

Monday, November 03, 2003

### A Chat with Duke



When you talk about real American Roots Music, the conversation eventually must turn to guitarist [Duke Robillard](#). In a day where many of the influential players of traditional styles of blues and jazz have either passed on or retired, Duke Robillard proudly carries the banner and reminds us of a guitar style that sounded great years ago and still sounds fresh and just as great today.

From his days as a founding member of the legendary Roomful of Blues to his stint with The Fabulous Thunderbirds to the current Duke Robillard Band, he has been thrilling audiences world-wide for over three decades and continues his non-stop recording and touring schedule. Along the way the legendary guitarist has earned numerous awards including: The International Guitarist of the Year award from the French Blues Association in 1999 and 2000, The International Artist Of The Year Award at the Maple Blues Awards in 2001 and 2002 and the [W.C. Handy Awards](#) Guitarist of the Year trophy in 2000, 2001 and 2003. Epiphone representative Don Mitchell had the chance recently to chat with Duke.

**EPI:** Duke, I know you are a busy guy! Why don't you start by catching us up on

what you've been working on lately?

**DUKE:** Well there's an awful lot going on right now. I did a Christmas CD with the Blind Boys of Alabama that was just released and I have a new album coming out on September 23rd (2003) called Exalted Lover on [Stony Plain Records](#). I'll be touring the rest of this year and quite a bit of next year in support of that project. I also have an album with Ronnie Earl that's coming out sometime next year and a jazz album with my group that will be released in the coming months. Then there's a Swing Era album I'm doing with J. Geils and Gerry Beaudoin under the band name The New Guitar Summit that I'm really excited about and I'm also in the midst of working on an acoustic album.



**EPI:** I received an advance copy of Exalted Lover just a couple days ago and I've got to say that it's great!

**DUKE:** Thank you!

**EPI:** Most would consider you a blues guitarist but I'm impressed by the diversity on this project.

**DUKE:** Yeah, you know, I just kind of consider everything that's American Roots Music kind of a link to the blues. It's all music that I grew up with and I enjoy it all so I kind of write in all of those styles.

**EPI:** Are the guys that played on this project considered the Duke Robillard band or are these guys that you chose just to record with?

**DUKE:** Most of them are my band. There are a few other people but the core of my band are on most of the tracks.

**EPI:** Track two is a beautiful duet with country music star Pam Tillis. Tell me how that came about.

**DUKE:** Pam and I played the Mountain Stage Radio Show in West Virginia together a little over a year ago, just as she was about to release the album of her dad's tunes, so she was playing a lot of that stuff live. It was very much traditional country sounding and I was knocked out by it. I just went crazy listening to her. We talked after the show and she mentioned that she was a fan

of mine and had been influenced by jazz and blues early in her career. She also said that if I ever needed somebody to sing a tune, she'd be glad to do it. I had already been thinking of doing I'll Never Be Free and when I heard her, I knew I wanted her to sing with me. It just worked out perfectly.

**EPI:** No kidding, you guys sound really good together. I'd love to hear a Pam Tillis project of blues/jazz with you producing!

**DUKE:** I would love to do that.....she sounds amazing she really does!

**EPI:** Who else have you worked with recently from a production standpoint?

**DUKE:** Roscoe Gordon, Jay McShann, Billy Boy Arnold, Jerry Portnoy, Eric "Two Scoops" Moore, Doug James my sax player, he has a solo album that we recorded in my studio that I produced. I've also worked with jazz guitarist Chris Flory, a guitar player from New Orleans named Bryan Lee and Tony Lynn Washington's latest album.

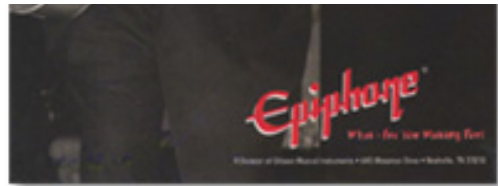
**EPI:** When you're producing a guitar player's project, how hard is it to take off your guitar player hat and allow the other players style to come through?

**DUKE:** Well, of course I have guitar opinions (laughs) but it's not really that hard to just let the artist be who they are. Like with Bryan Lee, you know it was just finding sounds that worked for him and then building the band around that. My job as producer is often just filling in around the artist. They typically have a direction they are headed and I try to help fulfill that goal. Its fun, you know and I usually get to play a little bit on each project. That's a huge benefit because playing with different people helps bring out something different in my own playing.

**EPI:** Let's talk a little bit about your early guitar days, when you started playing, who your early influences were, etc.

**DUKE:** Well I started listening to music early and by the time I was six, I knew I wanted to be a guitar player. My family listened to stuff like Hank Williams, Les Paul, whatever was on the radio. Then I had an uncle that played in a country band so I heard a lot of that and my brother played guitar also. He was 10 years older than I and he'd bring home Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Buddy Holly and Little Richard records that I would listen to. Then of course I got into the guitar players like Chet





Atkins Duane Eddy and Link Wray, you know, the guys doing the cool stuff. Because I was exposed to all this different stuff, I kind of grew up thinking that it was all related. I still look at all the roots music as being an outgrowth of the blues.

**EPI:** Tell me about your first bands.

**DUKE:** I was in my first band when I was 13 and then I played in high school bands but the year after I graduated from high school I started Room Full of Blues. I ended up leading that band for 12 years so it was a large part of my life and really where I fully developed.

**EPI:** Although you're primarily known as a blues player, your style is actually quite diverse and you blow through a lot of different changes. Do you have any advice for a player that might be stuck in minor pentatonic land that might push them to the next level?

