

## **STAN WEBB'S CHICKEN SHACK: I'D RATHER GO LIVE DVD (ANGEL AIR WAVES/MUSIC VIDEO DISTRIBUTORS)**

It's an unfortunate fact that, for most people who lived through the British Blues Boom of the late '60's, when the name "**Chicken Shack**" is mentioned, most folks think only of **Christine Perfect's** (keyboardist for them) marriage to **John McVie** and her consequent joining of the "modern" **Fleetwood Mac**...i.e. post-**Peter Green**. Few people realize that Chicken Shack's founder and guitarist, **Stan Webb**, has been playing marvellous Blues all these years (39 of them, actually) and, although Christine McVie did sing the vocals on Chicken Shack's biggest single (1969), an **Etta James** classic by the name of "I'd Rather Go Blind" she really has very little to do with the history of this notable band. Notice the play on words in the title of this DVD.

With the exception of one ill-conceived album and American tour Stan did with the **Savoy Brown Boogie Bros.**, he has carried on with several versions of Chicken Shack right up to this DVD. There are those critics who consider Chicken Shack one of the more "pedestrian" bands to come out at the time, unlike "legitimate" artists such as Fleetwood Mac and **John Mayall**. It is ironic, that after all these years, Stan's band has become a similar testing ground not unlike Mayall's, and, though I am a fan of the most recent Fleetwood Mac, they are not a Blues band as was the 60's and early 70's version. In fact, they were just a tad ahead of Chicken Shack in popularity in the '60's. Christine McVie and Stan Webb had in common **Freddie King** and his keyboardist, **Sonny Thompson**, as their mentors. Stan's music was heavily influenced by Freddie King and Christine McVie (ne. Perfect) was his perfect foil as she learned all she knew about Blues keyboards from **Sonny Thompson**. So, according to certain critics (whose tastes differ somewhat from mine), Chicken Shack never "recovered" from Christine's leaving. This same critic suggests, "If you're looking for relics of the British Blues Boom, however, you'd be much better off with **Ten Years After**." We are all entitled to our, ah, opinions.

All I can say to this is Stan Webb's Chicken Shack is no relic. Granted, his approach to Blues vocals is unique, but the aforementioned critic also criticized British Blues as being "exciting, (if usually derivative)". Well, you certainly can't accuse Stan Webb of being derivative. What counts is he has had a loyal following not only in the U.K. but also all over Europe and North America, for almost 40 years! And, unlike countless "Blues bands" of the late '60's who were overwhelmed by psychedelia, Stan stuck to his Blues roots almost totally, idiosyncratic though he may be. One important fact,

which seems to be missed by these "pundits", is Stan Webb's guitar playing. He is simply one of the best in Blues. In 1988, (15 years after Chicken Shack had disbanded, according to this self-same "pundit"), **Eric Clapton** appeared on stage (apparently without any warning) to jam at a charity benefit with Chicken Shack. Stan and Eric jammed on their favourite classics 'til the wee hours. Wish I'd seen that one! However, I did see the photos, which are on an assortment of websites. So, what we have here is an artist who is deeply admired by his fellow musicians and by his loyal fan base (the people who actually listen to his music and watch his performances).

Fortunately, this DVD, recorded in '04 in a packed venue in Lyme Regis, Southern England, allows Stan and his band to share this rare sound with us all. Chicken Shack is now a four-piece with **Gary Davies** on second guitar who plays some fine leads as well, **Mick Jones** on profound drums, **Jim Rudge** playing 5 string bass like a master, and, of course, Stan Webb incomparably on lead guitar and vocals.

The first "cut" is actually a series of interviews with fans (British fans, not the easiest of audiences, although all of those interviewed thought that Webb was underrated and one who thought he should have an O.B.E.!). The band then appears and begins with a traditional arranged by Webb, "So Tell Me". This song has been in his set list for pretty close to his entire 39-year career and is an ideal intro. It's an unassuming shuffle with Webb's long vocal notes, which may be unusual in the Blues, but the sincerity and pain is as real as any in Blues. He then flies into a fine lead any Blues guitarist would be proud to be able play. This contemporary line-up is as tight and well rehearsed as any I've heard lately. "The lads are on fine form", as they say in England. Also, Webb's use of dynamics is most effective here, as in other cuts to come. Next is "The Thrill Is Gone", which Webb begins with a soft, guitar-laden introduction that makes it very obvious that this is not **B.B. King**. However, the classic arrangement comes together with the lyrics and does the "King of the Blues" proud. I remember the first time I heard this cut, I was appalled at the use of a digital delay and a wah-wah on this classic, but as I listened a few more times, I realized that Webb has truly mastered these "effects" and uses them with overwhelming efficacy. Combined with his powerful soprano (the antithesis of B.B.'s voice), he effortlessly gets those shivers happening.

