



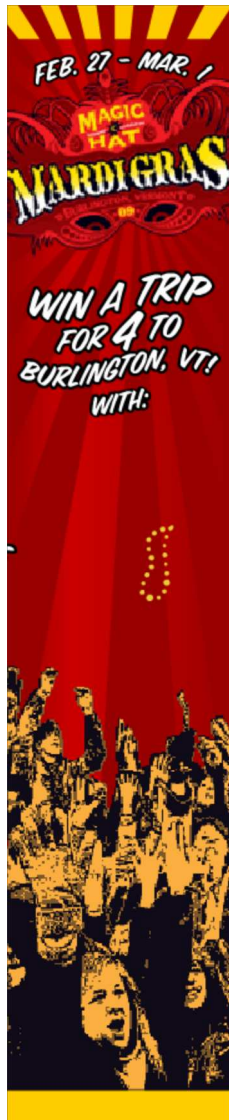
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Michael Falzarano, Stepping out of the Shadows

Mick Skidmore

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Michael Falzarano is one of those musicians who seldom gets the credit they deserve, yet his roles in Hot Tuna, The Jorma Kaukonen Trio and currently in the New Riders are important. He's a perfect sideman or back-up to the band leader. Although he has an unassuming and laidback persona, he is a versatile musician with all round talent as a guitarist, vocalist, songwriter and producer. Falzarano also fronts the gritty Memphis style rock and roll band The Memphis Pilgrims, but more recently in between his New Riders roles he has released a couple of solo albums which show he also as comfortable stepping out of the shadows and being the front man.

The most recent album is *We Are One* (Woodstock Records) and it a delightful encapsulation of everything that Falzarano does and simply the best overall project he has released under his own name. Falzarano is helped out on the album by an impressive array of guests including, Jorma Kaukonen, the late Vassar Clements, Melvin Seals, Pete Sears, Kerry Kearney, Professor Louie, Buddy Cage, Garth Hudson, and a slew of other notable players, including the Memphis Pilgrims. The most impressive thing about the disc, which flips from strident bluesy R&B through country blues, country rock and more, with ease and conviction, is that it is a cohesive effort. Clearly Falzarano is the front man, and enjoying it. The production is simple and the playing never over complicated, but it's a vibrant album, as indicated by the horn driven "It's Just My Way" (which has Jorma wailing away). Other highlights are the strident opener, "Why I Love You I Can't Explain," the gutsier blues rock of "It's My Own Fault." The soulful title cut is presented in two versions, an electric and an acoustic version. Both are good, but I prefer the acoustic one. He also reworks classic country blues tracks "How Long Blues" and "Candyman" with really interesting arrangements. The album ends with the appropriately titled instrumental "Gonna Power Down Now," which boast some great pedal steel from Cage.

Given the release of the new album we took the time to chat with Falzarano and get his take on the album and his current activities. Needless to say the affable and likeable Falzarano was typically unpretentious and informative. He is one of the breed of musicians that truly enjoys and appreciates what he does.

M.S. How have you been doing?

M.F. I've been doing really well and I've been real busy working with the New Riders of the Purple Sage. I have been out working with them for a couple of years now. I've just put out this record (*We Are All One*). But I'm busy doing a lot of stuff, like working at Jorma's camp, staying healthy, trying to stay out of trouble. You know the drill.

M.S. Everyone knows you as a sideman for Jorma and other people, but I figured it would be nice if we got some background on you. What were your original music influences and how did you get into music?

M.F. For me, because I'm of that age, I'd already been playing the guitar a bit by the time the Beatles came to America and were on Ed Sullivan. That pretty much cinched the deal for me. Then from there I just started exploring the songs that they and the Stones were playing. Then I realized that many of them were songs by American artists, blues guys. So, I went back and checked them, checked out Chuck Berry and all that stuff. Then not too long after I was a teenager and I started putting bands together and they were all locally successful to some degree. I put it down for a while and then pick it up again. Then somewhere after doing on the East Coast here with several different bands I moved out to California, and as soon as I got there I put together a band called the Phantoms and we started playing around San Francisco and the Bay area, and within about six months I met Jorma. And probably about a year after that we started playing together, not professionally, you know just hanging out.

M.S. So what kind of time frame would this have been?

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M.F. That would be the late 70's like '77. We probably didn't play together until '78. We played a bunch of shows together and started hanging out and then in '79 and '80 we started playing together, and then in 1983 we started that whole Hot Tuna reunion thing and that has just snowballed into right now. Before that there were many bands that I played in, in the Bay Area, and even while I was in Hot Tuna I was playing in bands, and of course on the East Coast here I had the Memphis Pilgrims that put out one full CD and a couple of EPs, and many of those guys are on the new album. It's kind of me moving forward, but looking back.

M.S. Talking of the new album I like it a lot. Don't be offended but your singing just sounds much better and more confident than it ever did?

M.F. Well, I'm getting more mature, not trying so hard and am just doing what I do. I guess its wisdom that just comes with age. I'm just being me.

