

The Matthew Skoller Band

His Kind of Blues

by Autumn Long

Over the past 25 years, Matthew Skoller has developed a brand of blues that boogies, rocks, and jives in the urban Chicago tradition. Skoller's warm, raspy vocals and succinct harmonica work radiate confidence and maturity without flashy exhibitionism. Today he enjoys a hard-won reputation as one of the foremost harp players in the huge talent pool of the Chicago blues scene.

For regular gigs at Buddy Guy's Legends, Chicago's House of Blues, and Blue Chicago, Skoller employs a rotating lineup of accomplished local musicians, most of whom gig with multiple bands. ("It's hard to keep a band together when the economy is the way it is," Skoller states pragmatically. "Everybody has to do as many gigs as they can with whoever is hiring.") Skoller employs various bassists and guitarists based on their availability, with drummer Mark Wilson the only permanent member of his band. (Skoller's bassist of four years, veteran Chicago sideman Willie "Vamp" Samuels, succumbed to cancer March 27; an obituary will appear in *Blues Revue's* next issue.)

The ensemble's talent and professionalism is aptly demonstrated by its tight interplay on Skoller's latest album, *These Kind of Blues*, featuring celebrated Chicago guitarist Lurrie Bell, who performs live with Skoller when his schedule permits. Skoller and Bell's decades-long friendship has resulted in a

Home base: Chicago
Most recent album:
These Kind of Blues, 2005
Sounds like: Contemporary
 Chicago blues seasoned with boogie,
 rock, and soul



deep musical understanding both onstage and in the studio. “This album was about the songs,” explains Skoller. “It wasn’t about extended soloing and ‘guitar hero’ or ‘harmonica hero.’ And Lurrie tuned into that immediately.”

Bell shares lead guitar duties on the album with Matthew’s brother, Larry, who resides in France and serves as the band’s European booking agent and producer. The group augments its regular Chicago gigs with short tours in blues-loving European nations such as France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The Matthew Skoller Band does little regional touring in the U.S., a decision with economic and personal consequences that Skoller has weighed carefully. “I like the music to take me to places I’ve never been, places I find interesting and enriching and different and exotic. I never wanted to wear out Highway 80. I just find that boring. Excruciating, really,” Skoller admits. “Maybe that has affected my career. I don’t know. I don’t really care.”

Skoller isn’t one to take the easy way out, and he refuses to compromise his independence in favor of corporate-sponsored record deals and tours. “I’m not interested

in somebody else’s vision of my music,” he states flatly. Skoller maintains full control over his gigging and touring schedules, and he bemoans the short-sightedness of record companies and producers with “strong opinions about how blues records should sound, how they should be made, and what they should say.” Skoller suggests of the larger labels, “They may want to take a look at the shape the industry is in, and take a look around at some of the artists flying under the radar, and maybe think about developing some of that talent. Or just giving it a platform, because they may find that a lot of the talent has developed itself.”

Skoller is quick to emphasize his respect for the musical traditions of his forebears; he earned his harp chops under the tutelage of Sunnyland Slim, Magic Slim, Jimmy Rogers, and Big Daddy Kinsey. But this contemporary blues artist is no slave to history: Skoller’s own compositions are uniquely modern, and *These Kind of Blues* broaches timely subjects such as the technology explosion (“Wired World”), political corruption (“Handful of People”), and the plight of wage-earners trying to make ends meet (“Get Paid”). He raises his voice against

social injustice, questions the values of a technology-obsessed culture, and chronicles love’s joys and pitfalls, all without preaching or lecturing at his audience.

With clever sound samples sprinkled throughout the album — there’s even a hip-hop remix of the scathing anti-war track “Handful of People” — Skoller’s forward-thinking approach to songwriting challenges adherence to blues orthodoxy both lyrically and musically. He pushes boundaries and breaks barriers like a man on a mission. For Skoller, the continued endurance of blues music lies in its adaptability.

“If there’s one point I can get across to young players, it’s that understanding the technology and rhythm of your own time *is* the spirit of blues music,” Skoller declares. “Listen to what Muddy and Wolf were doing in the ’50s. Those guys were flying in the face of everything that came before them. Then you got into the ’60s, and you had guys like James Cotton and Junior Wells taking it even further, bringing funk and soul rhythms into their music. That stuff is a constant push, a constant acknowledgment of what’s happening in their world at the time it’s happening.” ☐