

“I heard Howlin’ Wolf singing Smokestack Lightning and I was instantly locked into the blues”

Dave Speight

The Boy From The North Country

If you go to the North Country, you’ll find one hugely unsung, British blues treasure, Dave Speight. Recommended to me by photographer Jennifer Noble, I just had to find out more about this Liverpool-born man who these days resides in Yorkshire. If you’ve been to any blues festival in the north, you’ll have seen him, heard him - just one man and his guitar - and been drawn in by his mastery and love of the music he plays.

“I first heard Howlin’ Wolf singing ‘Smokestack Lightning’ and, having been a Motown boy until sixteen years old, I was instantly locked into the blues. There were no blues albums to be had in 1963 other than Josh White, but after some digging around I found some. I only started playing guitar after a visit to a folk club in nearby Warrington in 1964 seeing people playing, unplugged, in a room holding three hundred. You could hear a pin drop. There was an old guy who worked at Hussy’s in Stanley Street, and I bought a Big Bill Broonzy album, even played it at 16 rpm so you could hear what was happening. Robert Johnson’s album left me open mouthed. Then later a wondrous record store opened, and one of the staff there saved all the acoustic blues albums he came across – Blind Boy Fuller, Skip James, Blind Willie McTell, Scrapper Blackwell, Mance Lipscomb, although my first copy of that was a wedding present from my best mate. I also listened to the very popular Mike Raven’s Blues Show on Radio 1, as well as albums borrowed and never returned.”

Like pretty much every other aspiring young guitarist, Dave got going with Bert Weedon’s tutorial. “I wondered why it hurt so much and was so difficult. I soon gave up strumming though once I heard Bob Dylan finger-picking. I met Paul Simon and he showed me his style and I gave him a couple of riffs he hadn’t quite sorted. We’d both been listening to Davy Graham at that time.”

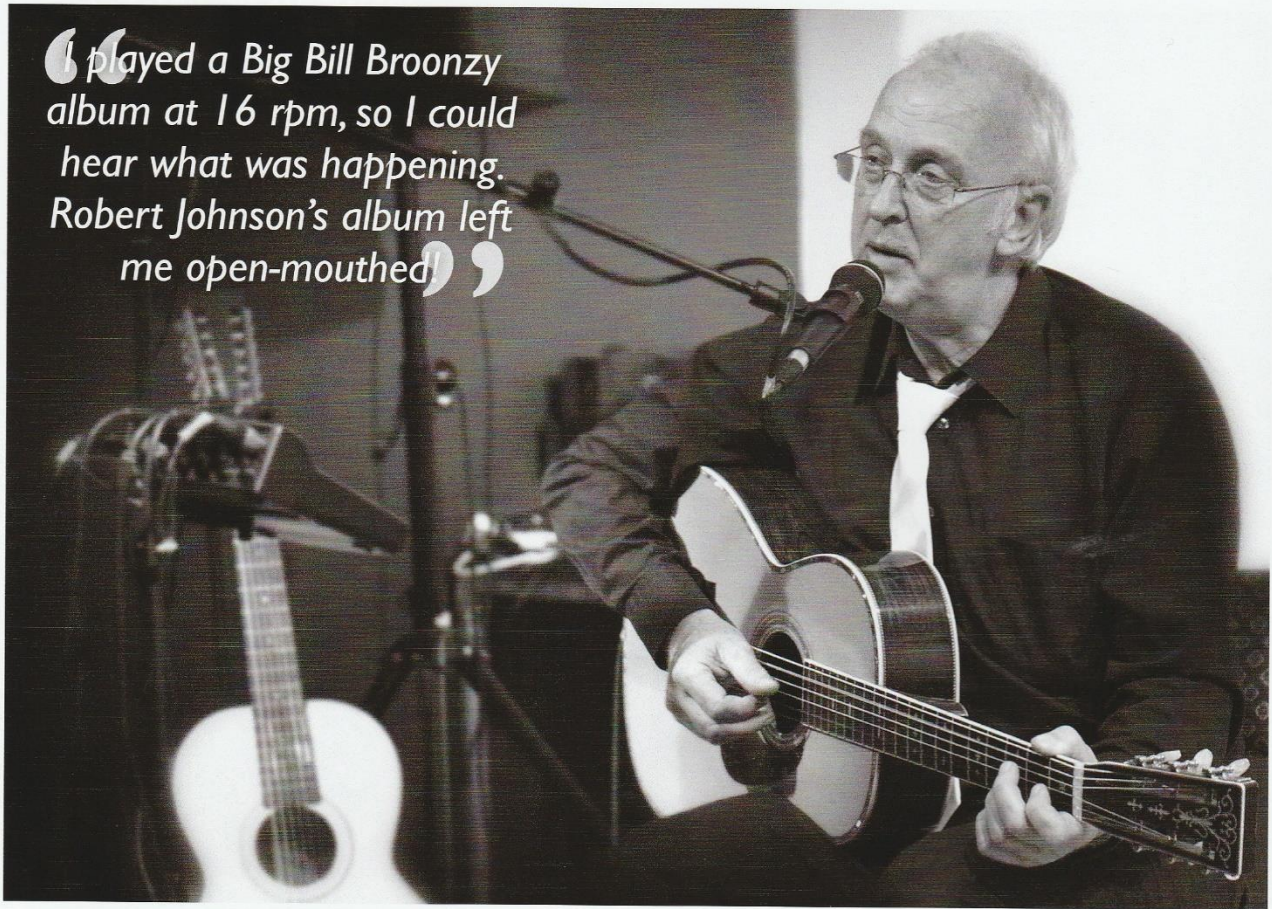
“Having seen Rev. Gary Davis, I gave up folk music and just wanted to play the blues.” In fact there’s a photograph of Davis playing in a club and sat to the side of him is Dave Speight, watching intently. He also remembers meeting the great bluesman at that gig, if only because the Reverend smoked over two hundred of Dave’s cigarettes over the