**DUKE:** All I can do is give advice that represents kind of how I developed as a player. I am self taught and the key for me was going back and listening to the early masters. I really tried to absorb things by listening for hours at a time. For example, when I listened to early jazz guitarists like Charlie Christian and Oscar Moore, it made me think that way and once I heard things a certain way I started to figure it out. One huge turning point for me was when I discovered B. B. King. His playing, especially during the 60's, was very melodic and although he was playing blues he was using a lot of sixes and nines. He just had a happier sound than people that were playing minor pentatonic stuff. That influenced me in a big way.

**EPI:** Do you think more in terms of scales or chords when you're soloing?

**DUKE:** Definitely chords. I'm not a scale player. I've never learned scales or practiced scales. I use a lot of arpeggios that are built off the chords and I've learned how to use passing tones to connect them. One thing that is a very big part of my playing that I learned from people like Les Paul is the use of chromatic runs. I very often play lines that are chromatic in nature, where I go from say the major third down to the 5th or even the 4th chromatically. I fit that into blues and of course it works well in jazz. That's kind of a signature sound of mine.

**EPI:** Do you tend to plan your solos out or lean more towards improvisation?

**DUKE:** You know, every solo that I do starts off as an improvisation but I gig a lot, so I tend to start editing things. Once you get an idea that you think is really

good, you try to remember it and then start adding things to it. There are certain songs that I've been playing for years that I take the same approach to and maybe start out with a certain lick, then I'll improvise for a while, get to a certain point where I use something that brings it up a level in intensity and then go back to something a little more familiar. So it kind of goes in and out of things that are planned but as far as my solos being actually note for note planned, no they're not. They just kind of grow out of the original improvisation. I think that's how you come up with a style.

**EPI:** Tell me about the guitar-synth tracks you played on Exalted Lover.

**DUKE:** (laughs) There are 4 synth tracks on the title cut. The most prominent is the trumpet part. I found this great trumpet sound and that was my first pass. I've always listened to horn players and a lot of my phrasing ideas come from horn players rather than guitar players so it just worked! It kind of blew my mind when I listened back to it. I've actually fooled several trumpet players with that part already. (laughs) There's also a couple keyboard pad type tracks on it and a sitar track that's kind of creeping in and out.

**EPI:** That's one of the questions I had for you...are you influenced by horn players? I guess that track tells me the answer is yes! You'd be hard pressed to know that's not a trumpet.

**DUKE:** I agree. It makes me wish I was a trumpet player. (laughs)

**EPI:** How many players are in your live band?

**DUKE:** Five, I have a drummer, bass player, keyboardist, sax player and myself.

**EPI:** You mentioned earlier that you are doing a lot of touring. How many dates will you play this year?

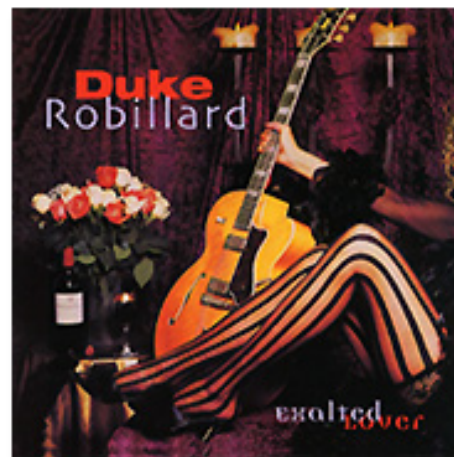
**DUKE:** We'll do about 150 this year.

**EPI:** Tell me about your gear:

**DUKE:** I use a lot of different guitars including an [Epiphone Emperor Regent](#), [Epiphone Zephyr Blues Deluxe](#), [Epiphone Broadway](#), [Epiphone Riviera](#), [Epiphone ES-295](#)...man that's a GREAT guitar...an [Epiphone Les Paul](#), Epiphone Les Paul Special with the P-90's...I love that guitar through my Tube-Screamer...and I also have a Gibson Byrdland and a Strat that I use. On the hollowbodies my strings are typically 011-049 but I'll go lighter on the solid-bodies. I usually play through a Twin but lately I've been getting into this old vintage Gibson Labs amp I found. It sounds great! For picks I just use your

basic, plastic, heavy picks.

**EPI:** Epiphone is extremely proud to be associated with a great player like yourself and we're honored that you dig our stuff so much! By the way, that's a great picture of an Epiphone on the cover of Exalted Lover! How long have you had a relationship with Epiphone?



**DUKE:** Wow...well, let's see....I first hooked up with Epiphone about 10 years ago. You know it just really comes down to the fact that I believe in them. Epiphone is making instruments that sound great, play great and are very road worthy. I use them a lot on the road and in the studio. I'm also very excited about this new [Elitist line](#). Somebody sent me the link to the Elitist web site and they look great! I can't wait to see them. I'm especially anxious to see the [Byrdland](#) and [Broadway](#).

**EPI:** Did you use the Epiphones on the new record?

**DUKE:** Yes, I used them a lot. In particular, I used an Epiphone Les Paul and an Epiphone Broadway on I'll Never Be Free. I used the Broadway for the rhythm part and did the solo with the Les Paul. Double X Daddy features the Broadway and I used an Epiphone Les Paul Special on Travelin Mood. Epi's are on there quite a bit.

**EPI:** Well Duke, thanks for spending some time with us today. The new record is great and we can't wait to see your live show!

**DUKE** Thanks! I'll be looking for you!

