

## Piazza on Pee Wee Crayton, Shakey Jake Harris and T-Bone Walker

I played so many gigs with Pee Wee. He was always real good to me. I was like his godson, and we had a lot of fun. I would get up there and play, then he'd come out and we'd back him up.

Shakey Jake was another fun guy. He came out from Chicago and had a little apartment on Sunset Boulevard, and we'd go over there and drink wine and listen to records and play harmonica, and then we'd go to gigs, and he'd tell me stories about Chicago that we hadn't heard from George. A lot of the things I thought were bullshit turned out to be true.

And we hacked T-Bone up. He would have his own gigs, but he had a lot of time off, so he would come around to my gigs and want to sit in. Sometimes he was drunk and really just couldn't do it, he was drinkin' too much, and we wouldn't let him sit in. Other times we'd be on shows backing him up, and he wouldn't be too drunk, and he'd get up there and just belittle everybody in his playing because it was just so simple and so soulful and right to the point and toneful. It was just like the damn records.

first joined the band. "He was mean!" she said. "Well, he was sick at the time. That was part of it. But he was generally just very stern. He knew exactly what he wanted to hear. And he wasn't being everybody's friend; he was the boss. But then I learned he was sick and was going through a bad marriage, so he had a lot of problems at the time. So after he got all that resolved and we got together, now he's the nicest guy! He's funny and quite a practical joker, too. He's a scream to travel with. Rick [Holmstrom] never knows what kind of little plastic snake he's going to find in his amp or hooked to his guitar!"

This transition from tough to tender was made easier by the growing number of talented blues musicians on the scene today. "Twenty, 30 years ago, it was a rough go trying to find a guitar player. Lord, I remember when I got out of the hospital, I went through months of trying to find the right drummer and conveying to a guy on drums what I wanted, and back then, I didn't know much about it."

The past year saw the band change not one but two people, a difficult task for all concerned. "It was tough," Honey Piazza admitted. "With our band, the five pieces,

our sound is a weaving sound. I've been through three guitar players now, and with each one I had to find different spaces for my fills. The spaces Junior left in his playing were very different from the spaces Alex [Schultz] left. And even though [new guitarist] Rick Holmstrom looks up to Junior's playing and tries to emulate it, he still plays quite differently. I have to anticipate where his last note is coming from and be starting my phrase from there."

Happily, Holmstrom's previous experiences sitting in with the band, as well as his thorough immersion in the West Coast style of guitar, made the transition easier. Likewise, new drummer Steve Mugalian, who has the unenviable task of replacing Jimi Bott, one of the best blues drummers since Fred Below, seems to have adapted well. "Steve said he's never played with someone with as good an ear as Rod," Honey said. "He said Rod'll catch him if he does one little thing. He'll turn around and look at him, tilt his head and look over the sunglasses! [Laughs.] I never hear it; it goes right over my head."

Breaking in the recruits had its advantages, however. The band rehearsed more than usual, testing new material on the road as well. The result: Their latest album, *Tough and Tender*, is chock full of "proven" original material. "Usually, we just put the album together in the studio, without really rehearsing or playing the songs in front of a live audience first. This time we knew going in what our strongest material was," Piazza explained. The key ingredient for a studio performance, according to him, is not so much technical proficiency as capturing the fire of a good live performance, even when overdubbing. Piazza's favorite songs on the new disc? "Quicksand" and "Searching for a Fortune," because "they both have a lot of fire, I think. But you'll have to listen and decide for yourself," he was quick to add.

Anyone who listens to *Tough and Tender* will undoubtedly agree that the fire still burns for this "California cool" band. Their mix of tight, interesting arrangements and improvisational interplay within traditional blues boundaries places them among today's blues elite. And Rod Piazza, the tough-and-tender ringmaster himself, enters his second half-century no less committed to excellence in his musical craft. Having already influenced many of today's premier harp-slingers, he'll no doubt continue to serve as a guiding light for legions of players to come. **BR**

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