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Rocker Ben Harper (left) and blues titan Charlie Musselwhite collaborated on the new album *Get Up!*

By Josef Woodard // Photography by Danny Clinch

BEN HARPER & CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE

Dancing Around the Bones



In an October afternoon, a brittle Southern California sun is beaming down on the funky, industrial neighborhood in Santa Monica where Ben Harper hangs his life and music. On this day, we are awaiting the arrival of Charlie Musselwhite, flying down from his home in Northern California to give the first official interview of the promotional phase for *Get Up!* (Stax), a long-awaited, powerful album linking Harper to the blues harmonica master.

Harper, having just returned from a triumphant solo concert at Carnegie Hall, gives me the 10-cent tour of The Machine Shop, a spacious and elaborately renovated former manufacturing facility that has become his home and work space. In the large area devoted to the “band room,” vintage and modern guitars, amps, drums and a pump organ are at the ready. Elsewhere, ramps and paraphernalia signal Harper’s sporting life as a skateboarder and surfer. A children’s room, for when his kids come over, is dubbed the “presidential suite,” in honor of framed photographs signed by President Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. Off in another corner, country singer Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks is working on an album.

Musselwhite shows up, a Zen-toned gentleman in his usual blues sartorial style and slicked-back hair. The entourage heads out to the comforts of a restaurant in downtown Santa Monica to chow down and talk up the musical matter very much at hand in these artists’ lives. The conversation touches upon Chicago blues lore, true blue night music, American musical heroes of various ages and epochs, and what Musselwhite calls the “will of the music.”

In jazz and blues, more so than in the youth-

centric ramparts of the pop music world, the idea of younger musicians paying respects to older, wiser artists is standard procedure—an idea Harper has been invested in since his formative years. In part, it was the natural path of being for a young singer-guitarist whose grandparents ran the esteemed Folk Music Center in Claremont, Calif., where famed folk and blues musicians would flock to perform. Roots awareness was in the genes and in the house (long before it became hip for pop stars to toss around the term “roots”).

Before and after working his way into a major-label record deal, a healthy pile of radio hits and large-scale following, Harper set his sights on a more underground, rootsy cultural turf. He sought out the counsel and company of great older musicians, including Chicago bluesman Louis Myers, gospel king Solomon Burke, country bluesman Brownie McGhee, vocal group the Blind Boys of Alabama (with whom he made the 2004 album *There Will Be A Light*) and, yes, Charlie Musselwhite. Many years ago, when the pair did a session with John Lee Hooker (1917–2001), the seed of a collaborative project was planted. And now, *Get Up!* is the gleaming, soulful result.

In one sense, this project represents a younger artist respectfully working with a respected elder

(Harper was born in 1969, Musselwhite in 1944). In another sense, age hasn’t got much to do with it. They are musical brethren, deep in the cause. Commonalities exist between the musicians’ stories and passions: Both have some Cherokee blood in the genetic mix, and both have avidly studied traditional music from previous eras. Musselwhite grew up in Memphis, cut his teeth in Chicago blues clubs and wound up in the Bay Area in the thick of the “Summer of Love” music scene.

Harper has long been a strong student and role model, a flexible singer and fine guitarist (especially on slide), traversing blues, folk, rock, reggae, soul and gospel. *Get Up!*, Harper’s first album for the Stax label after a long affiliation with Virgin, is the rootsiest of the 12 discs he has released since 1994. It also ranks amongst his finest work to date, which he proudly professes, without a hint of self-promotional lip service. To hear him tell it, the Musselwhite factor weighs in heavily, in sync with Harper’s own maturing talent. He has delivered something from the heart, and—in its modern, personalized way—the album conveys the heart of the great American blues tradition.