weekend! “After the gig, real late at night, he played ‘Cocaine Blues’ and ‘Della’ for me. He sang them when he knew no women were watching. His wife disapproved of profane songs! So my cigarettes and a bottle of whisky were my payment for the lesson even though he wasn’t supposed to drink. His minder and folk artist Maddy Prior went nuts. Afterwards he said, “Play me some, let’s see what you got.” Davis thought he played well but he also thought it was too clean, technically good, but soulless. He got a lesson in living and breathing the music, not just playing it well.

What does he remember about the first gig he ever played? “It was at the Minor Bird’s folk club in Warrington. They made me get up and perform and if I played there I got in for free and in 1966 they thought I was good enough. I played blues at my first gig; in fact there’s even a recording of one of the songs still on my website today. Paul Simon had played there previously for twelve guineas - I got a fiver and thought I’d made it!”

Dave hasn’t always been a solo artist. In the mid to late ‘70s, when the blues wasn’t so fashionable, he played in duos and groups including a couple of years in a jug band called Hot Pot Belly. “They were crazy, insane. One night playing at a local university, we were joined by Steve Phillips, Brendan Croker and Mark Knopfler - he played my guitar - and Pick Withers who played bones. Dire Straits had been playing support for Talking Heads in a bigger hall and so Steve dragged them up to join us.” And there’s been so many more. “Thinking of others I’ve seen or played alongside, there’s John Lee Hooker, Son House, Champion Jack Dupree, Fred Mc Dowell, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and David ‘Honeyboy’ Edwards. On the same bill I’ve played with Juke Boy Bonner,

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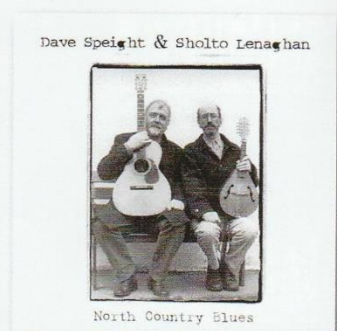
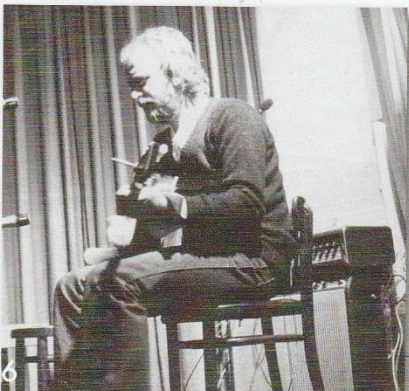


