



I GOT THE T-BONE WALKER
BLUES

ROY GAINES

Almost a quarter of a century after T-Bone Walker's death, his clean and distinctive sound remains a key part of the heritage of blues, R & B, jazz, and other genres. However, that signature bluesy eloquence, both on electric guitar and vocals, survives most profoundly in the artistry of the few remaining players who actually performed with and learned directly from the older Walker. And of those, nobody absorbed T-Bone's classy style more fully over a longer period of time, or articulates it more authentically today, than Roy Gaines.

As a fourteen-year-old prodigy who had quickly absorbed the master's basic idiom, Roy first shared the stage with his idol T-Bone Walker at City Auditorium in Houston over forty-five years ago. Now an accomplished multi-dimensional professional and recognized master musician himself, Roy has finally made the recording he's been rehearsing for since then. Appropriately titled ***I Got the T-Bone Walker Blues***, this CD is not so much homage to an individual as it is a tribute to a sound – a document of Roy's vision

of what blues music is at its best.

Growing up in Houston's Fifth Ward in the era of Walker's greatest artistic achievement, the 1940s and '50s, Roy experienced an essentially all-black cultural environment. Especially along then-vibrant Lyons Avenue, the youngster who began throwing newspapers for the Houston Chronicle at age five caught glimpses of the most famous African-American celebrities of the day outside of establishments such as the Crystal Hotel, Club Matinee, or Caldwell Tailors. Because of segregation, the common folk of the neighborhood shared a necessary physical proximity with visiting stars, directly interacting with them. In such a milieu the kids had real role models readily available on their own turf, people whose hands they could shake and whose presence and example could fuel aspirations.

Coming from a home where their mother kept a piano and encouraged musical training, both Roy and his older brother Grady Gaines naturally chose heroes who were professional musicians, men whose recordings dominated area jukeboxes and whose faces they could

actually hope to see around town. For Grady, who went on to become one of the great saxophonists of R & B, that inspiration came first from Louis Jordan. For Roy, who had started out as a pianist at his mother's urging, the initial fascination was with the dapper Nat King Cole. But a crucial realization at age fourteen suddenly caused him to switch instruments and follow the path of T-Bone Walker.

"I was playing piano then so I guess that's why Nat was attractive to me," Roy explains. "And I started playing with my brother's band. Well, Grady used to walk the floor with the saxophone, and what would happen, all the girls would be coming back to the bandstand looking for him, chasing him back." Motivated both by sibling rivalry and hormonal instinct, Roy vowed, "Boy, I've got to get me some of these girls!" So he promptly abandoned the piano. "I decided I had to play guitar, something that I could walk around with if I wanted to have the same effect on girls like Grady did."

Using money his mother had saved from his earnings on the newspaper route, Roy decisively purchased the instrument

that would change his life. "My first guitar came from Crown Jewels downtown. It was a Kay, and it was amplified." Recalling the excitement he felt coming home with the new acquisition, he beams, "Man, I was going to learn to play electric guitar – just like T-Bone Walker!"

After mastering his first chord (a B-flat) with help from eventual Duke-Peacock session player Clarence Holliman, and then taking a few lessons from former big band guitarist Steve Hester, Roy was comfortable with the new instrument. "Because I had taken piano, when I started with Mr. Hester I knew a lot about music, so I moved quite rapidly. In three months I was playing two of T-Bone Walker's songs and one of Gatemouth Brown's." It comes as no surprise that Roy's earliest repertoire consisted of hits by the two giants of electric Texas blues, men whose "battles" on stage at The Bronze Peacock or the Eldorado Ballroom were regular cultural events in Houston's black community. However, Roy ultimately had little trouble choosing his favorite between the two rivals because, as he explains it, "I was just so much more like 'Bone."

A short time later, after first making a name for himself covering a few of Walker's songs at the Whispering Pines nightclub in the Trinity Gardens area, the young devotee finally got to meet the master face to face. "When T-Bone came to town, they told him there's this little boy, fourteen years old, playing like you. He said, 'Well, that's good.' Anyway, I heard that T-Bone knew about me, and I went to see him at the City Auditorium downtown. They let me in, and I got the chance to go backstage and tell him that I admired him so." Happy simply to have met his hero and ready to take his place out in the audience, Roy was almost overwhelmed by what next transpired.

"T-Bone said, 'You stay right here. Don't you go no place. I'm going to call you on stage.' And when he went on stage and had played about three songs, he told the people that he was going to bring me on, and boy, I was standing back there about to pee on myself," Roy recalls. Then it happened: "He called, and all them people saw me come out there, a little boy. . . . He said, 'I'm going to sing, and I want you to play behind me.'" Holding Walker's enormous Gibson guitar in

his trembling hands and unsure of himself in such a daunting situation, the novice was saved by the next sentence the star uttered: "He spoke to me right over the mike, in front of all those people, and he said, 'Do Cold Cold Feeling.'" To this day Roy interprets that moment as a sign that he had found his destiny. "Man, that was one of my favorites! One of the very first songs I had learned! So I started the intro to that, and he came in singing, and I played, man."

The impact of Roy's first public appearance with T-Bone Walker was huge for the young guitarist. "When he left town, I got all kind of calls for jobs," he says, reciting a long list of gigs as "T-Bone Jr." that suddenly became available to him at the most prestigious clubs in Houston. "Oh it got exciting after T-Bone!" Roy capitalized on his enhanced local reputation and continued to develop his performing skills over the next two years. Then, at age sixteen, he followed Walker's example and relocated to California.