Still, this is not the brand of conventional blues outing some might expect, with I–IV–V chord progressions galore and free-range guitar and harmonica solos. Instead, Harper has crafted a

smart, varied song set, from acoustic bluesy pieces (“Don’t Look Twice,” “You Found Another Lover [I Lost Another Friend]”) to crunching blues-rock moments (“I Don’t Believe A Word You Say,” “Blood Side Out”) and gospel fervor (“We Can’t End This Way”). Harper’s voice is bold and vulnerable, finding a soulmate in Musselwhite’s signature blues harp tones and riffs.

Over a long lunch, Harper was often in a listening, deferential state with Musselwhite, like a protégé seeking wisdom from a master. And the transfer of wisdom ranged from blues philosophy lessons to the proper way to eat barbecue—an essential blues life lesson. Late in the afternoon, Harper asked, “How were those ribs?”

“Wow, they were great,” Musselwhite enthused. “When that first bone came up by itself, I knew I was in for a treat. I just pulled all them bones up and had a mess of meat there.”

Harper replied, “That’s how you did it. You just got rid of the bones. I’ll do that next time. I just kept dancing around the bones.” He paused, then added, with a soft laugh, “That’s not a bad record title, either: *Dancing Around The Bones*. That might get a little risqué, I guess.”

A list of album title ideas may be in order. There is more than a small portion of possibility that fans will be hearing more from this cross-generational musical partnership.

DownBeat: There is a long tradition of interaction between generations in music, especially in blues, jazz and folk. You two seem like a prime example.

Charlie Musselwhite: Yeah, it’s a good sign. I approve.

Ben Harper: Hear, hear. It’s hard not to, isn’t it?

CM: We just spark off of each other. It’s totally natural, and easy in the saddle. There’s a nice flow with every tune; it all makes sense. Everything just fell in place.

The seeds of this collaborative album go back to a John Lee Hooker session, right?

CM: When did we meet?

BH: We met at the Sweetwater [in Mill Valley, Calif.]. I was opening up and you were playing with John Lee. I think that was in ’95, and then again in Australia, we connected, in ’96. But it was that John Lee session where we hit a note.

CM: Yeah, that’s where we locked in. Well, we both had such respect for John Lee, so it was great to be together backing him up.

Was it at that point that you talked about the prospect of doing something together?

CM: No, but whenever we’d talk or see each other, we’d say, “We gotta do something. We gotta get together.” That was always there. I did the [2004] album *Sanctuary* and one tune was [the Harper composition] “Homeless Child,” and Ben was on it. That kept me on the road for a long time.

BH: To hear Charlie do that song really gave it weight. He took it to the top of the shelf there. What an honor.

CM: And it’s timely. It relates to today, to America now, and then. That’s what the blues is. The blues is about what’s going on. That’s not strictly a blues, but it has the same logic as the blues.

Some people consider the blues to be historical music. That’s one of its aspects, but it’s also about current events and sensations, isn’t it?

CM: Yeah, even if there wasn’t any music called the blues, we’d still have the blues [laughs]. Just read the newspaper. Lucky for us, we have a way to express that feeling through music. If we didn’t have that, the feeling would still be there. It turns out that I–IV–V is a nice way to package that up.

BH: The feeling. It turns out, as history has proven, people need a place to put their emotions, constantly. They figure the blues is as good as any place.



CM: That *is* the place.

BH: That’s the place [laughs]. That’s where I put mine.

CM: If you do a tune with I–IV–V and use the blues scale and all that, that’s not going to make it blues, with that feeling. On the other hand, B.B. King could sing “Mary Had A Little Lamb,” and you know you’re listening to the blues. It’s the feeling.

Speaking of that, it’s a bit surprising to find the lack of I–IV–V traditionalism on this new album, except for the finale, “All That Matters Now.”

CM: To me, it’s really unique. It’s a new way to be traditional, honoring what has come before—but it’s valid and current and making a statement, just like blues always has.

When did this album technically begin and how long was the process of it coming into being?

CM: It started when we were born [laughs].

BH: That’s the truth, though. He makes a great point. It’s a good thing we talked about making this record for so long. He was ready. I wasn’t. I had to earn my stripes. It came to life when it was meant to come to life. It has taken me a lifetime to make this record. We’ve been on [this path], and I do feel that my life’s course has been to make this record. It’s like it has been out

there waiting. Music was coming for us as much as we were coming for it.

