

KEY TO THE HIGHWAY

John Emil: Mesmerising

Those who have already seen John will be pleased he is returning to the UK this autumn and bringing with him his Hawaiian lap steel guitar. A new album is somewhere down the track but the last couple of years have been spent working on music for soundtracks and what he describes as 'production music'.

John explains "Since 2012 I've been focussing on production music alone, solo instrumentation tracks – music for broadcasts, television shows and so on. So I've been having more success with that. I've also been educating myself as far as recording software. Now I've evolved into doing stuff that sounds more like a full band. I've not been doing any writing until just recently when I've been forcing myself to write every day and I've starting to put together ideas for an album."

John goes through the products of his writing and turns it into what he describes as "Music in its simplest form – music, lyrics, melody and finding the right rhythm. So I'm going through everything really fast and just getting it recorded and getting the ideas down then jumping onto the next thing. Things are just beginning to add up." After this year's tour John plans to dive deep into the recent material that will evolve into his next CD, but comes to the UK with a plan "I've invested in some nice recording equipment to bring over with me so I'm going to record myself live. I'll take the best stuff out and put that on a CD. So I've got a plan going this year."

"Grandfather was a professional musician, not full time but for a living. He and my uncle played for the musician union in New Jersey. I was born in Jersey City. My parents moved to Miami when I was five so I pretty much grew up there. I was basically an artist going through high school got into music in my late teens. I started out singing first and was influenced by the psychedelic music from the late sixties. It was the right decision to go from artist to musician. I've found my niche in life."

Mesmerising is a word that is used to describe John's playing. He started playing conventional guitar then switched to slide, learning from an old school jazz teacher. Influences were Hendrix, Led Zeppelin and The Doors. Wes Montgomery and jazz influences came from his teacher, but when the teacher started getting him into jazz improvisation things changed "I was having a hard time with it. That's when I turned to blues. I became obsessed. I could see how people like Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix were taking from that. Not only taking but the room it gave them to



evolve into their own thing. Playing slide I had taught myself to finger pick over time. I wound up buying a resonator guitar and taught myself on it. Years later Kelly Joe Phelps from the West Coast influenced me into playing lap steel, maybe twelve or thirteen years ago. I mostly play my own music and then Mississippi John Hurt and others. Because I play on the lap steel I have to rearrange everything so there are a lot of improv. spaces."

John's main instrument when touring is a copy of one of the first instruments created for Hawaiian lap steel guitarists from around the late teens or early 1920s also known as a Weissenborn guitar. It was created by Chris Knutsen and it's now the touring instrument of choice. "I used to bring the resonator and the lap steel. People are more familiar with the resonator these days but mesmerised by the lap steel. That's lighter on my back and my knees too. The guitar was created with a hollow body like the harp guitar and raised the action instead of using things like the cow bones and railroad spikes Hawaiian guitarists had used before. Others produced their own versions and it became known as a Weissenborn because of their links to Hawaiian guitars and Koa wood. The instrument I play is the one George Beauchamp took to John Dopyera and was telling him he wanted to try to create a

louder instrument acoustically because the Weissenborn was too quiet for those days. So that's when they went off and invented the National Steel guitar and if you look at the first shapes of National Steel guitars the body shape is very similar to the Weissenborn."

John Emil has an encyclopaedic knowledge of his instruments and it is fascinating to have him reel off the names of the originators of National Steel and other famous guitars that have found their way through history and into his instruments and playing style today. With the benefit of functioning modern equipment audiences benefit from a master musician playing an instrument he knows and loves.

Prepare to be mesmerised.

Steve Morphew
johnemil.com

Gigs

- 22 Aug:** Monday Blues at Peggy Sue's, Leigh on Sea
- 23 Aug:** Railway Hotel, Southend
- 25 Aug:** Elm Tree, Cambridge
- 26 Aug:** Chivers Jam Festival, Cambridge
- 27 Aug:** Manor Farm Music Frivolities, Bicester
- 29 Aug:** Aber Jazz & Blues Festival, Fishguard