THE KURLAND AGENCY

TAJ MAHAL

Profile

In September 2014, some 50 years after moving to Los Angeles to form the band Rising Sons with fellow blues musician Ry Cooder and Jessie Lee Kincaid, Taj Mahal hightailed it to Nashville to receive an honor he called "one of the most powerful and wonderful things that could ever happen in my life." Celebrating decades of recording and touring that have nearly singlehandedly reshaped the definition and scope of the blues via the infusion of exotic sounds from the Caribbean, Africa and South Pacific, the two-time Grammy winning singer, songwriter, film composer, guitarist and multi-instrumentalist was feted with the Lifetime Achievement for Performance Award at the 13th Annual Americana Honors and Awards.

"I've been performing for over 50 years, and to be recognized for the road I've traveled means the world to me, says Mahal, who during the show performed "Statesboro Blues" – which he first recorded on his eponymous 1968 debut album - on dobro with a band that included Cooder and Don Was. "I could not have done this without the audience that has been so supportive of me throughout my musical journey. It was a fantastic night and I was thrilled to be there and celebrated among such other outstanding American musical treasures like Jackson Browne and Flaco Jimenez, whose music and talent I am a fan of. It certainly represented a diversity of musical styles and culture. That's what I'm talking about!"

The night at the legendary Ryman Auditorium capped another extraordinary year for Mahal, which began with a performance at the Gregg Allman Tribute Concert in Atlanta and included playing on the entire Blind Boys of Alabama Christmas album; performing as part of the Bonnaroo Superjam on a bill featuring Derek Trucks with Chaka Khan, Eric Krasno from Soulive, renowned R&B/blues session drummer James Gadson, David Hidalgo from Los Lobos and Susan Tedeschi; and playing and recording with Van Morrison in Dublin.

Since the release of 2008's Maestro, his most recent studio recording which received a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Blues Album, Mahal has been busier than ever touring and recording at a whirlwind pace with old friends and fellow musical sojourners. In 2010, after being nominated for Entertainer of the Year by the Blues Foundation, he joined Jimmy Fallon's Late Night studio band The Roots as a special musical guest on the Rolling Stones classic "Shine a Light." He also opened in Lake Tahoe for Bob Dylan. One of the highlights of the following year as performing a special opening solo set for Eric Clapton and Wynton Marsalis at Lincoln Center; Mahal also performed several songs with his two fellow legends. The concert was recorded and released as a CD and CD/DVD entitled "Wynton Marsalis & Eric Clapton Play The Blues – Live From Jazz at Lincoln Center."

After starting 2012 producing and performing (vocals, guitar and banjo) on Vusi Mahlasela's live album Say Africa, Mahal joined the critically acclaimed Experience Hendrix tour for a three week run that included performances by everyone from Buddy Guy, Dweezil Zappa and Robby Krieger to Robert Randolph, Jonny Lang, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Keb' Mo' and Living Colour. Energized anew after the Sony Legacy release of two collections celebrating the riches and rarities of his musical legacy – the two disc set The Hidden Treasures of Mahal Mahal 1967-1973, featuring a full live 1970 concert from Royal Albert Hall, and The Complete Columbia Albums Collection box set, featuring all of his LPs from 1968-1976 – the bluesman enjoyed a wildly productive 2013.

That spring found Mahal singing and playing harmonica on "Further Down the Road" from Clapton's Old Sock album, and performing as a featured guest at Clapton's Crossroads Guitar Festival at MSG (NYC) where over 30 of the world's greatest guitarists played sidemen to each other over two nights. Mahal jammed with The Allman Brothers Band featuring David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas of Los Lobos and in a special unplugged acoustic set with Keb' Mo'.

That June marked the release of the all-star soundtrack album to "Ghost Brothers of Darkland County," a supernatural blues n' roots musical featuring music and lyrics by John Mellencamp, a libretto by author Stephen King and production by T-Bone Burnett. Mahal appeared on "Home Again" with Sheryl Crow, Dave Alvin and Phil Alvin, in addition to "Tear This Cabin Down" and "What Kind of Man Am I." He later performed on "Vicksburg Blues" on actor/recording artist Hugh Laurie's album Didn't It Rain and a new rendition of his song "Winding Down" on the Sammy Hagar & Friends recording. He capped the year with "An Evening with Taj Mahal" at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles.

