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Cultura Blues.

La Revista Electrónica

Doug MacLeod

El caballero del blues acústico

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ENGLISH VERSION

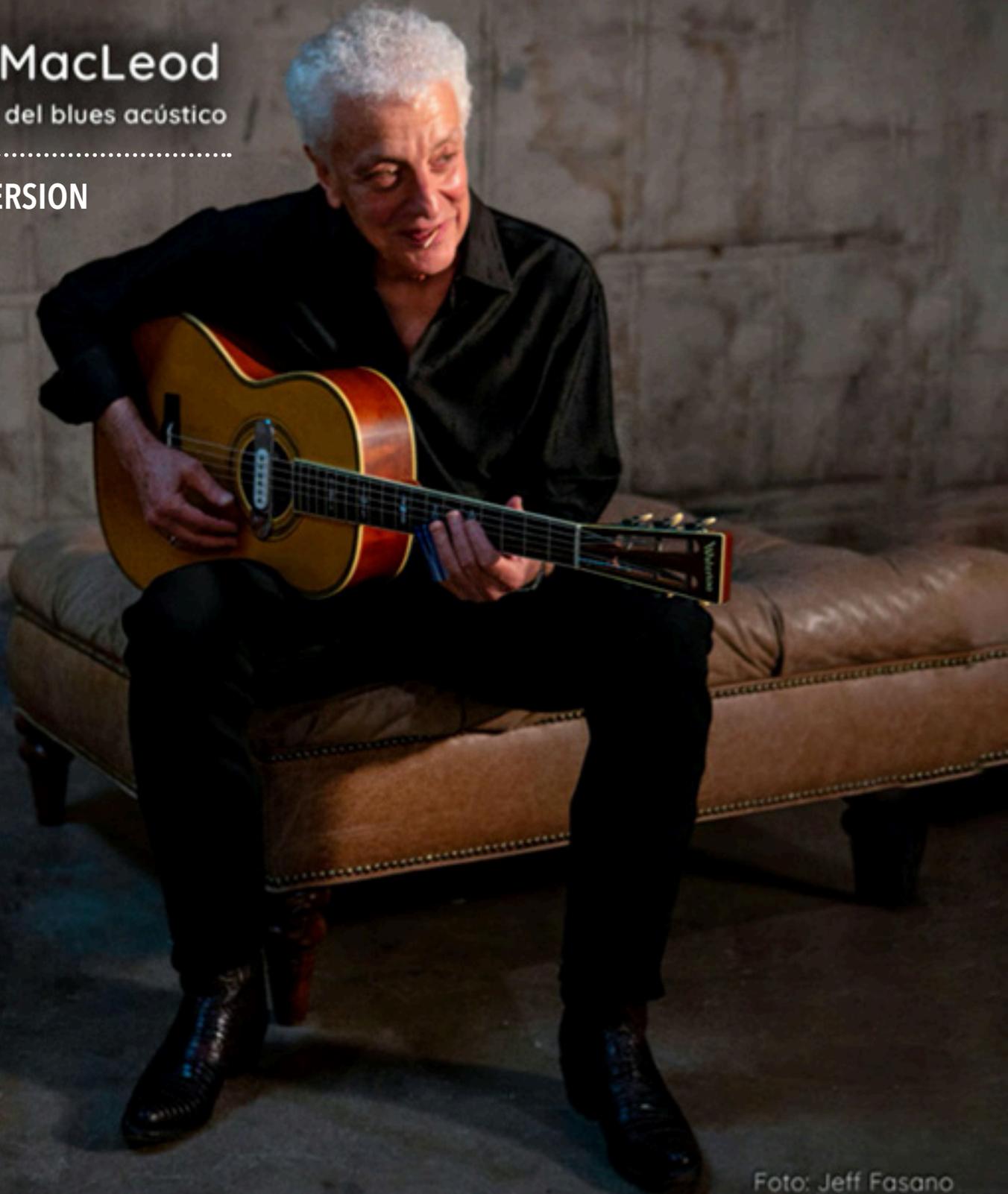


Foto: Jeff Fasano

...Y MUCHO MAS DE LA CULTURA BLUES



Interview with Doug Macleod The Gentleman of Acoustic Blues. (Photos by © Danny Day)

Doug MacLeod is known for his magnificent songwriting, his guitar skills, his warm and soulful voice, his wit, and his unforgettable live performances. At the heart of a Doug MacLeod performance is his ability to tell stories, bringing characters, from the faceless to the legendary, to life in a strikingly lifelike way. In March 2022, he co-wrote the blues murder mystery *Murder At The Crossroads* with Debra Schiff. Doug is a world-class artist who writes and sings original songs based on his own life and experiences.

He has won several Blues Music Awards, including the 2024 Acoustic Album of the Year for *Raw Blues 1* and the 2023 Acoustic Artist of the Year. In 2025, he received two Blues Music Award nominations: Acoustic Artist of the Year and Acoustic Album of the Year for *Raw Blues 2*. He learned from the old masters and continues a cherished tradition.

