

# TALLTALESANDTRUE

## Catfish Keith

### Fishtails And Blues

Catfish Keith is no stranger to British audiences; he's been swimming in our waters since 1992 and recorded his 2009 album, *Live At The Half Moon*, here. He's been nominated for a Grammy on thirteen occasions, inducted into the Blues Hall Of Fame, won the Acoustic Blues Album category at the Blues Blast Music Awards in 2019 and, just as Pete Clack reeled him in, he'd been nominated for an award at the upcoming Blues Foundation Music Awards to be held in Memphis in June.

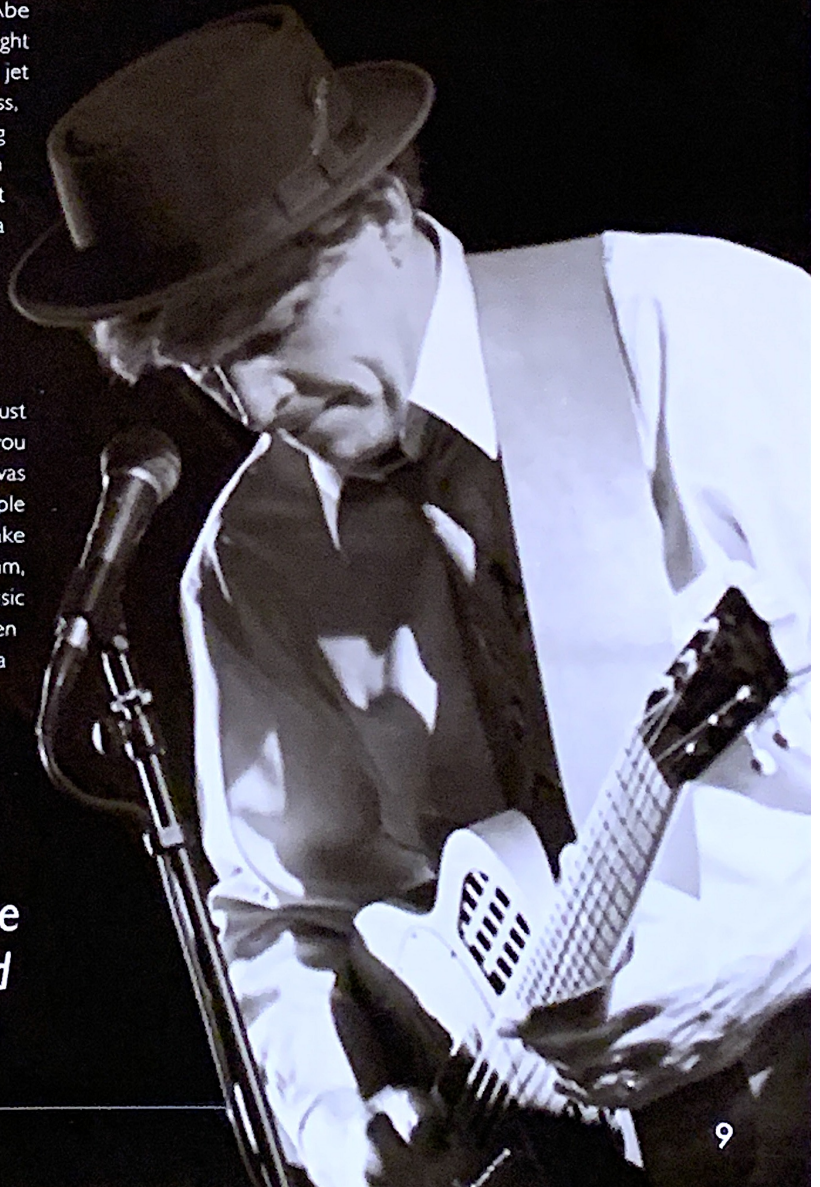
Catfish Keith is a true blues original and one of the best acoustic guitarists around, so how and where did it all begin? "I was born in 1962 in East Chicago, Indiana, an old steel mill town on Lake Michigan. They call it Indiana Harbour or just Harbour. My first memories were from there. My dad grew up there too, Grandpa was pure Slovak, Grandma was pure Polish. They were both born in East Chicago, but their parents emigrated from the 'old country', probably around 1900 or so."

