

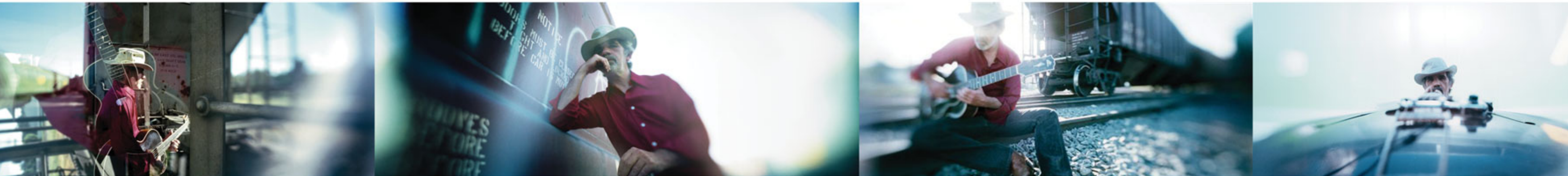
The Big Easy

J.J. Cale might just be the most laid-back individual ever to pick up a guitar and forge a successful, long-lasting career. Despite more than 30 years in the business, however, Cale remains an oddly anonymous figure – and that’s just the way he likes it. “My songs are more famous than I am,” he tells Jonathan Wingate...

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“I wouldn’t be surprised if timekeeping isn’t J.J.’s strongest point,” giggles Dawn, his publicist. “If he’s anything like he sounds on his records, you could be in for a long night waiting by the phone. I tell her that I would actually almost feel disappointed if Cale did call on time. Exactly an hour earlier than scheduled, just as I’m spinning through a couple of old Cale classics and thinking up my list of 101 things I always wanted to know about him but had no idea who to ask, the telephone rings, and the most chilled-out voice in music is on the other end of it. “Hey, is Jonathan there?” For a second, I don’t twig, although he talks just like he sings, and I have lost more hours of my life that I would care to admit listening to his drop dead cool drawl. “Yes, that’s me. Who’s calling?” I say, just as the penny drops. “It’s J.J. Cale,” he replies. Life can be so strange.

SEMI-RETIRED

To Tulsa and Back is Cale’s first record in eight years. It’s also his best since the late 80’s. He rarely tours for longer than a few weeks at a time, and hasn’t even done an interview on these shores for nine years, yet I have been told he’ll talk for around 30 minutes, a bit more if we get on OK. Two hours later, we’re still shooting the breeze, divided by 30 years and thousands of miles, but somehow speaking on the same wavelength. What have you been doing since the last album? “Well, you know, I noodle about on the guitar, muddle along, watch TV or visit friends,” Cale explains, speaking from his house in South California. “Just the same things that all regular folks do. There’s no showbusiness where I live. Every once in a while, I sit down and write a song, play engineer or I might buy a new guitar, see if it makes me sound any better. I guess I’m kinda what you might call semi-retired.”

J.J. Cale is the ultimate man of mystery, yet it’s an image he feels was used to sell his music, despite the fact that it wasn’t until he released his eighth album in 1983 that Cale actually allowed a picture of himself on the front cover. “Look, there’s J.J. on his back porch writing songs,” he says with a wry chuckle. “That’s a kind of marketing tool they used to try to figure out how to advertise me. Because I didn’t do much, didn’t tour much or make many records, and there wasn’t much publicity on me, people started using their imagination. For a long time, we never done any interviews at all. But I’m not reclusive, and I’m not mystical or none of that.” When you’re talking about J.J. Cale, the term ‘laid back’ isn’t simply a synonym for slow, it’s a vibe that can fit any tempo. “I guess you might call what I do kinda laid-back,” Cale confirms, somewhat needlessly. “When people are in the mood to have that kinda music, then you can use my music to fill your day. I’m surprised that people like what it is I do. That’s always amazed me, you know.” Spark up pretty much any J.J. Cale album from the last 35 years, and you can almost smell the thick clouds of dope drifting out of the speakers. His music invariably has an extremely warm, mellow atmosphere, his lazy, hazy, husky vocals and liquid licks almost floating around in the mix. “I don’t know how I do that,” he says. “I don’t want things to sound too direct. Mainly I try to give the impression that there’s always people in a room doing what you’re hearing. I do a lot of electronic manipulation to pull that off. I used to take drugs or drink to get me in the mood. Sometimes I made the wrong decisions when I was inebriated, and sometimes I got high and I wrote a song that I probably wouldn’t have done if I was straight. I indulge in all kinds of chemicals, but I don’t do that as much as I used to, let’s put it that way.”

I would have thought you would be more of a herbal man than a chemical man? “Well, yeah,” he laughs. “That’s true. I’ve had my fair share of both. At my age, I have to watch what I do now or I wouldn’t be around. Dope is a great thing for creativity, it’s not very good if you want to make decisions. “I’ve just put out my thirteenth studio album, and you could probably take any song from the last album and put it on the first album. My critics say everything I do sounds the same. But, you know, that’s who I am. I don’t sound like anybody else, and anybody else don’t sound like me. So I’m kinda stuck with what I do, I guess.”