After winning a talent show in Los Angeles, Roy secured his first professional touring work playing with the Roy Milton band, and the stage was set for a career

that would eventually include a stint backing New York-based singer Chuck Willis, followed by an impressive series of collaborations with major stars such as Billie Holiday, Jimmy Rushing, Joe Williams, Brook Benton, Bobby Bland, Little Junior Parker, Ray Charles, Quincy Jones, and numerous others. However, Roy never forgot his original inspiration, his role model, and in fact maintained a close personal relationship with T-Bone Walker until his mentor's death in 1975.

"See, T-Bone has helped me all through my life, is what I'm getting at. Our paths have crossed ever since that day at the City Auditorium – and crossed in very much the same way as that first meeting," Roy gratefully remembers. As the talented kid matured, his role in Walker's life evolved from that of a youthful impersonator and eager student to that of an occasional caretaker and constant friend. "Many years later, when he was near passing away, I used to – I didn't know he was as sick as he was – I'd take him on jobs... He would always ask me to come up and play, and I'd say, 'That's all right – I just want to watch you.' And he'd say, 'Naw naw, come up and play some.

Come up and let the people hear you.' And I'd play."

Roy still treasures the simple words Walker's wife, Vida Lee, whispered to him one day years ago: "Daddy thinks a lot of you." And although Mrs. Walker reportedly regularly referred to her spouse as "Daddy," the paternalistic implication remains important to Roy. For he – moreso than for countless other guitarists who have idolized T-Bone Walker from afar – can trace his musical lineage beyond the recordings and the concerts to the person himself, a man he knew well and loved. And like a fiercely proud son, Roy remains devoted to the memory of his musical father. "To this day, nobody can beat 'Bone on stand up singing and playing the guitar at the same time, nobody. . . 'Bone is the true king of blues."

With such personal history it seems natural for Roy to assert, "I've always wanted to do a T-Bone Walker record." And now, after teaming with noted producer Joe Harley and a sublime cast of supporting musicians, that lifelong dream has been brilliantly realized. ***I Got the T-Bone Walker Bone Blues*** features ten tracks associated with the major phase of

Walker's career, plus a tune made famous by one of his contemporaries. Collectively these eleven studio performances, all recorded live direct to two track, define Roy's notion of absolute blues purity. "That was the whole idea, to bring the blues back into its proper light," he explains. "It's the early T-Bone Walker. It's 'Bone when 'Bone was young."

And indeed, this recording delightfully evokes an older sound of blues – the way it was back when horns, especially the trumpet, had only recently yielded the lead position to the electric guitar (as would increasingly be the case in the wake of Walker's seminal example). From the opening rendition of ***Stormy Monday*** through all but two of the remaining tracks, horns are a major presence. Bold, vital blasts of trumpet (both muted and straight) and the smoky-throated sophistication of tenor saxophone remind us repeatedly of where blues orchestration originated – and how Walker ultimately changed history by re-creating such fluent horn-like precision on the fretboard of his electric guitar. On song after song, as Roy swaps spirited solos with trumpet and sax, augmented occasionally by piano, his rightful role as cre-

ative curator of the T-Bone technique is revealed. The nuances of his playing astound us twofold – first at the innovation of Walker's precedent and then at the faithful interpretation by the heir apparent.

But despite Roy's impeccable devotion to the master's style (on perfectly accented vocals as well as on guitar), this collection still has the capacity to surprise and enlighten. For instance, in the Les Hite composition *T-Bone Blues* (first recorded by Walker for the Varsity label in 1940), the dominant sound is the slippery twang of pedal steel guitar, an instrument associated more with country & western or Hawaiian music than with blues. Yet Roy's version here is true to T-Bone's original; in both cases, a supporting musician contributes the unique sonority of the pedal steel – sliding, moaning, bending notes into one melismatic dreamscape – while the standard guitar works a slow and easy foundation riff suggesting the rhythm of horses ambling across wide open spaces.

The pedal steel motif recurs in the subsequent song, an inspired and provocative bonus among these Walker classics – a tune by one of his contempo-

raries from the other side of the tracks, so to speak: Hank Williams' *Honky Tonk Blues*, reinvented and rendered here in wondrous T-Bone style. In some ways, this arrangement is Roy's most perceptive statement about the legacy of the blues, emphasizing as it does the syncretism of seemingly disparate elements in the tradition of the best American music. In addition to the pedal steel guitar, an exquisite fiddle sound emerges in the song, first faintly as background ambience and then as featured solo, gracefully communicating anew the fundamental role of blues in traditional western swing. As Roy, who was once professionally managed by Hank's ex-wife Audrey, is quick to point out, the music of both Walker and Williams "is blues, and it came along at the same time, in the late forties." And just as the original version of T-Bone Blues could legitimately incorporate the exotica of pedal steel guitar, this composition by a white man who sang with a nasal intonation could incorporate blues.

I Got the T-Bone Walker Blues concludes with a remarkably contrasting

reprise of *Stormy Monday*, this time rendered as a stripped-down acoustic shuffle in the manner of another colossus of Lone Star guitar, Lightnin' Hopkins. Here Roy leaves us with a final insight regarding the primal source of T-Bone's uptown sound. Here he gives us the other half of what he calls "the two sides of the Texas blues," indirectly helping us recall that a Dallas youngster named Aaron Thibeaux Walker was raised by a mama who included Blind Lemon Jefferson among regular guests at Sunday afternoon jam sessions in her home. Here Roy reminds us that before there were any electric guitars, there still was blues. And as he strikes the last chord, steel strings resonating across the hole in a wooden box, he's taken us back to where it all begins.

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