

Stevie Ray Vaughan Podcast | Episode 1

Meet the Band

Evan Windham: Hello. I'm Evan Windham, a staff member at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. And I'm going to jump right in with a little backstory about how I came to be the host of this podcast. The quintessential one and only exhibition on blues legend Stevie Ray Vaughan opened here at the Bullock Museum on March 10, 2017.

[Guitar riff from *Pride and Joy* by Stevie Ray Vaughan]

It's called *Pride and Joy: The Texas Blues of Stevie Ray Vaughan*. And in the months leading up to the exhibition opening, staff at the Museum were increasingly excited. They've swapped Stevie Ray stories after exhibition planning meetings. Everyone seemed to understand his place in music history. Most knew and liked at least a few of his tunes, and a few were big fans of Stevie Ray's music.

A number of them had seen him play live before his untimely death in 1990. But here's the thing. I felt a little left out because, frankly, I knew essentially nothing about Stevie Ray Vaughan or the Texas Blues in general. You could blame it on my age. I was born in the 80s, but just barely. Or taste in music, which ranges far and wide but only modestly, includes blues music.

But I consider myself a huge fan of 1980s pop music. Yet somehow there was some blank spot in my culture map where Stevie Ray was concerned, and I felt compelled to fill it in. This podcast is the remedy. It follows the personal journey of me, essentially a blank slate as I discover Stevie Ray Vaughan, his music, and its place in the universe of the blues, specifically the Texas variety.

The fact that it follows my journey out of the darkness should give you an idea of what we're in for. In other words, this won't be a strictly biographical account, and I'm neither music expert nor musician. But I talked to the people that knew him, that played with him, that loved him, or just really dug the music. I ventured out into the Austin blues scene, visited clubs, and took in shows with the self-proclaimed Live Music Capital of the world.

I talked with club owners, music historians, and many more. I was so lucky that everyone I approached was willing, even eager, to help me. In the end, this is really their story, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share it with you.

[blues music playing]

So, where should I start? Well, I knew that Stevie Ray Vaughan was a musician. And after a quick web search, I knew a few more facts. Amazing facts.

[keys clacking]

Born in Oak Cliff, a suburb of Dallas, Texas, in 1954.

[keys clacking]

Widely considered one of the most influential electric guitarists of all time.

[keys clacking]

One of the most important figures in the blues revival of the 1980s.

[keys clacking]

Double Trouble's debut album, *Texas Flood*, becomes a critical and commercial success.

[keys clacking]

By the mid 1980s they're an international act touring extensively around the world.

[keys clacking]

Earned six Grammy Awards.

[keys clacking]

Stevie Ray is killed in a helicopter crash in 1990 at age 35.

[keys clacking]

The band was inducted into the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame in 2015.

[keys clacking]

Armed with a little more context, I started out by listening to his music. I logged into a music streaming service, typed in Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble, and strapped on some headphones.

[blues music playing]

If you're not familiar with internet music streaming services, by selecting to listen to all songs, I just jumped right into an artist's entire discography. My listening experience wasn't curated in any way. I didn't experience catalog ranked by most popular tunes or album song order. It just all came at me in a bunch, and I listened...and listened...and it was all good. And I liked it.

But after a bunch of songs, I realized I couldn't quite grasp what I was hearing. That this incredible sound was coming from one guitar and only three or four musicians. I was having fun listening, but I wanted to see what was happening. So, I switched to YouTube. I watched live performances.

I watched music videos. I watched guitar tutorials and interviews. And since this is the modern age of user-contributed media on the internet, I sat through fan compilation videos of nothing but Stevie Ray breaking strings or condensed outtakes of his incredible showmanship.

[blues music playing]

Hours later, I was fully grasping what the fuss was about. This guy was more than amazing. He was a singular force of nature whose stage presence and explosive sound, combined with the tight groove of his band, to leave audiences slack jawed by what they'd experienced. And I'll admit, at this point I started to get a little nervous.

As I mentioned before, I'm *not* a musician, and I worried about not having the vocabulary to talk about what I was hearing, but I remembered that I'm not here to be the expert. This was a journal and a journey. So, after a brief period of panic, I jumped in and reached out to the people behind that incredible sound.

And it turns out not only were they approachable. They were incredibly generous, friendly, and just plain cool. So, where to start? Double Trouble.

