

If Albert Castiglia is a name you seem familiar with, yet can't quite place, then I suspect you aren't alone. The American guitarist spent many a year being lauded as 'the future of the blues' but, let's face it, that particular accolade has been awarded to almost anyone who's ever picked up a Strat and cited Stevie Ray Vaughan as his or her inspiration.

In truth, Castiglia's been slowly and steadily grafting his way into the eyes and ears of lovers of the genre since first coming to prominence in Junior Wells's band in the late 90s. However, his new album *Masterpiece* thrusts him firmly into the limelight – a heady cocktail of modern blues licks and electronic rhythms propelling songs inspired by an unforeseen event that changed his life: meeting a daughter and grandchildren he never knew he had.

Albert Castiglia was born in New York in 1969, to a Cuban mother and Italian father and was five years old when his parents moved to Miami. Seven years later, he was playing the guitar (learning chords from an uncle who'd play weekly jam

sessions at his grandmother's house), moving on to local gigs around South Florida while he was still at high school.

"Eric Clapton was my biggest early influence but there was also Hendrix, Zeppelin, Santana, The Beatles and the Stones. It was through Clapton that I really got into the blues. He was the conduit to the real-deal stuff like B.B. King, John Mayall, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, Johnny Winter, Junior Wells and Luther Allison. Then I heard Muddy Waters's *Hard Again* record and that was it. The day I heard that album was the day I wanted to be a blues man."

In 1990 he joined Miami Blues Authority as the band's lead singer and guitarist and he stayed with them for seven years but, after auditioning for Junior Wells in 1997, he became the permanent lead guitarist in Wells's band until the harp player's death in 1998. Even today, Castiglia is tremendously grateful for the opportunities that playing with Wells threw his way.

"I met Junior through a mutual friend in Florida, Gloria Pierce, who knew him from his Chicago days in the 70s. I was working at the welfare office in Miami and I was invited to sit in with Junior and the band at a gig in Florida. His road manager told me I'd better be good but I wasn't worried: I'd been in pretty tense situations at my work, so a bad night with Junior Wells was still going to be better than my best day at my regular job!"

Whatever he played obviously impressed Wells because two months later, when a position became available, he was offered the job on a permanent basis. "I was on a plane to Chicago from Miami three days later. I bummed on some couches and lived in a ratty flop house before settling there. I toured with Junior for about six months before he got sick and passed away, but I learned so much from him in that time. I lived a lifetime in

those months. I learned about running a band, about fronting a band, about being confident in my abilities and not taking any shit. The lessons that he taught me remain with me to this day. He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself and that really meant a lot to me."

Now firmly located in Chicago, Castiglia began writing his own material, releasing his debut album *Burn* in 2004. He signed with Blue Leaf Records for 2006's *A Stone's Throw* and over the next six years brought out three more albums on the label, before moving to Ruf Records in 2014. That association saw the live Blues Caravan record in 2015 and three more studio albums. He was still touring, landing support slots with ZZ Top and Elvin Bishop, all the while cementing his reputation as a pedigree player. And then came the discovery that changed his life and inspired his newest, and best, album to date.

"The material on *Masterpiece* comes from a very deep and personal place. I had just discovered that I had a daughter and two grandchildren, and they were my muses for this record. I really felt like shaking some things up and taking some creative chances. I was unwilling to compromise creatively and the opportunity arose to sign with Gulf Coast and leave the album intact the way I wanted. It was important for me to put out the record the way I wanted. It's dedicated to my daughter and my family."

Castiglia calls *Masterpiece* the most meaningful album he's ever made and it certainly chances its arm within traditional blues circles by adopting a radical modern sound. The entire album was performed by just Castiglia and long-time friend and collaborator (and owner of Gulf Coast) Mike Zito, and recorded with engineer Zach Feemster.

**Nicholas John
hears how blues
guitarist Albert
Castiglia got his
groove**

Swept away by Muddy Waters