M.S. You cover quite a lot of different styles and sound at ease. The vocals are good and the music is great. A while back I'd spoken with Buddy Cage and I mentioned to him how well you fitted in with the NRPS. I was amazed listening to you singing Marmaduke's songs; your voice just seemed to fit them perfectly. Was it difficult for you to get into that mode?

M.F. No, the thing that happened with the New Riders is the same thing that happened with Hot Tuna in the early days. When I was growing up on Long Island, I played in all these bands, essentially cover bands. We were playing Hot Tuna songs and Grateful Dead songs, blues songs and New Riders songs. It's just the way it was in the area that I grew up in. So, when I got into the New Riders, and I had played with David and Buddy for many years and John for that matter, when we first started doing this I already knew most of the tunes, and the rest of the guys as well. So we are all sharing the vocal duties and I have to be honest the New Riders is the easiest band I have ever played in. It all came together. We were going to do five shows and it turned into a hundred a year for the last three years. It's very relaxed. Everybody just does their thing. We are all trying to do our own thing, but staying true to the legacy and sound of the band.

M.S. Well, I have one live album you done and to be honest I actually think it sounds much better than the original band.

M.F. (Laughs) Yes, it's been a lot of fun. We are getting great crowds, good reviews. It's a lot of fun. We have a whole bunch of new songs. Robert Hunter wrote a bunch of songs along with David Nelson, so we got that going on. I'm producing that and it should be out sometime next year. So, I'm staying busy. I really enjoy playing with the New Riders. It's fun...I have been very fortunate in my career to have played with really great people, really talented players, some of the most influential on the planet and they happen to be really nice people as well, and that certainly holds true for the New Riders as well. David couldn't be a nicer guy. He is really supportive. He really wants to get everyone involved in the band. It really has been great and like I said we were only going to do five shows.

M.S. Sometimes it's the spontaneous things that work the best.

M.F. Exactly. When Buddy called me he said, "We are going to book these five shows could you help us out and do the shows?" And I said, "Absolutely." We got together rehearsed for like two hours went out and played the five shows and they all sold out. I called up Blue Mountain Artists, the agent that I knew and he took it, and here we are playing a hundred shows a year.

M.S. Are you finding a new audience or just the diehards?

M.F. At first, maybe for the first five shows and then the next six months to a year, it was definitely the older fans coming to check it, and many of them still come back, but there is also a very strong presence of younger people, which is good because that's the future.

M.S. Are you also writing material for the New Riders?

M.F. Yes, I have. I've written two for the new album. Johnny the drummer has written one. But for this new studio album it is mostly the Hunter/Nelson songs. We are trying to do all songs that haven't been played a million times although we have been playing some of the songs over the last year, so some people have heard them. There's one or two songs that Dawson has written that never saw the light of day that we are going to try and do.

M.S. What about your new album?

M.F. Yes, I'm happy to have it out. It is getting good reviews, its getting some airplay. My theory is you have to stay in it. People ask me all the time, "How do you do it, and how has this all worked out?" The first thing is you have to keep doing it. If you are easily discouraged this music business isn't for you.

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M.S. That's for sure.

M.F. I'm just not easily discouraged. You just have to stay in it and something will happen.

M.S. As I said I think the new album is the best thing you've done. Are you going to be able to do any touring to support it?

M.F. I would imagine that because it is so expensive to tour that it is going to be really hard unless something major happens, but if somehow it got major airplay and started to sell, I could put together an band in moments really, because I know a lot of players and they would all help me out and go and do it, but it has gotten so expensive that it almost makes it impossible without serious guarantees.

M.S. Now could you piggyback on some New Riders dates?

M.F. If there was something like that that was beginning to happen, yes I could that. Although I'm not sure I'd want to be doing that as I would be playing three sets a night.

M.S. Right, you're not getting any younger.

M.F. Exactly. I was talking with Harvey Sorgen, you remember the drummer.

M.S. Yes, sure I remember Harvey.

M.F. ...and we were just talking about that very thing, how doing a hundred shows ten years ago was nothing, but now it takes its toll, but knock on wood we are able to it.

M.S. With your new album I like the different directions. It's kind of nice that you have the nod to Hot Tuna with "How Long Blues" and "Candyman," which are pretty interesting arrangements. What was it prompted you to cover them?

M.F. The reason I did this, and on my last album *The King James Sessions* I did a tune we used to do in Hot Tuna, "I Know you Rider," but those songs in the versions as played by Hot Tuna are iconic and I played them for so many years and have always loved them, and I figured there's no way that I can do a version and compare it to a Jorma version, but I like those songs so I am just going to do my versions. This is how I do them. I think they came out pretty good and I enjoyed doing them. A song like "How Long Blues" I love that song. The first time I heard it was from Rambling Jack Elliott and the more I learn about the songs it's interesting.... It was like the first song Muddy Waters learned, the first song Ray Charles recorded or vice versa, but it's got such a storied history. On "How Long Blues" that is the Memphis Pilgrims backing me up, as are the first two songs on the record. When we were doing those sessions with Melvin Seals I just wanted to do those songs. It's just a different take.

