



MURALI CORYELL

To Express, Not Impress

It might seem that Murali Coryell was destined to play guitar – the son of fusion pioneer Larry Coryell and brother of multi-instrumentalist Julian – but he didn't take up the instrument until age 15.

His twelfth solo album, *Soul Of A Nation*, demonstrates the niche he carved out, straddling blues and soul. It mixes Donny Hathaway and Teddy Pendergrass covers with politically charged originals, because, in his words, "It's therapy. Sometimes there aren't enough words to express your feelings, but you can do it in a song."

The 56-year-old's follow-up, *Deep Blues*, teams him with drummer Bernard Purdie, bassist Tony Garnier, and guitarist Junior Mack.

What music were you hearing at age 13 or so?

I listened to FM radio, and back then, popular music was played by real musicians – no pitch control and all that. I dug Stevie Wonder, Earth, Wind & Fire, the Stones, Beatles, ELO; then, of course, hearing the jazz that my dad was playing, and my mom playing classical music. My dad

gave me two albums on my 10th birthday – *Are You Experienced* by Jimi Hendrix and *Steely Dan/Greatest Hits*. There was so much variety of cool music, by Donny Hathaway, Chaka Kahn, Fleetwood Mac, Cream, the Yardbirds, James Brown, Sly & the Family Stone.

I wanted to know what Led Zeppelin and these guys were doing, and my dad said, "Well, they listened to the blues. If you want to hear what they were listening to, you need to hear B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson." It was like finding the Dead Sea Scrolls. Howlin' Wolf and Bobby "Blue" Bland were life-changing. Blues became my foundation, what I felt confident in, and it found me at the right time – or I found it. I also got into funk, was playing some jazz gigs, going to every guitar jam. You don't realize that stuff makes a difference, but it does.

Were you fearful of being compared to such an important guitar figure as your father?

Yeah, that's why it took me a while. Of course, you're going to compare yourself to people, but you have to just compare yourself to yourself.

My dad said, "You're not really good at jazz. You're good at blues. Work on that." Julian was very influential on me, because he was a child prodigy. He was playing bass with my dad when he was 10. But that was a motivator. I can't do what he does, but it's all valid.

In the nature versus nurture debate, genetics versus environment, where do you see yourself?

There's a genetic component, no doubt. But being around it, that's also part. My family didn't think I had whatever it was. Bernard Purdie told me everybody has their own musical inflection that's unique to them, like a musical instinct. There were people that told me to keep at it, and I'm a persistent, stubborn, independent person, which has worked against me but also for me.

Your playing has a big soul/R&B component.

Those types of guitarists often get overlooked.

That's the fun of it, laying down those grooves; it's not so much about soloing. I really dig Cornell Dupree and Eric Gale from Stuff, Curtis Mayfield, Jimmy Nolen from James Brown's band, and the house guitar players from, say, Philadelphia International with Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff producing Teddy Pendergrass, or Leo Nocentelli with the Meters in New Orleans. Phil Upchurch in Chicago is another and Teenie Hodges on Hi Records in Memphis. Playing with other guitarists, like Motown's three guitarists, it's about blending, playing complementary parts. Music is about the space in between the notes, especially for that stuff.

What's special about a Stratocaster for you?

It can take a beating; it stays in tune; you can play any kind of music on it; and it just feels good. The one I'm using is an Eric Johnson Strat from about 2000. On the album, I had permission to use Joe Louis Walker's Les Paul for some solos. I used my Fender Deluxe Reverb, which gives me the tightness and cleanliness that I like, and I have a Wampler Faux Tape Echo delay and Electro-Harmonix Soul Food overdrive.

When did you feel like you'd developed your own musical identity?

I always had an *idea*. I tell people to have an idea of what you want to sound like, like a map. You have to hear it first, and then try to play it. That's the challenge. It took years of playing and gigging and practicing. I love variety, but when I look at my recorded career, there's a consistency. Playing with Joe Louis Walker really helped me. One of his things he said was it's better to be a bad version of yourself than a good version of somebody else. When you're covering a song, are you putting your own soul on it, playing to the spirit of it, and yet it's you? If I can serve the music, I feel like I'm doing the right thing. Take my ego out of it – to express, not to *impress*. – **Dan Forte**