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5 Minutes with... Raoul Bhaneja

*Appearing at The Duck Blues Matinee
on Saturday, December 19, 2009*



FoD: How was your recent trip to LA?

Raoul Bhaneja: It went well. I auditioned for a movie part and did some advance work for a gig I'm doing with guitar player Rick Holstrom and bass player Jeff Turmes in January at a blues club in Hermosa Beach called Café Boogaloo. I had been to the club a few times as a fan and that led to playing there this past October with Rick.

FoD: Had you played in the U.S. before?

RB: That was my first time. I guess they liked me enough to invite me back. It doesn't hurt when you have musicians like Rick and Jeff backing you up. They both play in Mavis Maple's band and are well respected.

FoD: You stated in an interview with the Toronto Star that you're not an actor and not a musician but a performer. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

RB: I try not to divide the two things up too much in my mind in terms of being an actor or a musician. I don't think of it like having a switch I flick one way or the other. I don't think of myself in terms of Raoul Bhaneja the actor or Raoul Bhaneja the blues artist. People always want to put me in a category and say, 'oh, you're an actor who plays blues on the side,' or 'you're a blues musician who dabbles in acting.' I've been doing both since I was a teenager and I take them both pretty seriously. I'm equally devoted to both and totally immerse myself in my art. Ultimately it's about entertaining people. For me it's about being a performer, whether it's in theatre, film, television or music. For the

most part, the blues is a story medium. The songs are built for participation, just the same as drama.

FoD: In the same Toronto Star interview you said that 'You can't fake the blues. You have to be the real thing on stage. The audience can always tell.' How do you pull up the feelings to convincingly play and sing the blues?

RB: It's my job. It's my life, it's who I am. It all feels and comes pretty naturally to me. I think it's a feeling you have inside you to begin with, and as an artist you're willing and able to connect with an audience to share that feeling. It's something that comes from the heart and an audience feels it through your delivery, your style, the way you put it across. That's what people respond to.

FoD: Can an actor act out the blues?

RB: A good actor can play the part of a blues artist in a movie or in theatre, because it's his or her job to portray another person. The better the actor, the more convincingly he portrays or becomes that person. But I don't think you can just slip into a blues persona and play or sing like the real deal. You have to be yourself as a bluesman. So either you are a bluesman or you're not. Still, it's something you develop and hone over the years. I mean, you're not even taken seriously as a blues artist until you're hitting middle age and beyond. The older you get as a blues artist, the more real it becomes, not so much the feelings, but how you express those feelings and how you're able to connect with your audience.

FoD: For a man of Indian, Irish and British descent raised in Germany and Canada, how did you ever end up getting into the blues?

RB: When I was a kid someone gave me a harmonica and I was looking for music to listen to that would help me play better. Seeing that many of the great harmonica players play the blues, that's what I started listening to. I was hooked right away on artists like Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and James Cotton. I was also a fan of Jimi Hendrix, the bluesy side of Hendrix. I liked his version of Hootchie Cootchie Man. At first I thought it was one of his songs but then I discovered it was a cover and I wanted to find out more about who did it originally. That's how I discovered Willie Dixon, who wrote it, and Muddy Waters, who first performed it.

FoD: What kind of music did your parents expose you to?

RB: A mixture of Indian classical music and jazz.

FoD: Everybody in the blues scene knows it's not the easiest way to make a living, but most of the blues artists have no other creative way to express themselves. You do, in film, television and theatre. Why not just focus on that area?

RB: I like variety in my life. I have tried to do just one thing, but then I'm not happy because part of me is missing. If I focus on acting only, I have to cut my music out of my life, and vice versa. It's tough making a living as a Canadian blues singer and it's tough making a living as a Canadian actor. But seeing that I'm both, and I love doing both, then why not try to make a living at both. Most Canadian film and TV actors are lucky to work twenty to forty days a year so they need something to supplement their income. A lot of musicians have to do another job on the side, too. For me, as a creative person, to work in both mediums is bonus. It's like I said earlier, I don't think of myself as either or. I'm a performer who expresses himself in two different mediums. One compliments the other.

FoD: Who are your acting influences?

RB: I don't know if I really have any. It's not like in music, where you're going to be influenced by the people you admire, that you like listening to. You hear a great harp player, guitar player, keys, what have you, and you want to be like that artist. You start out playing like that and you develop your own style and signature sound from there. The last thing you want to be is a clone. There are actors I admire but I don't want to be them or build on their technique. If anybody inspires me to improve as an actor it would be William Shakespeare. His plays are so challenging, you're always raising the bar for yourself when you do Shakespeare.

FoD: What's your favourite movie and favourite album?

RB: I've got a few favourites but I like *Lawrence of Arabia* a lot. It's an inspiring movie. And of course there are a few different albums I like, too. *The Trinity Sessions* by the Cowboy Junkies may not be my favourite, favourite, but it's one that I never give enough credit to. It's an incredible record and one that kind of helped lead me into the sound that I'm into.

FoD: Thanks for your time, Raoul. Any last words?

RB: I'm looking forward to playing *The Duck* with Gary and the and the guys. This will be my first time at *The Duck* so it should be an interesting afternoon for me. I hope to see you all out come out and share in the fun.

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