CM: I call it following the will of the music. If you tune into it, it will take you where it wants to go. It plays you like you play your instrument. It’s like a sculptor has a block of rock, and he knocks away the parts that aren’t in the plan.

BH: The will of the music. Love that.

Ben, did you write a lot of these songs with Charlie’s sound and musical voice in mind?

BH: They couldn’t be but what they are. The songs musically complete themselves by the instrumentation. Because I write isolated, any song can go any number of ways. But I’ve always said there’s only one right way, and the only right way to bring these songs to life was the way we had with him, as far as bringing them to the front of the line.

You’re from different places and age sets, but there are points of overlap. Have you both addressed that?

CM: I think we have the same tastes.

BH: Same tastes. I’m one part a kid in the candy shop, one part closet ethnomusicologist and the other part ... well, there’s another part [laughs]. Trust me.

CM: That sounds like me, too. I like the adventure of finding new tunes, even though the tune might be 80 years old, some old gem that nobody’s heard before.

BH: I’m the last generation that had to go diving for records. It was my music, and I heard it and connected with it.

I heard Mississippi John Hurt play when I was 16 years old, and it hit me in a way that it had never done before. It was a formative time in my life, musically and creatively. There was no turning back. When you’re feeling the blues, roads are going to lead you to the cats.

So you end up with three Charlie Musselwhite records, three Little Walter records, three Muddy Waters records and Robert Johnson. You end up with the pillars, if you’re really in the right place, which I was. The next thing you know, you have a collection of Shanachie records and Arhoolie records. You’re digging through the bins and looking for that sensation of “Ah” when you find the good stuff. Then there’s that moment of truth when you slip it out of the jacket and it’s clean. You’ve found a clean version of Blind Willie Johnson on vinyl, and you rejoice. You hear trumpets and violins.

It’s that same passion that I’ve committed to meeting my heroes. I would go to Chicago and hang out with Louis Myers. I would go up to Oakland and meet Freddie Roulette and Brownie McGhee. I’d spend weekends with Brownie in his garage, giving out candy to neighborhood kids, meeting his family and running errands to Home Depot with him. Taj Mahal heard me play, and that was my first paying gig, as a musician, in Taj’s band. I was in my twenties, playing slide guitar with Taj. I thought my life was going to climax there. I was thinking, “You mean there’s more?”

In a little way, it has all been downhill. I've been veering further from the blues, and blues is what means the most to me, musically. That's where the source is for me. I've been veering closer to that source in my musical endeavors. Again, that's why it has taken me a lifetime to get here.

Does this album, then, represent a full-circle scenario for you?

BH: Yes. I'll never forget sitting in John Lee Hooker's living room, going through his records there on the floor and noticing how many of Charlie's records were in John Lee's collection.

So John Lee was listening to what I was listening to, and what Charlie was listening to.

CM: It's interesting that nobody was pushing blues on us, but we recognized it. Even if we didn't know what it was before we heard it, when we heard it, we recognized it. It resonated. You knew that on your own, without somebody pushing it or selling it to you. In that sense, we both took the same path. We heard it, we recognized that it meant something to us, and it drew us in. So we had to go after it.

Charlie, was it a similar story with you in that

you headed to Chicago on a musical search?

CM: I was just looking for a job. I had no clue that there was this big blues scene there. Then I discovered Shaker's Lounge and Sergio's Lounge and the whole blues scene. I started hanging around all the clubs. One thing led to another and here we are talking about it.

So it wasn't like you were seeking musical heroes when you trekked to Chicago?