His parents were both teachers; his mother had quite a record collection which included the likes of Leadbelly, Odetta, Joni Mitchell, Johnny Cash and Gordon Lightfoot. "I was always in choirs at school" he remembers, "and further interest was sparked by learning to play guitar. The sounds of the acoustic guitar were everywhere as a kid, playing it was the thing to do." American kids have always gone to Summer Camps, and Catfish remembers one he went to called Camp Abe Lincoln, where the camp counsellors all played guitar, singing every night around the campfire. There he heard "song's about barges, leaving on jet planes, the life of a voyager. Then our Catholic Church had a folk mass, so before long I was asked to play guitar in the church band doing those gospel songs, all of that. My own journey with the guitar began when I was eleven or twelve, when I had a Stella Harmony guitar. It was a cheap red and black steel stringed one, so I began lessons with a neighbour's friend Alvin Brown, a WWII veteran who taught guitar in his basement. Every week was a different song, newer and older songs even then! He taught me theory, how to use a plectrum and read music. Got a bit bored with the method he used so after a year quit the lessons, but not the guitar."

A year or so later, though, Catfish heard a friend at a party who "just made her songs up as she went along. I certainly then didn't know you could do that. It was a revelation: I had been doing it all wrong". He was drawn to finger picking. "At first I thought it was two or three people playing guitar at the same time. When I found out you could make the whole sound on your own, playing melody, harmony, bass, rhythm, everything, that changed the whole game. It all started with the music of Paul Simon, early Bob Dylan, David Bromberg, Ry Cooder and then I discovered Leo Kottke, he became a huge hero, so I learnt to play a bunch of his instrumentals and pieces by John Fahey. I just loved that solo guitar sound."

Catfish's thoughts also turned to where the music came from and that led to the early blues which he'd been aware of for some

time thanks to his school and local public libraries where he found Paul Oliver's and Samuel Charter's books on the blues. "Buying a *Son House* record, that stopped me in my tracks, the conviction and raw power of the songs. 'Death Letter' was a song I wasn't sure what to do with, but kept on coming back to. A friend brought over his brother's Mississippi John Hurt record called *Today*. The rolling warmth was another revelation." Soon he was delving deeper into the old country blues learning, as he says, "many of the songs associated with folk like Memphis Minnie, Blind Boy Fuller, Rev. Robert Wilkins, Big Bill Broonzy, Sleepy John Estes, Charley Patten, Skip James and Sister Rosetta Tharpe - I loved her. Blind Willie Johnson scared me to death and Joseph Spence whose music I'll swear rewired my brain.



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Lonnie Johnson was just sublime, the depth of this music just swept me away."

He was on a mission now: a mission to record LPs and 78s onto cassettes. "You had to dig deep to find the music, so I got from whoever and wherever I could, from libraries and friends. I knew by the time I was fifteen or sixteen that I'd found my life's calling: to play and sing the blues, to be a concert artist, tour the world and make records along the way." He says his first paying gigs were when he was around seven years old, in restaurants and bars, then clubs, colleges and concert halls. "I just kept looking around for work and somehow made a living out of it. I went to college myself at the University of Iowa City for a year, perhaps less, but the classes mostly got in the way of playing. Mind you, I never worried because I was used to sleeping in the car or on someone's couch. The whole thing was an adventure for me, so I just got on and forged ahead."

In his big, old, rusty 1973 Oldsmobile he went all over the country to see what was out there. For a time he lived in the Virgin Islands. There he, "crewed on a sailboat, then lived on St. John for a couple of winters, then Santa Cruz, California. I even house-sat for a sword swallower and circus family in Colorado Springs!" Other places included New York, New England, some time down in Mississippi and in New Orleans. Now, all fifty states have seen him perform the blues, along with much of Canada and he's gone to Mexico almost every winter for the last eighteen years. Along the way he's got to know, and play with, several of the first generation blues legends whom he calls his "musical grandparents", including Johnny Shines, Henry Townsend, John Jackson, Pinetop Perkins, Hubert Sumlin, Louisiana Red, Queen Ida, Lazy Lester, R. L. Burnside, Lonnie Brooks and several more. He's shaken hands with Muddy Waters, played on concert bills with Ray Charles, Robert Cray, B. B. King, John Lee Hooker, Koko Taylor, The Everly Brothers and he names John Hammond, Rory Block, Dave Van Ronk, Stefan Grossman and John Sebastian as not only those he has learnt from, but also as his heroes.

