

# GARY CLARK, JR.

## 21st Century Blues RISING FROM AUSTIN

by Tom Hyslop

The last two years

have yielded a dizzying parade of triumphs for Gary Clark, Jr., the 28-year-old artist from Austin, Texas. With the force of Warner Brothers Records behind him, Clark has received a promotional push that rivals that of any mainstream artist, one that certainly exceeds anything witnessed in the blues realm at least since the 1980s, with the mainstream breakouts of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray, and possibly since the highly-publicized signing of Johnny Winter by Columbia Records in 1969.

In the course of the blitz, Clark has performed at every major festival, including Coachella, SXSW, Made In America, Bonnaroo, Summerfest, Lollapalooza, Dave Mathews Band Caravan, Newport Folk Fest, Electric Forest, Sasquatch! Festival, Mountain Jam, and others, along with dates in the most coveted clubs; received ink in a dizzying variety of publications, from *MOJO* and *SPIN* to such unexpected settings as *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, and even the mainstream *Entertainment Weekly*, with recurring coverage in *Rolling Stone*, including a five-star rating for his debut EP on Warners, in a write-up that led off the review section; and made appearances on the major late-night shows: *Conan*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

He has taped an episode of *Austin City Limits* as headliner. A fragment of "Bright Lights" provided the soundtrack to a major mobile phone provider's ubiquitous TV advertisement, and the video for "Ain't Messin' 'Round" received regular rotation on VH1, America's almost universally available cable music television channel.

And the list goes on. Clark participated in the all-star tribute to Hubert Sumlin at the Apollo Theater [February 2012] alongside legends like Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, James Cotton, Jimmie Vaughan, Henry Gray, and Billy Gibbons; and took a prominent part in the Red, White, & Blues celebration at the White House [February 2012] that featured B.B. King, Buddy Guy, Mick Jagger, Jeff Beck, Shemekia Copeland, Derek Trucks, Susan Tedeschi, Warren Haynes, and Keb' Mo'. Clark opened eyes nationally when he performed "Beat Up Old Guitar" with Copeland, and then tore it up with "Catfish Blues" and a stripped down "In The Evening."

He guest-starred in the Rolling Stones' 50th Anniversary Tour in December 2012, and then joined Jimmie Vaughan, as well as the full



ensemble of musicians onstage, during Buddy Guy's December 2012 induction into the latest group of Kennedy Center Honors recipients. Along the way, he charted a Top Ten album.

To the jaded, the sudden celebrity surrounding Clark may look like hype designed to propel a neophyte into prime time. Less cynical, but casual, observers may be forgiven for assuming that Clark has emerged overnight, fully formed, into the spotlight.