CM: I was, but that's not why I went. I was living in Memphis and grew up in Memphis. When I was a little kid, I would hear street singers downtown, singing for tips, and they fascinated me. I was following them around, just to listen. I'd look all around downtown until I found the street singers. I would just be fascinated with the songs and lyrics and the people and the music. Later on, I got to know Furry Lewis and Will Shade and Gus Cannon, and a lot of people who played the blues. I didn't know that I was preparing myself for a career. I loved the music and I loved being around it and learning it. I didn't have any idea it would lead anywhere. I just had to play it.

For you, was the blues harp your original music, or did you lead into that?

CM: The guitar was around the same time. When I got to Chicago, there were tons of guitar players, but not that many harmonica players. I was getting offered work on the harmonica. My guitar playing sort of leveled off to where I was at when I left Memphis, whereas my harmonica playing kept getting better.

In Chicago, in a lot of the blues bars on the jukebox, there would be Jack McDuff and Grant Green and this jazz-blues style stuff. I started getting ideas for riffs on the harp, listening to that. That's where I got "Christo Redemptor" [from his 1967 solo debut, *Stand Back!*]. The first time I heard that, I thought, "That's amazing."

You took blues harp to a new level, in terms of what could be done on the instrument. Was that something you set out to do?

CM: Yeah, I guess so. I really loved the traditional style. Listening to that stuff was totally satisfying. My idea was that if you played the blues, you played *your* blues. You played how you feel and express how you feel, not just memorized what your heroes have done. Although that's a good way to learn, you shouldn't stop there [laughs].

To open up the harmonica, I would listen to horn players, or any lead instrument. If I could hear a riff or a line that I thought would fit on the harmonica, I would try to adapt that. That taught me the instrument. I wanted to quit thinking about the harmonica as just being a harmonica. I'm pretty sure Little Walter was doing the same thing. If you listen to Little Walter's earliest recording, you could tell he was heavily influenced by Sonny Boy Williamson. Then, as he goes along, he sounds more and more like [saxophonist] Illinois Jacquet.

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Whether by accident or fate, you landed in two musical hot spots: the Chicago blues scene and then the Bay Area in the late '60s.

CM: Going to Chicago was just looking for a job—not having anything to do with [the city's] music [scene]. Going to California, I resisted at first. My first album came out and I got all these calls: "Come play here; come play there." Somebody offered me a whole bunch of work in San Francisco, for really good money. I figured, "I guess I'll go out there and make that good money, then come back to Chicago." I got on a plane and got to San Francisco. After 10 minutes, I realized, "I ain't goin' back to Chicago."

They weren't playing me on the radio in Chicago, but they were on the underground radio. I got work and the whole thing evolved into a career, thanks to the hippies and underground radio and people like Bill Graham, who booked these crazy shows at the Fillmore. People would go because they knew he put together the coolest shows. It might be Albert King and Ravi Shankar and Mississippi John Hurt. It could be that diverse, but it always worked.

That was a golden age in terms of bringing different worlds of music together, wasn't it?

CM: Oh yeah, it was something else. I would go down to Haight-Ashbury and see all these tie-dyed clothes. It was better than going to the zoo. I'd be down there in my black suit and white shirt, hair slicked back and my horny-toed shoes. Every once in awhile, somebody would say, "Man, you're weird." Here's this guy with purple hair and tie-dyed clothes, telling me I'm weird [laughs].

Whereas, Ben, when you came of age as a music fanatic, you had to actively seek out music, right?

BH: Did I ever! It was like, "OK, who's left? Blind Joe Hill? OK, great. He's in L.A. I'll go to him." It was my mission. I'd go to the source, everywhere I could. My family owns a store, open to this day, called the Folk Music Center, there since 1958. It was world music before world music was called "world music." Even though it was down in Claremont, 16 miles out of L.A., it gained a reputation as being the only place you could get a sitar that was in tune, or a djembe that was properly strung, or a selection of harmonicas. I was raised in that environment.

My grandparents also had a club called the Golden Ring. Everybody came through there. J.B. Hutto, Reverend Gary Davis, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, they'd all come through. The way I reconnected with Brownie was that he loved my grandma. In the blues folk tradition, you just stayed at peoples' houses. Hotel? No. They'd stay at my grandparents' house when they played at my grandparents' club.