He's always been known as a solo artist, but I wondered whether he'd ever thought of having a band? "My main vision has always been as a solo artist. I wanted to make as much music as I could and get as much expression as possible out of guitar, vocals and my feet, but I've always enjoyed playing and recording with some excellent musicians. It's fun to sit in with a band once in a while. On my albums I've recorded several duets and for a brief period, around 1996 or '97, in Iowa City, I formed a trio with me singing and playing electric guitar,

Marty Christensen on stand-up bass and Paul Cunliffe on the drums. I wish we'd recorded an album as Catfish Keith And The Percolators, but I soon realised that what I loved best of all was making a whole music world of my own."

Over the years, Catfish has been nominated for many major blues awards mostly because of his very own style of playing...and his foot stomps. "Hey! The foot stomping! I was always tapping my foot so it made sense to plug that in. In the early days, we were putting a mic on the floor, then in the late 90s a buddy of mine, Ron Saul, put a Highlander pickup into a piece of plywood and it became another instrument. It serves as a sub, heartbeat sound."

As a musician, his main source of sounds is mostly through open tuned bottleneck slide guitar, using a variety of National guitars. "First", he says he had a Duotone, "then a Reso Phonic and that led in turn to playing a Baritone Tricone which I play today. This has a very unique sound, on lower tuned, often metal bodied versions that are in a category of their own and make a very distinctive bonk and splang with sweet reverberation to them." I mention his string bending, his use of harmonics and chimes. "Yes, thanks! The use of these harmonics or chimes in string playing has always fascinated me. It's not something you really hear at all in the world of acoustic blues. I heard the sounds in a few different genres, found it very exciting and added it to what I do. What it does is increase the range of the guitar, and suddenly you have beautiful high chiming notes that are bent notes with vibrato and very expressive!"

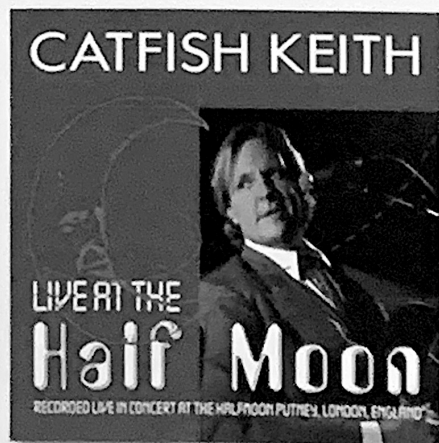
His nineteenth and most recent album *Blues At Midnight*, is filled with his own original

songs, which led to me to ask how his songs come about. "You know, the process feels just about the same as when I started. Forty years went by like I just popped through the wormhole...yet all of that experience in this big old life colours what goes into a song. It can come to me literally in dreams. For instance I'd been listening to the Carter Family over a few days and through the night those songs kept going around my head. I woke up pretty early with those sounds still in my head, so after making a cup of tea, I sat down with a pad and pen and wrote a song. No guitar needed. The song was inspired by what I'd been listening to, but was all mine. Once I write a song it changes very little, if at all. They seem to pop out fully formed. Then, when it comes time to make a new album, I'll gather my songs, maybe twenty or thirty of them, work on them, craft them, and just go off into the studio and maybe record each one three or four times, then move on, eventually choosing the best dozen or so for that new release."

Back in February 2020 Catfish says things were shaping up very nicely on the touring front, but then came March and for him and everyone else it all crashed very quickly. He remains hopeful that normality will return. "I sincerely hope we can all get back to it, very soon. We'd love to do those tours that had been planned and then postponed including those lined-up in Britain and the U.S.A. with Robert Plant and Saving Grace." He says his "fondest wish is to get back to my life's work on the road, playing concerts for live audiences. 2020 would have been my fiftieth and fifty-first tours of the U.K." The clock is ticking...

Pete Clack

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