

ROCK'N'ROLLCONFIDENTIAL

HARVEY MANDEL

The travelled guitar spell-caster talks blues, magic and the Stones.

Asking an interviewee how they are is, for the most part, simple journalistic politeness. With Harvey Mandel, it's more pressing. The 71-year-old Michigan-born guitar god has just completed his penultimate prolonged treatment in a three-year battle with nasal cancer. "I'm doing better," says Mandel, simultaneously tough and tired. "I'm hoping I'll need only one more operation and be back in business." That means touring *Snake Pit*, his first full studio album since 1974. Recorded at Creedence's Fantasy Studios with Ryley Walker's Chicago band, *Snake Pit* is a storming return to the sinuous, supercharged, heavy-sustain guitar jazz-blues-rock-funk gumbo old heads and young crate-diggers revere him for, a sound that draws on 50 years of playing with Muddy Waters, Magic Sam, Canned

Heat, and John Mayall, plus a very brief period in The Rolling Stones. "I didn't really get giant recognition from that," says Mandel.

The new album sounds like you haven't been away, which of course you have. How did it come about?

My manager in Chicago got approached by [fan and Tompkins Square label proprietor] Josh Rosenthal. We set it up together and Josh brought in these young Chicago musicians. They were all Grade A guys. What you're hearing is live cuts, set up in the studio. I'd vocally run down my ideas and we did it in one or two takes. It worked out great.

You've been seriously ill. Were you able to keep playing in that time?

Nowhere near like what I normally would, but I'm at that point in my life where I don't play for two or three months, pick it up for one day and I'm ready for action. It's automatic.

Still rolling: in the mid-'70s, Harvey Mandel sustains that long note.

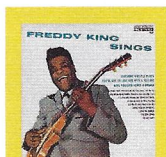
You didn't even start playing guitar until you were 16...

Almost 16, I was playing bongos with this guy in Chicago who was doing the beatnik folk business, just having fun. One day at his house I said, "Hey, show me a chord on that guitar." He showed me an E chord, I played it and I was hypnotised. From that day on I went crazy. For the next few years I devoted 23 out of 24 hours, learning, working with records, practising guitar.

Soon you're playing Chicago blues mecca Twist City with Buddy Guy.

I was a little white guy, in the heart of the ghetto, but nobody ever messed with me. I started as a beginner but after a few months I was playing better than most guys. I jammed with all the major blues guys. Buddy was king of the hill, but B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Magic Sam... I hung out there for a year and a half. I was a night person. I finished at 4am, slept, had dinner and was off again. Dinner was breakfast.

When did you recognise that you had your own distinctive style?



HARV'S CUTS

Mandel's five big bangers.

- 1 **The Ventures** *Walk Don't Run* (DOLTON, 1960)
- 2 **Cannonball Adderley** *Somethin' Else* (BLUE NOTE, 1958)
- 3 **John Coltrane** *A Love Supreme* (IMPULSE!, 1965)
- 4 **B.B. King** *King Of The Blues* (CROWN, 1960)
- 5 **Freddy King** *Sings* (KING, 1961)

LAST NIGHT A RECORD CHANGED MY LIFE

MARK EITZEL

The American Music Club principal was led to The Modern Lovers' 1976 LP by haunting song Hospital...

Strong medicine: Eitzel (below) reflects on the health-giving properties of *The Modern Lovers*.

I was in the south of England in Beaulieu, in a bar called Spats, drinking with my friend, as we did, every day. I was 15, 16. I really liked Joan Armatrading, Joni Mitchell, Sex Pistols, The Stranglers, Slaughter And The Dogs and X-Ray Spex. I was writing terrible songs, and refusing to wear punk rock clothing, because I thought, "Fuck these people."

