

Sue Foley - Pinky's Blues

Guitars are strange instruments. On the surface they look normal enough: a roundish piece of wood with a neck that holds the strings to the top of the instrument. While they've been modernized like mad over the past 100 years, at heart they are still the same thing they started as: something to play songs on and hope those songs take on a new life of their own.

If only it were only that simple.

Guitarists often look at their guitars as possessing real magic, an indescribable totem of impossible beauty able to create power and passion. To tell a true guitarist their instrument is there just to play is like telling an art lover that the Mona Lisa is a nice drawing of a woman sitting still. There are infinite worlds lurking in this beacon of musical art, and it is in the finding of it there that whole worlds are created.

Sue Foley has been playing guitar since she was 13 years old. Like so many other musicians, it was the music of the early Rolling Stones that inducted her into the world of the blues. As she started working with other bands, she made her way to the Mark Hummel group and began touring Canada and northern America. When Austin blues nightclub and label owner, Clifford Antone saw her at the annual Blues Music Awards in Memphis, he knew he'd met an all-timer. Before long, Foley was living in Austin and, in 1992, recorded her debut album **YOUNG GIRL BLUES**. They say some things are meant to be, and surely it was this connection with Antone and Austin that set the stage for much of the blues woman's life.

At the heart of it all has always been the guitar, though. It's the sound of Sue Foley's soul that comes out of the six strings, and it's no accident that her new album **PINKY'S BLUES**, is named after her pink paisley Fender Telecaster electric guitar that has been such a major part of Foley's life for all these years.

Everything about the musician's new album seems to point its wondrous aim at destiny. Sue Foley and producer Mike Flanigin decided to make the album in the middle of the COVID lockdown in 2020. "Mike, drummer Chris Layton and I had just finished making Mike's album **WEST TEXAS BLUES** and we needed another challenge to keep us busy," Foley says. "And because we'd been hanging out together we were comfortable in each other's presence, and this would be a very low-key closed session. I brought in Jon Penner to play bass. He was my first bass player and had been on all my early Antone's records. So just the four of us along with engineer Chris Bell went into the studio and recorded the entire album in three days. What you're hearing is live, off the floor, in the moment the music was played totally spontaneously and, mainly, improvised."

Being that spontaneous, Sue Foley still had an overall idea for how she wanted the music to be. "We just wanted to make something representative of the Texas blues that we had been schooled on in Austin. So, we picked great songs and I wrote a few of my own to round things out. Everything on it is a labor of love."

That open-flow feel of the great empty spaces of Texas that blows through many of the songs, no matter whether they're previous classics like Lavelle White's "Stop These Teardrops," Frankie Lee Sims' "Boogie Real Low" or Lillie Mae Donley's "Think It Over" or newer songs like Angela Strehli's "Two Bit Texas Town" and Foley's own "Dallas Man." There is a strong vibrating hum of Lone Star music that runs wild and free through the whole album, like there is some kind of spiritual wholeness of the music of Texas which binds it all together.

Part of that is the total devotion Sue Foley has to the guitar, and in particular to the one she calls Pinky that has been with her for decades and continues to play on this album. Foley feels it's almost a living extension of who she is and helps guide her through the rambunctiously deep renditions of everything she performs. It was while playing Pinky and reaching out via livestreaming to connect with other people and players that much of **PINKY'S BLUES** came to life. "During the COVID lockdown, Mike Flanigin and I had started a livestream show called 'Texas Blues Party'," Foley says. "And all we were doing was live-streaming from Mike's house, just the two of us along with a drum machine and playing and talking about the history of Texas blues, and many of our heroes. On the show, we would call some of our friends and talk about the music and its origins. It was a fun concept and it ended up being the foundation for both Mike's album **WEST TEXAS BLUES** and my album. We called Angela Strehli one day and ended up learning some of her songs. I've loved Angela forever and she just means so much to me. I think she's one of the most soulful blues singers there ever was. And besides being such a great singer Angela is also a wonderful songwriter, so I was thrilled to be able to include her incredible songs on this album.

