

# New Blood

## Robert Cray's Been Talking

Over the last couple of years Robert Cray's reputation and popularity seem to have grown exponentially. In 1980 his first album *Who's Been Talking* was released on a small West Coast label that went out of business six months later. The album disappeared.

But nowadays the Robert Cray Band is "shifting units" by the truckload.

*Strong Persuader*, their fourth and current album, became the highest charting blues album on the *Billboard* charts in over 20 years. Subsequently all his previous albums took on a renewed lease of life. Even *Who's Been Talking* has been disinterred, remastered, and is now selling healthily.

Cray is also one of those musicians who attracts the sort of accolades from their peers that sound like the ravings of fans. Eric Clapton has called him "the best all-round talent on the scene at this moment" and recently recorded one of Cray's songs. George Thorogood put it bluntly: "He can sing like Sam Cooke and he plays guitar as well as he sings, and he looks like Sidney Poitier. The guy's got it all." Keith Richards recruited Cray as a back-up guitarist for a recently filmed documentary on Chuck Berry. Cray was one of a select handful of performers chosen to showcase the blues on this year's Grammy Awards show. And New Zealand audiences also saw him recently when he guested on Tina Turner's *Break Every Rule* TV special.

### Duty Calls

The Cray Band is presently in the midst of a world tour that will take in an Auckland gig on August 5th. Speaking to *Rip It Up* by phone from his hotel in Switzerland, Robert Cray spoke warmly about his videotaping with Tina Turner:

"It was November in London and it was my first meeting with Tina. We had it worked out where I was going to perform on one song only, playing guitar for her on Sam Cooke's 'A Change is Gonna Come.' Wilson Pickett was also on the programme, then suddenly I found that Wilson Pickett wasn't on the programme. I don't know what the situation was. [Cray is doubtless being diplomatic here. It's widely acknowledged that Pickett stormed out of the show at the last minute.] All of a sudden I was called on to do a couple more songs with Tina."

So the audience was treated to Cray and Turner duetting on a medley of Pickett's hits. The fact that they'd had virtually no rehearsal time together didn't phase Cray. "The band knew the songs and I'd known them from some time ago so it was just a matter of me refreshing my memory."

### Bluenotes

Such material is all part of Cray's musical background. Although typed as a bluesman it's obvious he draws on much wider sources than simply 12 bars and three chords. His singing is often reminiscent of such soul crooners as Bobby Bland and Bobby Womack, as Cray acknowledges:

"I'm one of their biggest fans.

Sam Cooke too. There's also a lot of Stax music — Sam and Dave, Otis Redding. A guy called O V Wright is one of my favourite singers. He sang basically in the South and had a few records released on the Hi label, the label that also had Al Green, Ann Peebles and Betty Wright. And there's also the pop sounds, because I grew up when the Beatles were happening and Jimi Hendrix was around and Eric Clapton in Cream. I've listened to a lot of different kinds of music."

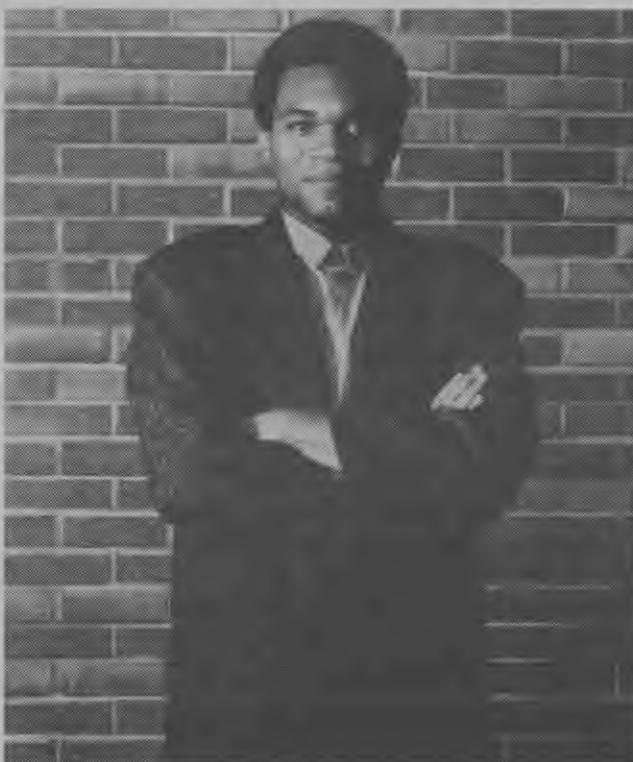
Cray's musical education began by listening to his parents' records at home. When he was six his father, a US Army serviceman, was posted to West Germany for two years and, as Cray puts it, "I listened to my parents' records because I couldn't understand the television. My father bought records at the service store. We had a lot: B B King, Bobby Bland, Sam Cooke, Freddie King, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, Miles Davis, gospel music too."

### Invasion

"But later on when I finally started playing guitar — I was 12 — in 1965 it was as a result of the British invasion, the Beatles and the Stones and so forth. I separated myself from my parents' music," Cray laughs. "But then later on I came back to it."

Now of course, Cray has become part of that same heritage, so much so that some commentators have dubbed him "the future of the blues." It's a title he feels uneasy with:

"It's hard, you know. I mean I'm proud of the kind of music I play but



to hold a title like that is something I don't want. I don't think about it. It's just a tag. I just do what I do — go on stage and perform our music."

And those performances are for increasingly bigger crowds than just the blues club devotees of the band's early days.

"We started the band in 1974 and started travelling up and down the West Coast in 1976. We've been working since then. It's nice to go to different towns now and to play for different people, but the main thing is you still have to go on stage and make the audience like you. Because there's more people that know about us doesn't mean they're going to like us after they see us." He chuckles. "We still have to work hard, you know."

### Character

Because the vast majority of his audience has got to know Cray via his records, many people must see him as the character he plays in his song lyrics: a lover who's either cheating or being cheated on, a man who's racked with feelings of jealousy, guilt or vengeance. This persona appears even when the songs are not self-penned. Such role-play must surely be deliberate.

"Yes it is. It's pretty derivative of the kind of lifestyle that we've led. We live out on the road most of the time and to manage a relationship is next to impossible. Well it was in the past. We write about subjects like that — past loves, things that we've done when we're out on the road. Sneaking around and cheat-

ing type things. Not so much now though. My life was more like that back when we were in one place, living on the West Coast with shorter touring distances. These days I'm pretty reserved, pretty soft spoken."

Cray ponders for a moment whether this may mean his lyric-writing could begin to change now that "the cheating and lying isn't going on so much."

### Thrill

But it's the thrill of live performance that he enjoys more than songwriting. "It's a challenge to go out on stage every night and try to win that audience. That's the most fun. The writing I do pretty much while I'm on the road, in my spare time."

Robert Cray is hopeful that his current popularity will be beneficial for blues music in general. "The way we do our music is nice for some people to take their first bite of the blues. It would be really great if because of us, some other blues musicians got some good record deals so they could be heard too."

With such an attitude it should be evident that the Robert Cray Band is not about to dilute its music in pursuit of even greater popular success. "We wouldn't do it," he states emphatically. "That's not what we're in it for."

Peter Thomson

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