Mahal's career has been full of and defined by colorful twists and turns, unexpected whimsical ventures and a commitment to a muse that has long preferred freewheeling innovation to conformity. So there's always the challenge of finding the right words and phrases to capture just what he's meant to American music over the past half century. Miles Mellough, who wrote the start and honest, no holds barred liner notes for The Complete Columbia Albums Collection, captures the complexities perfectly on several posts he penned on his blog Birds with Broken Wings after the box set came out.

"Here's the thing, plain and simple," he writes. "Taj Mahal has always been a conundrum; a man who is capable of mirroring many things to many people, and the reason why is because he's an enigma --- an alchemist and a contrarian…Through his music he's been a dirt farmer, a man of gentry, and a Mississippi riverboat gambler. He's played the role of the pious country preacher of old South camp meetings to a chain gang prisoner breaking rocks in the hot, midday sun. He's been a hard-boiled harp player with a gold tooth and process blowing gritty on the South side of Chicago to a West Indies fishing boat captain sipping Banana Daiquiri's with a St. Kitts woman…Like the blues tree with its many roots, Mahal has become the sum of many parts. But if you were to strip him of the elements that have come to define him publicly, you'd no doubt find that beneath it all he's really just a simple man with a harp, a steel guitar, and a banjo in his rucksack; a man making music with a whole hell of a lot of heart and soul."

In another post, Mellough ruminated on the global fusion approach Mahal has taken to the blues, which has caused its share of controversy: "While purists may have sometimes had issues with his unusual blend of acoustic blues mingled with the sweet sounds of Africa, the West Indies and South Pacific Islands, I believe Mahal elevated the music form to an entirely new plane. By approaching the blues from a global perspective, Mahal presents it as part of a broader musical palette, a world canvas. Using traditional country blues as a starting place, Mahal perfumes the pot by mixing a spicy concoction of Afrocentric roots music, a blues gumbo kissed by reggae, Latin, R&B, Cajun, Caribbean rhythms, gospel, West African folk, jazz, calypso, and Hawaiian slack key. The savory dish he serves is both a satisfying and uplifting stew that actually transforms 'singin' the blues' into something to be very happy about."

The parents of Harlem born Henry St. Claire Fredericks, Jr. (Mahal's given name until his dreams of Gandhi, India and social tolerance inspired him to change it) came of age during the Harlem Renaissance and instilled in their son a sense of pride in his West Indian and African ancestry. Growing up in Springfield Massachusetts, Mahal's father was a jazz pianist, composer and arranger of Caribbean descent (called "The Genius" by Ella Fitzgerald) who frequently hosted musicians from the Caribbean, Africa and the U.S. His mother was a schoolteacher and gospel singer from South Carolina. Henry Sr. had an extensive record collection and a shortwave radio that brought sounds from across the world into their home.

Back in the 1950s, Springfield was full of recent arrivals from all over the globe, allowing Mahal to understand

and appreciate many world cultures. "We spoke several dialects in my house – Southern, Caribbean, African – and we heard dialects from eastern and western Europe," he says. In addition, musicians from the Caribbean, Africa and all over the U.S. frequently visited the Fredericks home, and Mahal became even more fascinated with roots – the origins of the various forms of music he was hearing, the path they took to reach their current form, and how they influenced each other along the way. He threw himself into the study of older forms of African-American music, which the major record companies of the day largely ignored.