The Modern Lovers song Hospital came on the radio. It was a complete revelation. I think I almost cried. It was such an emotional, real song. "So when you get out of the hospital/ Let me back into your life..." It's almost like he's pretending to be a teenager while he plays this teenage angst music. That's the genius of it. That was all I wanted to write about. As a kid I was completely isolated and hated and reviled - I think my high school years were the loneliest. And Jonathan Richman was so, like, telling the truth, in a way that was attainable to me, like, I could reach that height. Mind you, I never have.

It's a young people's song and the whole album is for young people.



"HE SAID, 'HERE'S YOUR ALBUM BACK, IT REALLY SUCKS.'"

There's a genius behind his way of being dumb. He's never dumb. He's absolutely deliberate. It's the sign of a great songwriter that he's not the song. So it's such a gormless sort of genuine album, you're never really sure whether he meant it or not. Just the assumption on that record, too - "I saw you with Hippy Johnny, he's stoned" on I'm Straight - that was me, as a kid. Like, everywhere I went it seemed like everyone in the room was cooler than life, and Jonathan Richman was not. He was actually engaged. The truth of songwriting is, it's not about being clever, it's about having your heart always exposed.

When American Music Club opened for him [1988], we gave him a copy of [LP] *California* and the next day he said, "You know, you shouldn't be playing with me, I don't like your music, here's your album back, it really sucks, there's no melodies, there's no songs, I think it's just shit." Yeah! Ha ha! I honestly didn't mind - it's Jonathan Richman.

I've met him a few times since. Last time I told him this story about Hospital, and how it's probably the song that made me start writing. A year later I was in a crowd watching him and he sang it. I wept. I was a complete mess. He's a fucking genius.

Ian Harrison

Mark Eitzel's *Hey Mr Ferryman* is out on Decor. He tours the UK in March.

It was always in my mind but it took a little while to come out. I had to experiment with different amplifiers, different toys. In my head I had that sound, like a violin, steel guitar and harmonica sounds, that gave me the idea of the sustain and I kept working on it until I could emulate those sounds with my equipment.

Your 1971 LP, *Baby Batter* credits Harry Nilsson as "Wine Consultant and Bearer", and you called your mid-'70s outfit Pure Food And Drug Act. Wild times?

On occasion, on occasion. We had a lot of different magic people that would come by. PF&DA was put together after I'd played with Canned Heat and John Mayall. We would jam all the time. Unfortunately, the "drug" element was Sugarcane Harris. There was no one on the planet who could play better violin on rock and blues but he was a total heroin addict. Dealing with him, and the drug thing, was a real nightmare. We lost a couple of giant record deals because of that.

Is it around this time that you developed your famous finger-tapping technique of playing?

I picked it up from Randy Resnick but took it to a whole 'nother Harvey Mandel world. I first did it with the *Shangrenade* record in 1973. Not long after that I was playing at the Whisky and Eddie Van Halen came in, saw me doing this tapping stuff. Next thing he's playing on Michael Jackson's Beat It. I wouldn't say I was annoyed but I wouldn't mind if I got better recognition for doing that first. Unfortunately, Van Halen made all the money.

How did you end up working with The Rolling Stones?

At home one night about three or four in the morning I got a call from Mick Jagger. He said, "We're in Munich, Germany, we want you to come play on a couple of songs. Leave tomorrow." The idea was I'd be a replacement for Mick Taylor, playing the slick guitar. But there was a whole argument in the studio. Keith wanted Ron Wood because he wanted to keep it all English. Mick was leaning towards me because he wasn't looking for another guitar player on-stage, leaping around doing crazy stuff. Unfortunately, I lost out. I played on Hot Stuff and Memory Motel from *Black And Blue*.

Tell us something you've never told an interviewer before.

Well, when I got the call to do *Black And Blue* I was taken to the fancy hotel, getting ready to sleep, and, all of a sudden, tap-tap-tap on my door, there's Mick Jagger in his bathrobe. For a split second I thought, "How far will I go to become a Rolling Stone?" Anyway, that's my funny Rolling Stones story.

Andrew Male