As a young man, Doug overcame abuse and a crippling stutter by turning to music. After strumming a guitar and singing, he found his voice. MacLeod's playing allowed him work as a sideman for George "Harmonica" Smith, Big Joe Turner, Pee Wee Crayton, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Lowell Fulson, and Big Mama Thornton. Many artists, including Albert King, Albert Collins, Joe Louis Walker, and Eva Cassidy, have covered his songs.

How have the blues and roots music counterculture influenced your worldview and the travels you've taken?

Well, the blues has taught me a lot about life and how to live it. As I say, this is music about overcoming adversity, not giving up on it. I saw that in the time I spent with the old bluesmen I worked and toured with. So, in tough times like we're having now, I'm reminded of this old saying: "If you ain't all right now, you'll be all right." Its way of saying, "This too shall pass." And about living it up: enjoy every day. Yesterday is over. Tomorrow isn't promised. At best, tomorrow is an IOU. So the only thing you have for sure is now. So live it, enjoy it, and don't waste it.

How would you describe your musical philosophy and repertoire?

What excited you about the acoustic, resonator, and slide guitar?

That goes back to my first mentor, Ernest Banks of Toano, VA. He instilled honesty in me. He told me, "Never write or sing about what you don't know, and never play a note you don't believe in." Honesty. Reality. Emotion and reality. When you play acoustic guitar, there are no effects. Just you. Slide to me is like a voice. Singing. Sometimes sweet and soft, and sometimes like a locomotive burning on the dance floor.

What do you like most about your album "Raw Blues 1" (2023), how did it come together, and what are you working on now?

It was a lot of fun to make. Just sitting in front of the microphones and playing. Andreas Werner, the producer, just told me, "Just sit down and play whatever comes along, like you're on your porch." We did. Andreas is a pleasure to work with. We'll be releasing Raw Blues 2 soon (it was actually released in April 2024), and Andreas and I are working on a new album that we'll record early next year (2025).

Where did you grow up and what got you interested in music? How exactly did your journey begin?

When did you realize this was a passion you could make a living from?

I grew up in three parts of the country: North Carolina, the New York City area, and St. Louis, Missouri. I became interested in music because of the radio. My mom told me when I was about 3 years old that our neighbor in North Carolina played Louis Jordan music at full volume. His music room and my nursery shared a wall. She was worried about whether her baby was sleeping in his crib. She looked inside. My eyes were closed, but my foot was tapping to the beat. As my mom said, "Louis Jordan was my first musical influence." I think I realized it was a passion after the abuse I suffered as a child and the subsequent stutter I suffered. I was shutting down, and then music came along, I was able to express myself, and that changed things. When did I realize I could make a living from this? I don't know if there was a specific moment. I just knew it was what I wanted to do and what I had to do.

What encounters have been the most important experiences for you?

What was the best advice anyone has ever given you?

Meeting Ernest Banks around 1966 in Toano, Virginia. Meeting George "Harmonica" Smith in 1978 at Shakey Jake's Safara Club on 54th and Vermont in South Central Los Angeles. Playing with my son's godfather, Pee Wee Crayton.

With Ernest, as I mentioned in the previous question, George "Harmonica" Smith taught me how to entertain and play. He encouraged me to be myself. He once told me, "Dubb (that's what he called me), you sure sound like B.B. K." I said, "Thanks, George!" Then he replied, "Dubb, that's not a compliment." He said, "Let's bring Dubb out and see what happens with Dubb." He was like a father to me. I loved him. I still do. Pee Wee? Like a favorite uncle. Someone you could talk to, laugh with, joke with, and also get any advice you might need. When I played, he told me to take my time. To use the space. To not be afraid to play less. A lot of times in the blues, less is more. I'm very proud that he was our son Jesse's godfather. I was very proud to give his Blues Hall of Fame induction speech.

Do you have any memories from gigs, jams, performances, and studio sessions that you'd like to share with us?

I opened for B.B. King in Seattle. They told me to do 35 minutes. I did 34 minutes and 32 seconds. I was welcomed and very glad I did. But what made it so special was that B.B. asked me to pick him up on his bus. The thrill of my life, I think. Only surpassed by the birth of our son.



What do you miss most about the blues of the past? What are your hopes and fears for the future?

I miss the guys. I miss the laughs, the stories, spending time together. I miss that culture. I feel very fortunate to have been able to learn and be with those musicians. I hope young musicians learn about the history of this music. Learn from what has come before. Put that into their music and then build on it and pass it on to a new generation of listeners.

If you could change one thing in the music world and it became a reality, what would it be?

The way we get paid to broadcast! I'd make it fair for the songwriters and artists!

What is the impact of blues and roots music on sociocultural implications? How do you want it to affect people?

Wow, that's a tough question. It might not be a tough answer, but it's what comes to mind. I'd like the music to reach people. Help them think, laugh, cry, feel.

What are some of the most important lessons you've learned from your experience in the music world?

