in we immediately went into the Lynyrd Skynyrd thing, and although there are a lot of southern rock influences in the music we are not a southern rock band. As a trio we can play and jam all night and have no idea where we'll end up, so for me the trio is freedom, like in Miles Davis' music."

Although there are no specific plans for the next album, "as I said I do have those 28 songs! This year we have a lot of gigs coming up so I'd have to find the time, but if I have the time then I will surely record another album. I can't be sure it will sound anything like Bound To Roll: maybe it will sound very different, musically and song-wise."

With luck there will also be time for a UK tour, "Apparently we have two blocks of dates available, at the end of April and in October, but I don't want to be that guy who says 'I'll be out there on this date' and then it turns out there are no gigs!"

Moray Stuart

Image: Greg Owen
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