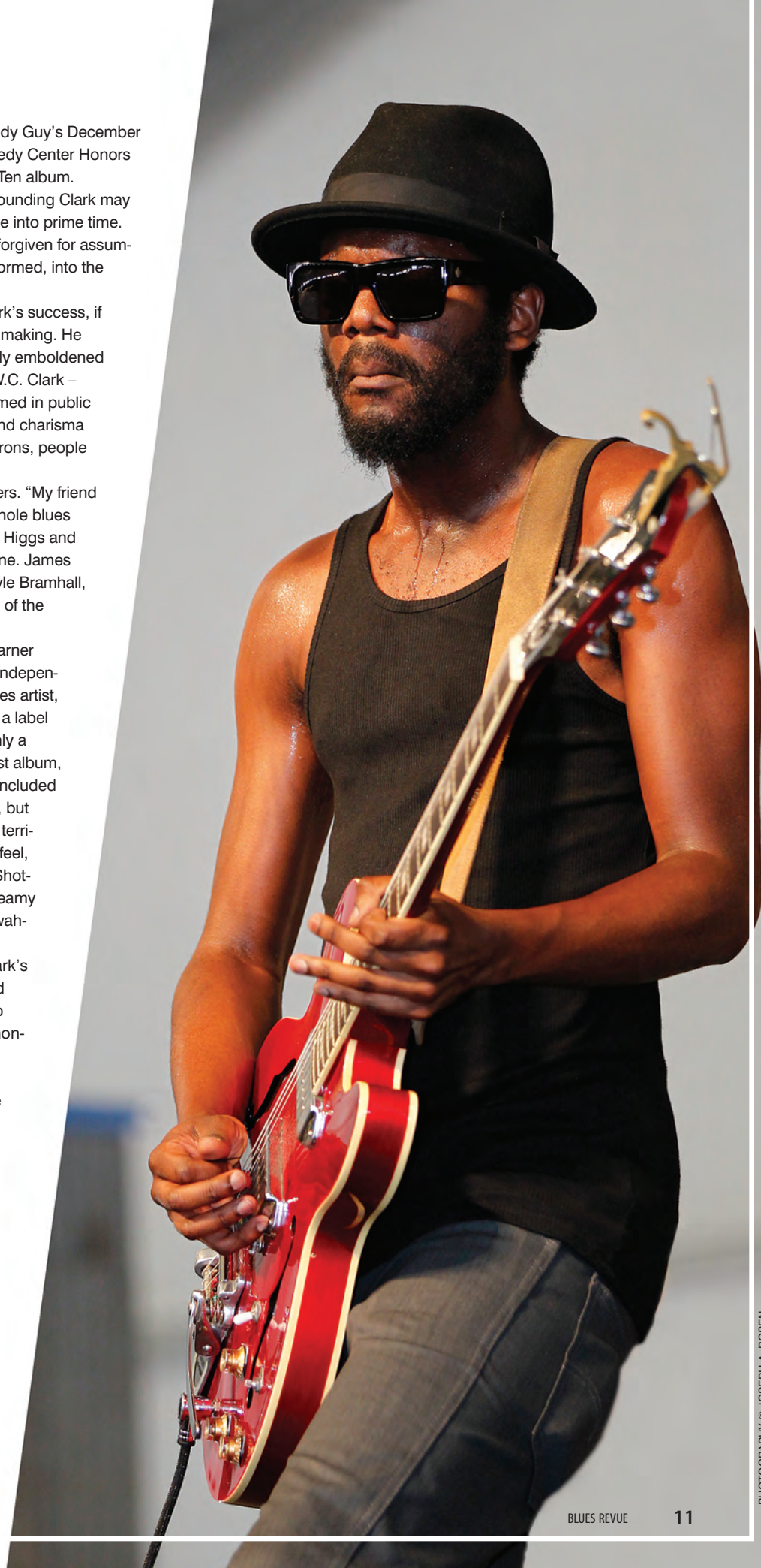
The reality is quite different. In fact, Clark's success, if often predicted, has been a long time in the making. He began playing guitar at age 12, and, probably emboldened by the example of his (much) older cousin W.C. Clark – Austin's Godfather of the Blues – first performed in public two years later. The youth's obvious talent and charisma soon attracted the attention of important patrons, people like Clifford Antone and Jimmie Vaughan.

Clark recalls some of his early supporters. "My friend Eve Monsees, she kind of got me into the whole blues scene. A lot of people came through. Walter Higgs and Appa Perry. Derek O'Brien and Clifford Antone. James Cotton, Pinetop Perkins, Hubert Sumlin, Doyle Bramhall, and Willie "Big Eyes" Smith" were just some of the noted musicians who encouraged him.

In the decade before he signed with Warner Brothers, Clark recorded and released four independent CDs. Although he is perceived as a blues artist, and clearly comes out of that tradition, such a label does Clark some disservice in describing only a narrow range of his musical interests. His first album, 2001's entirely self-penned *Worry No More*, included not only solo acoustic blues in the title track, but greasy shuffles, detours into Curtis Mayfield territory, slow blues with a vaguely Jimi Hendrix feel, blues inspired by Albert Collins (the funky "Shotgun Man") and Jimmy Reed ("Insecure"), steamy jazz à la Howard Roberts, and the dreamy, wah-wah-tinged dreamscape, "Drifting."