M.S. If my memory serves me correctly wasn't "New Shirt" a song you played with Hot Tuna in the '80s?

M.F. Yes, I did do a version of "New Shirt" with Hot Tuna. It was a much faster up tempo pop sounding thing. I didn't think it fit in with Hot Tuna that well but Jorma loved it and insisted that I play it, who argues with the boss! Over the years the song has mutated and one time we were in the studio with Buddy and we did this version. Most of the tunes on the record are live takes, first take or second take of the song. There's no song that was put together from scratch, like bass track, drums etc. For the most part they are all live recordings.

M.S. Was the album recorded over a period of time?

M.F. Yes, it started a couple of years ago. I pretty much had it finished up before I started playing in the New Riders, so I was going to put a band together and go do this, and then the New Riders thing happened and just snowballed. For two and a half years it was like a bulldozer, so there was no time to think about doing anything, but now that things have settled into place a little bit with that, I felt I have time now. But yes, the songs were recorded over time. I recorded the songs with Vassar Clements the year before he passed away. I forget when that was now, but we did that when he was in town doing one of his birthday bashes with special guests, which we did every year.

M.S. But it really sounds pretty cohesive.

M.F. Right, this is the way I explain it, and you'll understand, it's just me, that's what I sound like, so whoever I'm playing with that's how its going to sound, for the most part and I tried to get it to the point where it all sounded together. I've heard some CDs, especially where it is "with friends" situation where there is just no connectivity to anything. It just sounds like this song and that song. So I tried my best to make it sound like one cohesive project.

M.S. I really like the acoustic version of the title track.

M.F. That was just an add on that I decided at the last minute, but the acoustic version with Kerry Kearny doing the finger style guitar actually came before.

M.S. You've played with a lot of people. Is there anything that really stands out for you?

M.F. I have been very fortunate and a lot of it is through Jorma and through our travels I have wound up in various places where I was able to play with these people, but yes, there are many moments where I look back and say, "wow, that was a pinch me moment." One of them was getting on the Furthur Festival. I got to play "Kansas City" in Kansas City with Johnnie Johnson. I like a lot of the stuff with the old time blues guys. We are in Austin, Texas and we played with Pinetop Perkins and it has been great playing with Bob Weir and getting to work with Paul Simon was unbelievable.

M.S. When did you work with Paul Simon? I missed that.

M.F. I forget what year it was, but it was mid-90s when he had that Broadway show. Me, Jorma and Pete were playing in New York and after the show he came up and said he was doing this play, I need some music, would you guys be interested in coming in and Jorma said, "Sure, have your people call." And they called. It was really interesting to work with someone like that. I also got to play with Dr. John who is another of my big heroes, and Vassar. There really is a lot over the years.

M.S. You mentioned to me before that when you teach at Jorma's camp you do "Blues For Beginners," what's that like? Is it trying or rewarding?

M.F. I've been teaching there for ten or eleven years since it opened up, two, three or four times a year. Earlier on there were literally people that were true beginners and that is a little tough, but now most of the people that take the class have some knowledge of the guitar and some knowledge of how to make chords. They have no idea about structure and blues progressions and that kind of stuff. One of my things is to get them to be able to play a song, at least one song in a genre, a one four five blues progression with fills and licks, all within the four days, so now they can go away and play a hundred and fifty songs because now they know how to do this, rather than play a particular song. I love doing it. It is really great and I am one of the few guys there that teaches the beginners, so I am fortunate my classes always fill up, which is a good thing. I get a lot out of it too. It's a fun thing to do.

M.S. What do you see for Michael Falzarano down the road, more of the same?

M.F. Yes, more of the same. I'm in the New Riders and if everybody stays healthy, I don't see any reason why that shouldn't continue. We've got the gigs, we got the music. I've already started working on another album. I'm a songwriter; it's what I like to do.

M.S. Do you think you will play with Jorma again?

M.F. Yes, last time I was out there we did a show. And last year me, Jack, Jorma, Eric Diaz, and G.E. Smith played a show and that was great. That was rocking.

M.S. I would imagine so.

M.F. So, we stay in touch and I have learned never to say never, you know something could happen and the phone will ring, look playing in the New Riders was nowhere on my radar. If you stay with it and your name is out there you can make things happen. My plan is to stay in it as long as I can and keep putting out CDs.

M.S. Well, Michael thanks for time and good luck with the album. I'm also looking forward to the new, New Riders album.

M.F. Thanks a lot; it's going to be good. It's not going to be a traditional pop album. When I think of the New Riders I think of the first four or five albums with all the great songs, but the band nowadays, the New Riders renaissance is different. We play a lot of three and four minute songs that are old but our new stuff tends to be a little more lengthy and jammy. A few of the new songs are short, but when you are writing with guys like Hunter and Nelson, they are going to be a little longer and there's nothing wrong with that. It's not like we are trying to get Top 40 airplay so why not keep it interesting.

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