Tommy Shannon: I met him the same place I met Johnny Winter. This club called The Fog in Dallas.

[blues music playing]

Windham: That's Tommy Shannon, Double Trouble's bassist, and he's an old hand where the Texas music scene is concerned. Originally a guitarist, Tommy joined his first band, The Avengers, at age 13. He took up the bass in the late 1950s when he was 21.

Tommy played with many groups and in many styles. His gig with Johnny Winter, a Texas blues legend in his own right, led their band to The Progressive Blues Experiment to play at Woodstock in 1969, where Tommy met Jimi Hendrix.

Chris Layton: I woke up one day and I'm like, you know what? Something said, "You should go to Austin." Two days later, I packed a car, four changes of clothes, and a four-piece drum kit, and I just drove up here.

Windham: And that's Chris Layton, also known as Whipper. Born in Corpus Christi, Texas, he grew up in the Gulf Coast region, where he took up the drums at age 13. He received formal musical instruction, learning how to read music and play with a group of people. Chris moved to Austin, Texas, in December of 1975.

[blues music playing]

So, I've got these interviews lined up, and I'm trying to get my head together. And one thing kept nagging at me. The music sounded simple—three instruments, basic blues beats, classic chord progressions, and lyrics that were direct and powerful. But watching the band play made it all look so complex and it felt...well, intense is the best word I can use to describe it.

Quite frankly, I didn't know how to talk about it with anyone. So, I asked Tommy and Chris if they remember the first time they heard Stevie play. Could seasoned musicians have possibly been impacted the way I was? Tommy was my first interview, and he shared the story of one fateful night at a club in Dallas.

Shannon: Right after I broke up with Johnny Winter we flew back to Dallas, went to an old stomping ground, The Fog. And I was outside talking to some people. I heard this guitar.

[blues music playing]

I got to hear this, and I went inside. I was expecting some older guy. And there was Stevie, a little pigeon-toed, big-eared kid, you know, playing his butt off. And he's 15 or 16 years old. You know, he was a little kid, and he looked up to all the big guys around him and they were his heroes. And I remember trying to tell him, man, you're already better than these guys.

[blues music playing]

Windham: I wanted to ask Chris the same thing when we met a few days later, and he told me of a chance encounter when he went to see a friend play one night in Austin.

[upbeat electric guitar playing]

Layton: My friend Joe Sublett left what we were doing to go play with this band Paul Ray and the Cobras.

He said, man, you got to come out, see our band. We play at Soap Creek Saloon. So, I went out there one night and I walked in, and I looked at the band and there were a great band, but this guy was playing guitar, and I just went, "Wow, what is that?"

[upbeat electric guitar playing]

I was totally taken with him. I was like, something's going on with that guy.

Windham: So, it wasn't my lack of musicianship working against me. Stevie's talent and sound was capturing the attention of incredibly talented musicians from the very beginning. In fact, just about everyone I talked to could remember distinctly the first time they heard him play.

So, the next question became obvious. How did the power trio of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble, as we know it, come together? Research told me that the efforts leading to the formation of the band, as we know it, began in the fall of 1977 as a five-piece line up called Triple Threat Review. Triple threat contained members of the cream of Austin's musician talent pool. Lou Ann Barton, a Fort Worth native, was the singer, W.C. Clark, known as the Godfather of Austin blues, added bass, Drummer Freddy Walden laid down the beat, and Mike Kindred played keyboards.

By spring of 1978, as Stevie would later say, "The band went off into a bunch of different bands." Lou Ann and Stevie stayed together and formed another five-piece lineup with Freddie Walden called Double Trouble, named after the Otis Rush song, and were joined by Johnny Reno on sax and Jackie Newhouse on bass. And this was the formation Chris Layton heard at one point in 1978.

Layton: I went out the following week to go see them. Their drummer was late and so they got me up to play drums after much discussion. The band needed to start. I got up and started playing and Stevie kept turning around looking at me, and I had so much fun.

[blues music playing, clapping]

Windham: Then one day, Stevie dropped by the apartment Chris was living in.

Layton: Not long after that, within days, all of a sudden Stevie came over to our apartment because me and Joe Sublett the sax [player], we were roommates. And he came over to see Joe, and he walked in, and we started chatting. I was listening to a Donny Hathaway live record, and he came up on me. I had on the phone. I was kind of jamming along. He goes "You like Donny Hathaway?" I went, yeah, I love this. That's one of my favorite records.