*110*, which arrived in 2004, marked Clark's arrival as both one-man-band (he graduated from playing guitar and keys on his debut to covering all the instruments, including harmonica, bass, drums, and programming) and visionary auteur. Opening with a spot-on homage to B.B. King's mid-'60s playing, the again all-original disc moves through Dylanesque retro folk stylings, Texas shuffles, sultry Hi Records-inflected ballads and neo-soul along the lines of D'Angelo, spacey meditations from a Shuggie Otis bag ("Nighttime" and "Sad Song"), rumbling roots rock ("Travis County"), acoustic Delta blues ("Numb" and "Temptation Starin' Me In The Face"), and the ethereal instrumental "On The Battlefield."

Clark says, "I kind of played all of it on my early albums. I was experimenting on drums, bass, guitar, and keys, doing vocal things, and just kind of playing around, you know: not too







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much traditional stuff, more original material than traditional bluesy type stuff. And what I would do when I was recording is just go in different directions, and put it all on one album.”

He made a bold return to his roots on *Tribute* (2005), today a much sought-after album cut live in the studio with bassist James Bullard and the superb drummer Jason Moeller, uncannily recreating the styles and spirits of Lightnin’ Hopkins, Jimmy Reed, Albert and B.B. King, Hound Dog Taylor, and Albert Collins, and touching on modern Delta boogie in a “Catfish Blues” that owes a solid debt to the Clarksdale juke joint sound of the Jelly Roll Kings.

Around this time, Clark told *Blues Revue* in our first feature on him that he was content to stay in Austin, performing and making records at his own pace. But he was beginning to attract wider attention. The noted independent filmmaker John Sayles (*Return Of The Secaucus Seven*, *Matewan*, *Eight Men Out*) cast Clark in a key role in *Honeydripper* (2007). As the itinerant bluesman Sonny, like Elmore James an ex-military man with a flair for electrical work, Clark appears by chance just in time to save a local juke joint from foreclosure by appearing as Guitar Sam, a notoriously unreliable star modeled after Eddie “Guitar Slim” Jones. In 2009, Clark played and sang on the Omar Kent Dykes-Jimmie Vaughan tribute to Jimmy Reed, *Big Town Playboy*, and appeared in the Austin City Limits episode promoting the project.

In 2010, Clark and his band played onscreen in an episode of the acclaimed television series *Friday Night Lights*, and saw the release of his fourth CD, the self-titled *Gary Clark, Jr.* This album, which marked his first recorded work with current drummer J.J. John-

son and touring guitarist Erik Zapata, covered hard blues boogie (“Don’t Owe You A Thing,” destined to reappear on his five-star Warner EP), doo-wop, hip-hop-inflected R&B, and a Prince-like pop/rock/soul mashup in “Breakdown.”

It also delivered Clark’s first reworking of the creamy, Al Green-style ballad from *110*, “Things Are Changing,” included a reprise of “Drifting” (as “Outro”), and introduced his breakout number “Bright Lights,” which he subsequently played to a huge Chicagoland audience at Eric Clapton’s Crossroads festival, in what would prove to be a star-making performance. The song, a boastful yet brooding, slow-paced number, was built on an unforgettable instrumental hook that would be heard countless times in the Verizon commercial mentioned above, yet never grow tiresome.

Although buzz had been building for years, it was the Crossroads appearance that made it virtually impossible for Clark to remain Austin’s best-kept secret. The major-label deal followed, and with it, the whirlwind of new fame, beginning with Rolling Stone’s unprecedented review of *The Bright Lights EP* in 2011.

We spoke with Gary Clark Jr. during the period leading up to the October 2012 release of *Blak And Blu*. That CD draws songs from earlier releases (“Things Are Changin’,” again; “Travis County”; the doo-wop number “Please Come Home”; the hip-hop-styled “The Life”; the already-classic “Bright Lights”) and indulges Clark’s interests in contemporary soul (the title track is deft neo-soul; “You Saved Me” draws on Prince), hard-charging, horn-driven Stax soul (“Ain’t Messin’ ‘Round”), and heavy, fuzz-toned blues-rock. The latter, heard in the slightly psychedelic “Glitter Ain’t Gold,” the cool, yet deranged,



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medley of “Third Stone From The Sun/If You Love Me Like You Say,” a new recording of “When My Train Pulls In,” and the radical reimagining of “Numb,” invites comparisons not only to Hendrix but to current scuzz-blues/alternative rock stars The Black Keys.