Next, "Reconsider Baby", a slower, relaxed shuffle, was my introduction to Webb's slide playing. He holds the bottleneck over the neck, as opposed to the usual method of coming up under the neck. Whatever it takes, he is a brilliant slide player. "I Know You Know Me" (Webb) is a fast rocker spotlighting Webb's imaginative vocals and lyrics. It's this type of beat,

which separates the men from the boys on the drum kit. I must say Mick Jones is in the top percentile of accomplished drummers...always moving the beat with the left hand while throwing in those flams and other subtleties at just the right moments. Again, Webb uses dynamics to great effect, just before kicking out the jams for the final 12 bars of screaming guitar.

"You Are the Sweetest Little Thing/Hurt" is introduced as "a song about me Mum". It is a building 3 chord ascending kind of arrangement with a wonderfully simple vocal melody made more exciting by Webb's unique approach. On a couple of lines, he brings **Bob Dylan** (or at least his incredible sincerity) to mind. Some might think Webb uses his high, powerful voice too much, but it is a very powerfully moving part of his style, second only to his ripping guitar solos. By the way, "Hurt" is his Mum's favourite song, by **Johnny Cash**, which Webb sings in a credible Cash imitation. I had never realized what wonderful lyrics this song has, not to mention the first part written by Webb. Webb soars with a classic solo in which one can hear all the major influences of the '60's before returning to a reprise of Johnny Cash's masterpiece, building to a crescendo with a tight, masterful, classical Rock ending, as you would expect from a band of this calibre.

"Stan Webb's Chicken Shack Opera" (Webb) or, as Webb introduces it, "Some of you may know this one, the C.S. Opera"...to a huge ovation, follows. This song is the closest Webb ever gets to out and out Rock, but with a band as talented as his, it's a format to show off the skills of the rest of the boys. Gary Davies, on a Stratocaster, (Webb's a Les Paul man), plays a highly imaginative solo on this one, trading off with Webb's plethora of riffs. It's basically a one-chord thing, but just when you start thinking it's a little predictable, in comes a complex progression, which serves to change the feel of the tune, and announces a change in direction. Fantastic communication between band members...the mark of seasoned pros. Webb begins this "opera" with a verse, and then inserts another near the end (conclusion, or perhaps, finale, would be the right word). Reminds me of the jams we used to do for hours when we were learning our instruments...sounds a little different when the pros take over!!

An old **Willie Dixon** tune is next. Yes, Spoonful, that **Cream** "hit". Although the vocals are not dissimilar to **Jack Bruce's**, the lead break is definitely reminiscent of Clapton's on their studio album. The bass and drums pretty much stick to the basics. Oddly enough, unlike Cream, who played that song (live) for 20 minutes or so, Webb's version is the shortest song on the album. His lead makes up for my wanting more!! He leads the band into a classic shuffle by the name of "Doctor Brown" where he pulls

out his bottleneck again. The lyrics give us a further taste of Webb's sense of humour, without which I'm sure he wouldn't have made it this far.

Next in line (this DVD was recorded over two nights, so the order is what they decided on after the fact. However, I looked over his set lists over the last 39 years and not much has changed.) Webb sings a moving version of Chicken Shack's biggest single, "I'd Rather Go Blind". I'm not exactly sure how it stands up to Ms. McVie's version, but he definitely does justice to Etta James' version. He also plays (probably for the 10,000 time) a beautiful, well thought-out and paced lead that is as fresh as the first time he played it, I'll bet. He ends the song with a huge, sustained vocal note with just the right amount of vibrato...brilliant...and, at 60 or so, not easy!!

Following is a curious, wonderful Rock-Blues gem, "The Daughter of The Hillside", written in the same mood as Cream's "Tales of Brave Ulysses", vocals reminiscent of Jack Bruce, but without **Peter Brown's** poetry. As Webb introduces it, "this is hardly **Robert Johnson** country, but I'll tell you what, it'll blow your brains out". It's lyrically probably the finest, or one of the finest examples of the "Blues-based psychedelia" of the time. Webb's guitar is the true star of the song. He has a wonderful understanding of the importance of those low fills during the verses, especially, and how to emphasize the higher licks played during his solos, particularly with his wah-wah. Blew my brains out, so to speak!!

They finish with a band introduction based on a three chord wah-wah progression, which finishes with that structure that Hendrix used (as did **Stevie Ray Vaughan** and Eric Clapton) on the classic tune "Little Wing" (that double-strummed E-major "power" chord). A very powerful way to finish one of the better concerts (DVD's) I've had the good fortune to watch/hear recently. Five bottles of your best, Mr. Bartender. That will leave one for the cameraman, whose work is often taken for granted. Keep it up, Stan.

...**Bruce J. Miller**