The song "Dallas Man" on the album also comes from some soul-searching by Sue Foley. "I realized when I wrote 'Dallas Man' it was just about all these great guitar players from Dallas and right around there," Foley says. "I've always been infatuated with Blind Lemon Jefferson and had been reading about him and working up some of his songs. I was also fascinated by how intricate his guitar style was and how difficult it was to learn. Between Blind Lemon Jefferson and Frankie Lee Sims, and then working on some Freddie King and always watching Jimmie Vaughan came the idea of 'Dallas Man.' The idea of the song is that these guitar players that came out of that area, how they all have their own sound and style. Just imagine: Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jimmie Vaughan, Freddie King, T-Bone Walker, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Frankie Lee Sims, Anson Funderburgh, Zuzu Bollin, Doyle Bramhall II, Denny Freeman and Derek O'Brien all came from that area. And those are many of the main guys we played with and studied. That's almost a whole album right there!"

As the album became close to completion, certain surprises became apparent, and Foley says that's one of her favorite parts of finishing the sessions. "I'm always surprised in the end," she says. "When you're recording you never really know what's gonna be the stand-out tracks. There are sleepers that catch your attention later and you realize are the ones that surprise you. The song we recorded by Angela Strehli, "Say It's Not So," is one of my favorites. We did that in one take on the first day of recording. I had never even played the song live or performed it, so I was just getting comfortable. The band had never heard it. We literally learned it while we were recording. But that put us all in the moment, listening and feeling off each other's energy. The song just led us into a really deep place, and you can hear the dynamics rising and falling. It was pretty magical. We live for these moments."

As life turned inward throughout 2020 and now into 2021, everyone has had to learn new ways to live and relate to not only others, but to the whole outside world. In some ways, many days feel like we're all back in school again, feeling our way through the new fundamentals of living. Sue Foley's life has been an exploration of the blues and so much more. Leaving Canada as a young player, she knew she had to go where the music thrived. All her years in Austin, and including those when she left to learn new approaches to life, have all come together on **PINKY'S BLUES**. "The fact that I have ended up back in Austin just seems right," Foley says. My home is Canada and I definitely identify as a Canadian. But I had a yearning for this music and I can't even put my finger on why or how. It got in my soul when I was a teenager. I guess I was open and I got imprinted by the sound and the force of blues music. I saw my first blues show at 15 and I swear I've never been the same. I was lucky because I was able to play with so many legends before they passed away. That direct transmission, as we know, is what it's all about. I have the kind of experience and education that you can't even get anymore. In a way it's a big responsibility to carry the message of these giants. But even more important, it's about finding your own voice within this framework. In blues, that takes time. The beauty of blues, and something I've always loved about it, is that you get better as you get older. I've always been a fan of older musicians. There's something about the message, the life experience, the whole package. If you can keep a good perspective on life, a sense of humor, and a love for what you're doing, you have much more to give. This is when it all really happens."

It for sure is all really happening all over **PINKY'S BLUES**. Sue Foley's well-loved guitar is stepping up and stepping out, playing the music of the spheres and sharing a love for something so deep and so pure there are no words to truly describe it. Though Foley tries: "I've been on the road for over 30 years. You could call that paying my dues. I've made over a dozen albums of my own. I've raised a child. I've bought and sold homes. I've had great successes and great failures. And all of this just makes my life richer and more colorful. It's funny I keep coming back to the same 30 or 40 albums as my place of inspiration. I keep studying the same artists, over and over again. Freddie King, Muddy Waters, Memphis Minnie, T-Bone Walker, Howlin' Wolf, etc...etc.,... You never really get there. You're just always going. But it's a great trip and I never get tired of playing a slow blues. That's the ultimate." Today, in 2021, Sue Foley is surely one of the ultimate. With Pinky right by her side.