In extending the confident eclecticism of Clark’s earlier work, *Blak And Blu* offers a tonic to the rock-flavored *Bright Lights EP*, possibly to the consternation of some who had hoped for a new Jimi Hendrix. While Clark shares Hendrix’s uninhibited experimentation in sonics and song craft, and sometimes the same heavy approach to slow blues, his guitar playing, rooted in feel, tone, and groove, is unlikely to dominate his songs in the way many blues-rock fans may desire.

But there is much to appreciate for anyone who cares for blues, rock, hip-hop, or R&B. Asked about his wide-open style, Clark laughs. “This may be open to interpretation, but when people ask me, I just kind of describe it as blues, soul, and rock ‘n’ roll – a mixture of all kinds of things. I listen to all kinds of artists and different genres. And when I write something or am coming up with a song, I don’t say, ‘I’m gonna write this in this genre, and take it in one certain direction.’ An idea comes and I just kind of put it out, whatever the idea happens to be. It might be a little bit different, not straight up, I-IV-V blues, sometimes.

“I’ve been listening to Skip James lately. Freddie King had a great influence on me. Elmore James. A lot of the Texas guys: T-Bone, Albert Collins, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Johnny “Guitar” Watson. I could go on and on and on. And a lot of the local guys right here in Austin: Alan Haynes and Derek O’Brien, and W.C., all those guys. Just being a kid when I first heard the music, I was completely drawn in and wanted everything right away, so I would just soak things up wherever I could. Lately, I’ve been listening to this band, Black Owl Society, from Austin. Pretty heavy, three-piece blues, kind of sloppy Delta stuff, but it’s cool. What else? Let’s see. Buddy Guy’s ‘Worried Mind.’ Otis Redding. Some hip-hop stuff.”

Perhaps the most surprising part of the Gary Clark Jr. story is the way he has connected with a wide, relatively youthful audience – one that conventional wisdom says is out of reach for artists playing in predominantly blues-rooted styles. Asked if it is due to his charisma, the music itself, or to some secret sauce, Clark comes down on the side of the music’s inherent appeal.

“That’s a good question! I think the major factor is just exposure. I get out on the festival circuit and catch people walking up, and a lot of them don’t know what to expect. We’ll go into, ‘Three O’clock In The Morning Blues,’ and these folks will get into it, having never heard us. Blues is the foundation of a lot of things, so whether it’s the riffs or the vibe, society’s familiar with it. The instrumentation may change, but, still, it resonates across time.”

This observation underpins Clark’s belief that real blues will survive. “I think blues is fine just the way it is. Some people will stick with traditional blues and some folks will try and do other things, but the basic foundation stays the same. What you get out of it, and what you want to bring to it, or whether you just want to leave it alone for what it is, I think blues is just fine in any form.”

Of course, this opens the door to innovation, and while Clark’s interest in continuing the tradition is unshakable, he refuses to confine his own music within any boundaries. “Growing up in Austin and being around those guys who brought me up, took me under their wing, gave me an education in what the music was all about, they taught me that to put it out there was very important. But if I didn’t do all the other things as well, I would drive myself crazy if I was just putting it out there and letting it be what it is.”

His high-profile appearances have made a deep impression on Clark. Asked about playing at the White House, Clark said, “Red White & Blues was a tribute to the blues, performed for the President. I just wanted to be up there for the event. The whole experience was pretty special; it was great for me on a personal level to be alongside a lot of the people I’d been listening to for a long time, like B.B. King. At Crossroads, in Chicago, we played the finale. But we rehearsed that one [“Sweet Home, Chicago”] at the White House. That was the first time we [B.B. King] actually performed a song together!”

At this point, it appears Gary Clark, Jr. will have the chance to play with just about anyone he chooses. Asked to compare his life today with the comfortable, self-paced lifestyle he enjoyed in Austin when we first spoke with him, he reflects for a moment. “That was a long time ago! I must have been 20 or 21. Things were simpler then, for sure. The last couple of years have been very busy: Lots of travel, lots of obligations, and lots of complications. I don’t have as much freedom as I should. Or, I don’t have as much freedom as maybe I’d like. But it’s good. It’s good. Right now, I’m just enjoying the moment, enjoying the journey.” **BR**