AFTER MIDNIGHT

Jean-Jacques Cale was born in 1938 in Oklahoma City, and raised in Tulsa. Although he didn’t come from a musical family, Cale started by playing a guitar owned by a friend. “When I was about 14, I fooled around with the neighbourhood kid’s guitar until I got me one,” Cale recalls. “But I didn’t start writing songs until 15, 20 years later when I got a job as a sound engineer, so I had access to a studio. That was my main occupation, and I played guitar at night. I always thought writing was kind of a hobby until I heard Eric Clapton cut ‘After Midnight’, and then I thought, well I guess I’m a songwriter.” By 1964, Cale left Tulsa and joined up with his friend Leon Russell in Los Angeles, mainly because “you couldn’t really get more than \$10 and all the beer you could drink playing nightclubs in Tulsa.” Cale engineered at Russell’s home studio, where he met a man called Snuff Garrett, who signed him to Liberty Records. Around this time, Cale had a semi-regular gig at the Whiskey A-Go-Go. It was Elmer

Valentine, the owner of the Whiskey, who suggested he change his name to J.J. Cale. Two years later, Garrett started his own Viva Records, and at the height of the psychedelia boom, he suggested Cale get together with some of his buddies and cut an album of “psychedelic hits of the day.” Released under the name, *Leather Coated Minds* in 1966, the *Trip Down Sunset Strip* album is something Cale would rather forget, although it did spawn ‘After Midnight’, the song that would change Cale’s career forever. Originally written as an instrumental track for the album, the song was relegated to the B-side of a single in 1966. Cale was on stage in Atlanta when he heard someone in the audience shout, “Let it all hang out.” The words for the song came to him almost immediately. “I’m kind of a background guy – an engineer, guitar player, that kinda thing,” he draws. “I’m not really a performer, but because I wrote songs, it kinda pushed me out front. I was playing with Bonnie and Delaney early on. Carl Radle was playing with Eric, who was looking for some songs for an album in 1970. Anyway, somebody played it to Eric. A lot of the guys on his album were friends who I’d played with, and I’d given them all copies of my 45, which I couldn’t sell or give away. “I’d moved back to Tulsa, because I was starving back in L.A. I was driving down the street, and I heard the song on the radio and I knew then that I was gonna be a songwriter,” Cale says. “You know, have some cash coming in... So I kinda stayed in the music business because of that. When Eric cut ‘After Midnight’, that kinda opened a bunch of doors, so I slid into actually being in the professional end of the business. Eric’s records have kinda kept me from having to get a job selling shoes. It’s all a matter of luck, man. It has nothing to do with talent. My songs are a lot more famous than I am.”

His friend, manager and producer, Audie Ashworth suggested it was the right time for Cale to make his move and release an album. Three months later, he played Ashworth a totally new sound, a unique, mellow mix of rock and roll, blues, jazz and country. Ashworth rented a studio and hired demo musicians because they were cheaper. Denny Cordell liked the album and decided to put it out on his label, Shelter Records. Although Cale’s first single for Shelter, ‘Magnolia’ failed to set the charts alight in the summer of 1970, a DJ at KAAV Radio in Little Rock kept playing the flipside, ‘Crazy Mama’. Six months later, they realised they had released the wrong side of the record and reissued ‘Crazy Mama’ as an A-Side. The song reached No. 22 in the US, his highest chart placing to date. Soon after, his debut album, *Naturally* climbed to 51. “That was the first of the 13 albums I’ve done in the last 34 years,” he says. “I was shocked that it even came out, because we didn’t even have a deal when we made it. I never was that high on my music.” You must have felt it was a mark of respect when people started covering your songs? “Yeah, you know, and I was used to having no respect,” he says with a wry chuckle. “If you start playing music for a living, then the first thing you learn is nobody gives a damn, so I wasn’t expecting anything. The old saying is, if you don’t want to be disappointed, don’t expect anything. I really didn’t have any ambitions. I was just, you know, trying to wile away the day playing music and having a little bit of fun. I’ve probably written more songs to entertain myself than songs that people like. That’s probably why I don’t sell any more records than I do. I don’t really write trying to sell records. I really write to please myself.”

TWO NOTE RANGE

Cale recorded another seven classic albums with Ashworth including *Really*, *Okie*, *Troubadour* and *Grasshopper*, although Ashworth passed away shortly before the duo were about to begin recording *To Tulsa and Back*. “Music is a hard life, because you’re up one day and down the next. You have no guarantee that you’re gonna have a job tomorrow. You know, it’s a hustler’s deal. It’s very disappointing. 99% of all the people who play music never make enough money to buy gas for their car. That’s from the lowest level all the way up to the highest level. Everybody likes to play music and everybody likes music, but it’s real hard to make a living and get actual financial rewards in the music business.” Which artists have influenced you most over the years? “Oh gosh... a lot of guys. Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Mose Allison. Clarence ‘Gatemouth’ Brown was a big influence on my guitar playing too. I never really was a jazzer, and I wasn’t a blueser or a rock and roller, but all those influences kinda come out as what it is I do. “I’ve never considered myself a singer, but if you write songs, you gotta sing something,” J.J. Cale adds as we’re wrapping things up. “I have about a two-note range. My style is pretty much talk-sing. It’s a phrasing thing, man. And I sing behind the beat. That’s probably my whole deal – I tried to sound like a lot of people that were really good, and I didn’t pull it off. And in doing that, it kinda made me sound unique, I guess.” Unique indeed, J.J. Cale is that most unusual of performers in the noughties a true one off, and long may he continue to talk sing his two note range, write for himself and every once in a while let us all hear the results 

To Tulsa and Back is out now on EMI