CM: I always loved [McGhee's] singing. It kills me. He had a great voice. Real mellow, never straining. How'd you meet Louis [Myers]?

BH: My grandparents were known for paying fair prices to musicians who wanted to sell

instruments, or trade. Louis came in, looking for an electric guitar. He had an old Gibson A model, a real round Gibson with the oval sound holes, which I still have. He couldn't believe I had an Aces [Myers' band] record. Through that connection and me being a relentless, blues-fanatical kid, at the age of 20 or 21, either he invited me or I invited myself to come to Chicago. He said, "You got a place to stay."

CM: Did he take you around to all the clubs?

BH: Yes, he did. I met his brother, Dave, and I met their mom. He did two solo shows at Rosa's and I teched for him, did all the strings and tuned

him up, and went to Checkerboard Lounge and met all his friends. I don't remember their names, but what a cast of characters. I lost some significant money playing poker at Checkerboard.

CM: Did he take you to Theresa's [Lounge]?

BH: Yeah, we went to Theresa's and Wise Fools [Pub]. I remember he went to Kingston Mines. Somebody owed him some money. He got his money.

CM: It's interesting that you got exposed to world music as a kid. When I was in Memphis, I was looking for blues records. I'd go to the Salvation Army and they had stacks of 78s, and

Jaleel Shaw

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they were only a nickel. Anything that had the word "blues," I would buy it, no matter what it was. I noticed things that looked interesting and I'd get those, too. So I discovered Arabic music, Greek music, and it sounded like blues to me. That opened me up to thinking that every culture has this musical feeling. Blues is a human thing. It's interesting that we were both exposed to what we call "world music" now.

You think about the power of blues and gospel music, cornerstones of American music. Even many a lame pop hit on the radio, once analyzed, has roots in blues and gospel.

BH: Yeah, blues and gospel—they're the same thing. You just throw God in the mix.

CM: Every time you hear a rock guitarist bend a string, it came from blues. You know that Pops Staples learned the guitar from Charley Patton? I love that.

BH: That's like learning soccer from Pelé or baseball from Babe Ruth. That's just crazy. All of a sudden, you start realizing, "Wait a minute, Big Brother and the Holding Company, that's blues. Led Zeppelin, that's blues." Then this world gains infinite dimensions. You hear African music. Wait a minute, that's how big the blues is? Holy shit.

Will blues purists wonder what's going on with your album?

BH: I think blues purists would be more challenged about the Black Keys. Because I am a blues purist [laughs], so I think we might be all right in that realm.

With so little blues on modern rock radio, at least there is the Black Keys, a nice nod in the blues direction, don't you think?

BH: Yeah. And Adele, quiet as it's kept, is more blues than pop [sings, "We could have had it all" from Adele's "Rolling In The Deep"].

CM: Who's Adele?

BH: Adele is a female singer from England who is just storming the airwaves. You're as bad as me, asking about Adele. That proves what blues purists we are. She's more blues than anything out there. She blows the house down. It's r&b soul that has become the new pop.

So there is hope yet for the radio.

BH: But don't kid yourself. It's not by accident, like it used to be. There were musical accidents back in the day. Now, if you get through on radio, someone is hammering someone to death. Even with some of my songs in the past that have been "hits," I have seen the hammer it has taken. John Henry has nothing on the hammer it takes to get a song to radio.

Ben, do you have a special feeling for projects such as the collaboration with the Blind Boys and now this one with Charlie, connecting with a hero?

BH: Yeah, it's like Charlie said, following the will of the music. We didn't miss a beat. We just went in and it went.