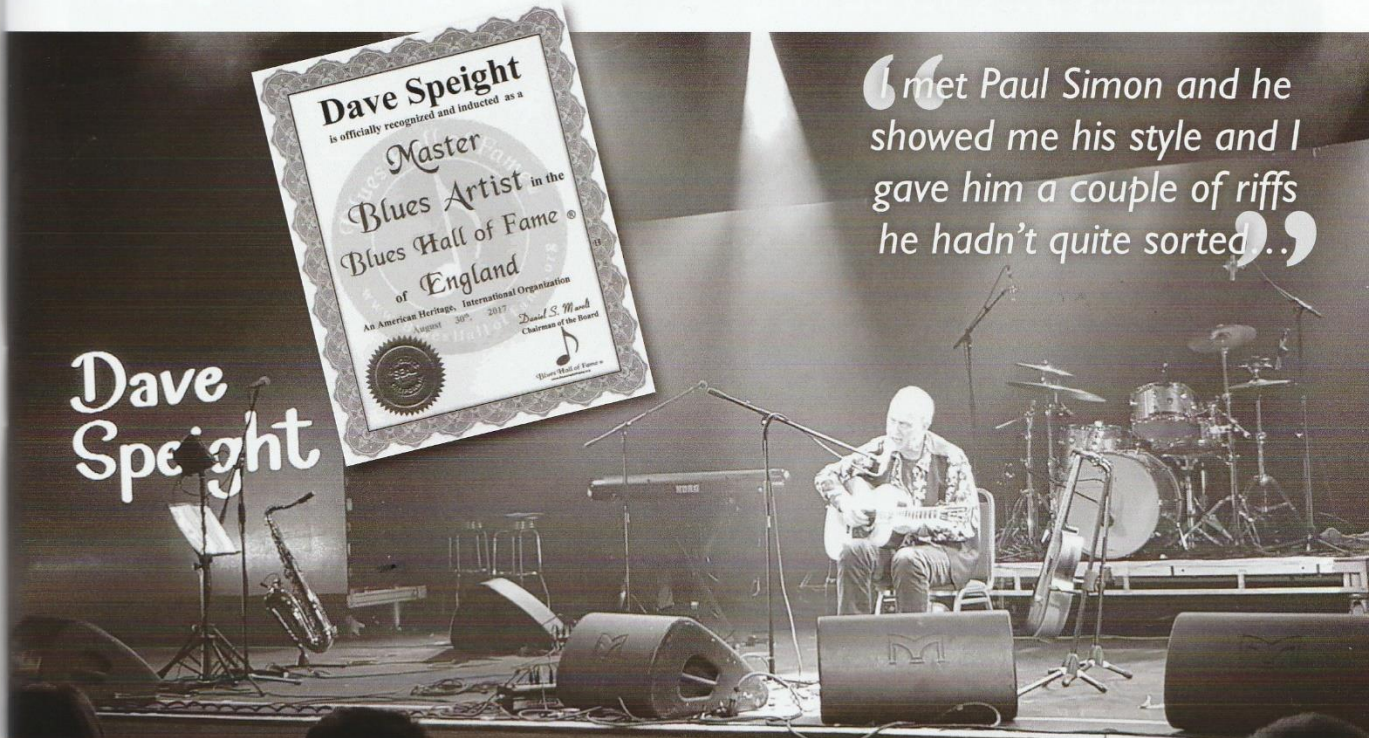
Jack Dupree and a whole raft of U.K. players, some you may not know, but including Ian Anderson, Mike Cooper, Jo Anne Kelly, the sister of The Blues Band’s Dave Kelly. The first time she came up north she was my support. That quickly changed as I supported her the next time. She had such a great voice, sadly passed on far too young. Others at that time included Duster Bennett and Ray Stubbs, as well as my good friend Sholto Lenaghan. We played John Estes numbers mainly.”

