

# Leap In The Dark

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## Music DVD Review: Long John Baldry *It Ain't Easy: Live At Iowa State University*

In the late 1950's and early 1960's young English musicians were putting together bands to play music that most of them had no experience with outside of records they had picked up in the shops. There just weren't that many opportunities to see bluesmen from Mississippi and Chicago performing live in London and Lincolnshire in those days. Now a days they're all household names, but back then Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger, Rod Stewart, John Lennon, and the rest were unknowns playing anywhere they could get gigs.

Aside from their love of blues and American music one other thing that most of those young men had in common was the patronage of the man Rod Stewart refers to as the "first white guy singing the blues (in England)", Long John Baldry. Baldry wasn't really much older than the others, but he had experience. He had toured with Ramblin' Jack Elliot and sung with Muddy Waters, and was working professionally when the Beatles were still only playing sets during intermissions at The Caravan in Liverpool. It was Baldry who gave most of today's old veterans their first gigs by hiring them to play in his band; Ginger Baker, Jeff Beck, Brian Jones, Elton John, Ron Wood, Charlie Watt, Keith Richards, and Rod Stewart all played with Baldry early in their careers. He was so important and respected by all of them that when The Beatles did their first international television special in 1964 they insisted that Baldry be included on the bill singing Muddy Water's tune "I've Got My Mojo Working".

Baldry never became famous, it doesn't appear he wanted fame that much, and according to Rod Stewart he was content to play bars and sing the blues where and when he felt like it. Not that he didn't have his share of troubles, as he battled with alcoholism for long a while, but unlike others he won that war and came out the other side. He was also an incredibly brave man, as long before it was popular, or even safe, he went public with his homosexuality, and was probably the first openly gay music personality of any repute. I remember hearing him being interviewed somewhere around that time, the mid-eighties, and he sounded like a man at peace with himself. He had left England in the early 1970's and moved to Canada where he began a third career as a folk and blues artist signed to the Stoney Plain label who he was with until his death in 2005. His last release was *Remembering Leadbelly* in 2001, a tribute to his first inspiration, Huddie Leadbetter.



Long John Baldry was distinguished by two features on stage; his towering presence - he was six feet seven inches tall (where did you think he got his name from?) and his deep, mellifluous voice that was made to sing the blues. Stony Plain has kept quite a few of his releases in stock, including some reissues of work from the late sixties and early seventies if you're interested in checking him out. Even better though is the opportunity being offered by MVD Video on September 26th when they will be releasing the DVD *It Ain't Easy: Live At Iowa State University*. Recorded in 1987 it features Baldry playing a small club on campus backed by a five piece band and supported by vocalist Kathi McDonald.

While this represents a rare opportunity to see Baldry perform it's not what I'd call an ideal situation. The sound quality is fine, as is the picture, in fact, given the age of the recording it's a lot better than anyone has any right to expect. The problem is that who ever did the original filming only recorded eight of the songs that the band performed that night, and two of them, "Respect" and "Natural



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**Oct 4, 2008**

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