CM: I felt comfortable immediately. It has a logic to it like blues has a logic. Blues just makes sense to me. I remember trying to play country music, and I just could not get the hang of it. But blues made so much sense to me. I just laid into it, effortless. But country—I couldn't hear it. I love old hillbilly music. County music is more syrupy. All you've gotta do is have a cowboy hat and a guitar and sing through your nose. Hillbilly music is good stuff. Have you heard of Charlie Feathers? Charlie learned guitar from Junior Kimbrough over in Holly Springs [Mississippi]. Charlie couldn't read or write. He was just a great singer. He was kind of a hillbilly rockabilly guy.

BH: Then again, so was Ray Charles, at times.

CM: Oh man, he did some great country music. He knew how to deliver.



Did you ever play with him?

CM: No, I never did, that I recall. Unless it was during my drinking years.

You had some lost years there, in the '70s and thereabouts, didn't you?

CM: Oh, yeah.

BH: Still looking for them. Haven't found them yet [laughs].

CM: Wherever they are, I'll leave them there.

BH: You and me both, man.

CM: Yeah, you never know what's twisting in the wind out there, ready to bite you in the butt when you least expect it.

BH: Charlie, talk to me briefly about the blues and nightlife, and how interconnected they are.

CM: They go hand in hand. If you get off of work, and want to go out and socialize and relax, the blues is there to reflect your ups and downs. The blues is your buddy when you're up and your comfort when you're down. It's like a celebration, waiting for you at the end of the day, with the blues and a beer. Dancing, good-timing, socializing. The music and the people and the place all constitute one spirit. You walk in there and you become part of it, and everything is OK. Until the next morning.

BH: Have there been moments where you experienced a musician and it was so deep, you just thought, "Oh my God..." and were just jumping up and down?

CM: The first time I saw Howlin' Wolf. I had

his records and thought they were great. So I'm down in Chicago and I found out where he was playing, a club called Silvio's, at the corner of Lake and Kedzie. I walked in there and wasn't prepared. Even with the music I had heard, he was way more in person than you could possibly get on record. He was so powerful, with his voice and playing and his band. Wow.

At one point, Wolf started getting up and by the time he got all the way up, he was like the Rock of Gibraltar—this massive man singing the heaviest fucking blues you ever heard. He totally nailed it, and totally satisfied that part of you that wanted to get that blues hit. Everybody was sitting there like they were in church or something. Wolf had them in the palm of his hand. It was like he had left the planet or something. He was transcendent: That's the word.

Ben, to turn your question back on you, have there been particular life-altering epiphany moments in your life as a musician and music fan?

BH: Yeah, one of them's sitting right here, being in the studio with Charlie and John Lee Hooker. Lightning may as well have struck twice. After I did that, I went out and sat on the curb for about an hour. Everyone said goodbye and I just sat there.

CM: John had a presence. [If] he walked in the room behind you and you didn't even see him, you *felt* like something had happened.

BH: Hearing Charlie's harp and John's voice, it was almost too much for me to play.

I was in the thick of that, as a player, but let me give you an example of another experience. I would go up and visit Brownie and he'd never pick up his guitar. Finally, one weekend, he said, "Would you go get my guitar?" I got his guitar and he starts in on, "I got a woman, sweet loving kind every day..." He spent the next two hours riffing and handing me his guitar. I didn't want to touch it, but he said, "No, if you're sitting here, you gotta play."

That's that moment, for me. You don't know if you're melting, or levitating. Everything else is gone. Your ears get hot and you think, "What the hell is happening to me?" You're switching your physics.

Another one of those moments was with Solomon Burke. I wrote a song for him for his last record. He said, "Harper, I want you here. You can point to me, because the phrasing is a little bit different." We both had headphones on and he said, "Now you point when you want me to start." I'd point and there would be that voice. Whew.

CM: What do you call it in Buddhism when the teacher gives something to the student? Transmission. That's what I was thinking about with Brownie. It wasn't just the guitar playing, but this deeper thing, on another level.

BH: I know what you're saying. It was the fact that I had to earn it, listen and talk. It was like he was saying, "You have to go somewhere with me first."

CM: The way you describe Solomon and the way he wanted you there: He didn't want to just show up to be a singer. This was on another level, something personal and spiritual. **DB**