In more normal times Dave is a busy bluesman, but of late it’s not been so easy. “I was due to be supporting ‘The Colonel’, but with Covid, Steve Cropper’s tour didn’t go ahead. I’ve got a booking with Catfish Keith later this year if he is able to come here. I’ve played the warm up for him before, so it will be nice to join him again. Mind you, I play a lot quieter than he does!” Alongside being a performing musician, like several others Dave also teaches guitar. “Yes, I do teach but I’m not a great teacher if you don’t pick it up quickly. One notable success is a young guy named Will Severs who has just released an album ([reviewed](#)

[in issue 232 – Ed](#)) and he learns very quickly and really applied himself – he lives in Italy.”

I asked Dave about his own music: the work put into it to grasp that authentic sound of the early blues. “Great question that. It’s random. I always have about eighty numbers that can quickly be brought back to performance level. So with each of the three albums I have released, that goes through my mind and head all the time. When I record, all the tracks are in one take, no overdubs, they come as they are. It is what it is on the day and often it’s a new number that prompts me to head to the studio, or as on the last album being offered free studio time which was nice.” The albums so far released are *A Seam Of The Blues*, *Blues Around Midnight* and *Last Chance Blues*. He also has some sound advice for any budding musician. “I have always said do it like you mean it, really mean it. For young guitarists, learn your craft then put the guitar down. Throw your head back and sing without the guitar, really go for it, make those words matter to you, don’t just say them like a hymn or folk song,





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feel it. Then pick up the guitar again and don't let the guitar drive the singing. Let the singing and the performance drive the guitar. Never stop! This music has been around for over fifty years and it will always be what I do. Work on it and learn your craft, live the music your playing.” Sound advice for everyone who plays.

“I have a number of guitars that go on the road with me. My main guitar is one that Steve Phillips built for me back in 1979. Loads of bling and Brazilian Rosewood! It's good but not as good as the 000 Martin it's based on. There's also a 12-string (tuned down to A) and both were built by Pete Howlett, who's currently building his thousandth ukulele and a Beltona Tricone built this time by Steve Evans that rings like a bell and an old 'Michigan' Parlour guitar of indeterminate age, probably made around the 30's or 40's that I use as an authentic sounding slide guitar. Then most recently a beautiful little 12 fret Vega that I bought from my good friend Jim Murray. I have a luthier nearby, who replaced the fingerboard, bridge and tuners then re-finished the back and sides for me. It has an amazing balance and to think it was originally built circa 1910.”

The man - his music and his instruments - after over fifty years playing the blues, still has much to offer. So once things get back to some sort of normality, where next for Dave Speight? “There are no ladders, just snakes. I missed a bunch of festival gigs last year that will hopefully happen at some point in the future. Just keep checking the website. We'll be back, though sadly I've heard that a few of my favourite venues have called time for the last time and they will not be returning. I'm like many others of us here in the North of England who love and play acoustic blues. We'll carry on playing with the passion we always have done...ladder or not.”

Dave Speight may not be a household name to many, being based in the north, but all his years as a musician has made him one of the finest artists in the country playing real Delta blues. One thing Dave certainly wanted to add was the influence of Wizz Jones. “He was”, says Dave “the first person I heard play Blind Boy Fuller and that was jaw dropping back in the mid '60s. Then there was the time he took me along with him to The Troubadour and I played in the same line up with him. You know it may not mean a lot to others, but for me it was a real milestone as a young player, just coming out of my teenage years.” As Jenifer Noble said to me, “Dave Speight is a real national treasure and he really should be heard.” Articulate words indeed.

Pete Clack

“This music has been around for over fifty years and it will always be what I do”



It's hard to believe that Maddy Prior began her career as a roadie. But her early years weren't spent touring with any old folk musician: she accompanied the Rev. Gary Davis, regarded as a founding father of acoustic blues. “Spending a month driving round England with a leading blind musician was a bit unusual, even back then,” she laughs. “But he really was a fascinating guy. He used to say, ‘Miss Maddy, you'd make a great nurse!’ I came to the conclusion that this was both a compliment and an insult at the same time. But he was a terrific inspiration, as well as being one of the reasons why I embarked on my career.” As everyone knows, Blackpool-born Maddy went on to become the lead singer with legendary folk group, Steeleye Span.

(re-produced from the Manchester Evening News)