[soul music playing]

Windham: That last comment gave me pause. I've been thinking of Double Trouble as a blues band and nothing more. It hadn't occurred to me that these guys might be influenced by more than a single genre of music. Chris had more to share on the subject.

Layton: A little while later, Stevie had called me after we'd spent some time going through record collections and realized we like Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Wonder and Motown and I'm thinkin' he's a blues guy. You know, there was like a *blues* thing that was going on in Austin. People played the blues. I mean, he likes all this stuff, and we like the same stuff together. I

tell us, I'd love to work with you no matter how we do it, whenever we do it, whatever that means. I'd love to do that.

But right before he had come back, he apparently, he was here listening to me play, and he asked Jo Sublett, his band mate, my roommate. He said, "Has he ever played blues?" And he went. "No, he hasn't." And Stevie told Joe, "That's good."

[blues music playing]

Shannon: Well, after Blackbird, we kind of went our separate ways.

Windham: Tommy Shannon had played briefly with Stevie in a band called Blackbird and another group called Kracker Jack with a 'K.' But that was all 10 years before a revelation in 1980 when he ran into Stevie. Here's Tommy.

Shannon: You know, I had a drug and alcohol problem. And so, we didn't see each other for years. And I remember going into Rockefeller's in Houston. Stevie was playing. I just went to see him play. And, when I walked in, it was like a revelation. That's where I belong. That's where I belong, right there.

[blues music playing]

Windham: And that experience prompted Tommy to make a bold proposition.

Tommy: They took a break, and I went up and told Stevie, "I belong in this band." I got up and jammed with them. It sounded real good. And they played there three more times. And every time I'd tell Stevie that. Finally, he called me. That's when I joined Double Trouble in 1980.

Windham: Chris wasn't as bold as Tommy, but Stevie had taken note of him, and it wasn't long before Stevie got in touch.

Layton: He called me, a little while later, said, "Hey, why don't you come over here and come over to this address, and let's jam." I go over there, and I walk in, and W.C. Clarke is there with his bass on, and there's a set of drums, and Stevie, the guitar is leaning against the wall, and W.C. said, "Hey, sit down and let's play some."

I realized later on that was an audition to see whether or not whatever W.C. or Stevie would tell me, whether or not I was willing to listen to it. And could I do anything with it. And so, after W.C. said a few things to me while we were playing, "Play as quiet as you can, don't look at me, I'm gonna say a few things to you" he started saying these things to me. All a sudden, something started happening in my playing that had never happened before. And then Stevie picked up the guitar and we started jamming. And then him and Lou Ann Barton said, "You want to join our band?" And I went, "Yeah." And that was the beginning of me, Stevie Vaughan, and Double Trouble.

[blues music playing]

Windham: So now the group has morphed into a power trio with Stevie on vocals and a new name for the band—Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble. At first glance, this might sound simple enough. You meet some people, you're all in the right place at the right time. You have

a certain level of talent, but talking to these guys it's clear that there's some sort of magic involved.

You need a lightning strike. And you can hear that magic and see that lightning in their performances. As they play, they just seem to know where the others are going. They're having fun and feeling music and heading in the same direction. Chris Layton said that Double Trouble wasn't a blues band or a rock band. They were a mix of those things and more. In Chris's words, "They were a jam band." They drew inspiration from what they liked across many genres and styles, and out of those raw materials they created a sound of their own. At this point in the project, I was meeting Stevie and his music for the first time, and I figured I'd start by asking about the early seminal moments, first listenings, first meetings, and the formation of the band.

But as Tommy and Chris started talking, I realized there were so many new questions emerging that would have to be answered if I was to fully understand how this all happened. So that leads us to the next episode, where we'll take a closer look at Stevie's influences and get a sense of what makes the Texas blues a unique animal.

[blues rock music playing]

Pride and Joy: The Texas Blues of Stevie Ray Vaughan was created by the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles and guest curated by Texas blues hero and Stevie Ray's older brother, Jimmie Vaughan. The exhibition runs through July 23, 2017. This podcast is a production of the Bullock Texas State History Museum. Learn more at TheStoryofTexas.com