Take your time—flavor and space. When in doubt, leave it out; less is more; write and sing only about what you know, and never play a note you don't believe in.

Let's take a trip in a time machine. Where and why would you want to go for a whole day?

I'd like to go to Kansas City in 1937 to a Negro League game with Satchel Paige as the pitcher. Then, at night, go enjoy some good Kansas City barbecue with a beer and reflect on the history I just learned.

When was your first desire to get involved with the blues?

In the 1960s, when I first heard the music in St. Louis.

Who were your first idols?

B.B. King, Albert King, Big Bill Broonzy, and Lightnin' Hopkins.

Is the blues a way of life?

It has been for me.

What was the best and worst moment of your career?

The best? There have been many. One of them was opening for B.B. King and then having the chance to meet him after the show on his bus. The worst? Mmm-hmm. Years ago, I didn't get paid when I was working at the old Parisian Room in Los Angeles with my band. But I paid my band.

Is there any similarity between the blues of today and that of the 1930s and 1940s?

Well, I wasn't around back then... (laughs). Yeah, well, there were some guys like me who were singers, songwriters, and guitarists, and there were some really good bands too.

What musician have you ever wanted to be?

I never wanted to copy a musician; I learned from them, but I think I always knew you have to be yourself with your music.

What does blues mean to you?

It's a way of life. It helped me overcome some problems in my childhood and eventually helped me find a good outlook on life.

Do you think younger generations are interested in the blues?

Sometimes I'm not, and then I start meeting young musicians who are very interested in the music. So if they start playing blues or incorporating blues into their music, this music will live on.

How do you prepare for your recordings and performances to maintain your spiritual and musical stamina?

If I can, a short 20-minute nap helps with that. If I don't have time for that, I step away for about 10 seconds and say what my manager Miki told me Luther Allison would say before playing. Now I say it before every performance: "Leave your ego, play the music, and love the people."

What have you learned about yourself through music?

Well, I guess you learn what's really deep inside you!

How would you describe your connection with people when you're on stage?

I'm old school in that sense. I like to entertain and get close to people. I learned that from the older blues guys I worked with growing up.

What's the most interesting period of your life and why?

Right now, because it's right now.

Why do you play the blues?

Because I love it and I love doing it.

What's the difference between acoustic and electric blues?

Well, the obvious reason, of course. As for guitarists, I'd say acoustic guitarists play a lot more with their fingers because they don't have a band to back them up.

What experiences in your life make you a GOOD musician?

Well, being able to translate your life experience into music honestly and with a lot of practice.

What do you consider to be the biggest problem in the world?

War.

What would you ask Skip James?

How did you come up with that tuning?

What musical mistake do you want to correct?

People who don't play with feeling.

You've traveled all over the world. What are your conclusions?

I like people from around the world... the leaders? Well, I think we need to work with some of those people.

What historical blues figures would you have liked to meet?

Big Bill Broonzy and Tampa Red.

Do you remember anything funny from the studio with George 'Harmonica' Smith?

Oh my God, yes. We did a song George called 'Sunbird.' It was about the space shuttle. During the song, George blew a huge amount of air into the microphone and nearly knocked engineer Austin out of his seat.

Have you recorded your new CD using an older sound because you believe there are no new avenues for sound?

No, that's how I always do it. I just go in and play.



Who would you like to give one of your songs to?

In the past, I've sent songs to record companies and such. Eva Cassidy made "Nightbird" because she heard it on the radio.

What was your relationship like with Pee Wee Crayton?

Great. He was godfather to my son, Jesse.

How do you get inspiration for your songs?

From my life.

Which musicians and writers have influenced you the most as a songwriter?

There are many. And they come from different places. People like Doc Watson, Jerry Butler, Jerry Reed, Jimmy McGriff, Kenny Burrell, Nina Simone, Tampa Red, Louis Jordan, Willie Dixon—these are just a few.

Who were your mentors in traveling blues?

George 'Harmonica' Smith was a great musician. He always said you should travel light. And being in the Navy for four years gave me a good idea of how to fold and roll, you know?

How did you feel when artists like Albert Collins and Albert King chose your songs?

Great and honored.

And as far as getting a song to an artist? How has that changed?

Not much, I think, except that many artists are writing their own material these days.

How has the music business changed over the years since you started in music?

Recording has changed quite a bit. And iTunes and the whole digital thing have changed the way people buy music.

What advice would you give to aspiring musicians thinking about pursuing a career in the craft?

You're going to have headaches and heartaches in everything you do in this life, so the way I see it, it's best to do what you love.

What do you think is the key to your success as a musician?

I don't know, I guess people like what I do, and I was lucky enough to learn from some of the best.

Have you changed over the years? Any general changes or evolutions? And if so, why?

Sure. With my songwriting, I try to make the songs and the message more concise. As for the guitar, I just play what I hear and feel. And I trust that. And I remember these sayings: "Taste and space" and "When in doubt, leave it out."

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