Mahal's parents started him out on classical piano lessons, but he soon expanded his scope to include clarinet, trombone and harmonica and discovered his talent for singing. His stepfather (his mother remarried after Henry Sr. was killed in a tragic accident) owned a guitar and Mahal began playing it in his early teens, becoming serious when a guitarist from North Carolina moved in next door and taught him the various styles of Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker and Jimmy Reed and other titans of Delta and Chicago blues.
Before music became a viable option, Mahal – who first began working on a dairy farm at 16 and was a foreman by 19 - thought about pursuing a career in farming. Over the years, this ongoing passion has led to him performing regularly at Farm Aid concerts. In the early 60s, he studied agriculture (minoring in veterinary science and agronomy) at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he formed the popular U. Mass party band, the Elektras. After graduating, he headed west in 1964 to Los Angeles, where he formed the Rising Sons, a six-piece outfit that included guitarist Ry Cooder.

The band opened for numerous high-profile touring artists of the '60s, including Otis Redding, the Temptations and Martha and the Vandellas. Around this same time, Mahal also mingled with various blues legends, including Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Lightnin' Hopkins and Sleepy John Estes. He and Cooder also worked during this period with the Rolling Stones, and in 1968, he performed in the classic film "The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus."

This diversity of musical experience served as the bedrock for Mahal's first three recordings: Taj Mahal (1967), The Natch'l Blues (1968) and Giant Step (1969). Drawing on the eclectic sounds and styles he'd absorbed as a child and a young adult, these early albums showed signs of the musical exploration that would become Mahal's hallmark in the years to come. In the 1970s, Mahal carved out a unique musical niche with a string of adventurous recordings, including Happy To be Just Like I Am (1971), Recycling the Blues and Other Related Stuff (1972), the GRAMMY®-nominated soundtrack to the movie Sounder (1973), Mo' Roots (1974), Music Fuh Ya (Music Para Tu) (1977) and Evolution (The Most Recent) (1978). The type of blues he was playing in the early 70s showed an aptitude for spicing the mix with exotic flavors that kept him from being an out and out mainstream genre performer.

Mahal's recorded output slowed somewhat during the 1980s as he toured relentlessly and immersed himself in the music and culture of his new home in Hawaii. Still, that decade saw the well-received release of Mahal in 1987, as well as the first three of his celebrated children's albums on the Music For Little People label. He returned to a full recording and touring schedule in the 1990s, including such projects as the musical scores for the Langston Hughes/Zora Neale Hurston play Mule Bone (1991) and the movie Zebrahead (1992). Later in the decade, Mahal released a series of recordings with the Phantom Blues Band, including Dancing the Blues (1993), Phantom Blues (1996), and the two GRAMMY® winners, Señor Blues (1997) and the live Shoutin' in Key (2000). Overall, he has been nominated for nine GRAMMY® Awards.

During this same period, Mahal continued to expand his multicultural horizons by joining Indian classical musicians on Mumtaz Mahal in 1995, and recording Sacred Island, a blend of Hawaiian music

and blues, with the Hula Blues Band in 1998. Kulanjan, released in 1999, was a collaborative project with Malian kora master Toumani Diabate (the kora is a 21-string west African harp). Mahal felt that this recording embodied his musical and cultural spirit arriving full circle. He recorded a second album with the Hula Blues Band, Hanapepe Dream, in 2003, followed by the European release Zanzibar in 2005. His 2008 Heads Up International recording Maestro marked the 40th anniversary of his recording career and featured performances by Ben Harper, Jack Johnson, Angelique Kidjo, Los Lobos, Ziggy Marley and others – many of whom have been directly influenced by Mahal's music and guidance.

"What inspires me most about my career is that I've been able to make a living playing the music that I always loved and wanted to play since the early 50s," Mahal says. "And the fact that I still am involved in enjoying an exciting career at this point in time is truly priceless. I'm doing this the old fashioned way and it ain't easy. I work it and I earn it. My relationship with my audience has been fun, with great respect going both ways! I am extremely lucky to have fans who have listened to the music I choose to play and have stayed with me for 50 years. These fans have also introduced their children, grandchildren and in some cases great-grand children to this fabulous treasure of music that I am privileged to represent. It's very exciting, to say the least.
"Like ancient culture," he adds, "the people are as much a part of the performance as the music. Live communication through music, oh yeah, it's right up there with oxygen!"