

## A Louisiana Spirit Meets the Spirit of the '60s

Written by Mike Schulz

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“It’s such a wonderful gathering of bands,” says Marcia Ball of the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, and she should know. Not only has Ball made three previous appearances at the event, but she’s emerged as one of the most acclaimed figures in music, a mainstay of the professional blues circuit for nearly 25 years.

In a genre dominated by guitarists, Ball is something unusual: a singing, song-writing *pianist*, whose dexterity on the ivories is only matched by her passionate, throaty alto. These elements culminate in a blues style influenced by both her Vinton, Louisiana, upbringing – where the piano-playing chanteuse began her musical journey – and the decade she came of age in: the 1960s.

In a recent phone interview, Ball spoke of Vinton with affection. “There’s so much wonderful music from that area,” she says, adding that in addition to such noted blues performers as Janis Joplin and Kenny Neal, “The Big Bopper was from [Vinton], [Clarence] ‘Gatemouth’ [Brown] started there, Lonnie Brooks.” Ball herself began playing the piano in Vinton at the tender age of five, and immersed herself in the music of her region through high school.

Yet by the time she was attending Louisiana State University in the late '60s, Ball was as much a student of the *period* as a student of music.

Referring to her LSU years, Ball admits to being “pretty liberal,” adding, “at least as much as you *could* be in Baton Rouge at the time.” Vinton in the '60s was a go-to place for musicians -- “they had a *lot* of recording studios there,” Ball says – as well as entertainment of other kinds, if you knew where to go. Ball recalls, “We were in an area where you could drink on one side of the line and not on the other side.” One can only guess which side of the line Ball *preferred*

, but a grin is almost audible as she says, “There was always a party happening *somewhere*

.”

Still, the spirit of the '60s was urging her to travel farther west, and as in the song, Ball found herself “going to San Francisco” in 1970. Unexpected car trouble, however, stranded her in Austin, Texas, and within days, Ball made the decision to *remain* there, realizing she “had to get somewhat more liberal, and Austin was very liberal at the time.”

Despite her early exposure to the blues, though, Ball began her career in Austin performing with the country band Freda & the Firedogs, and when she recorded her debut LP in 1978 – *Circuit Queen*

– it, too, was in the country-music vein. “I first played country 'cause that’s what the hippies were playing at the time,” she states, adding that performing country was practically inevitable; she’d previously tried her hand at nearly every *other*

music genre under the sun. “I ran through all styles of music growing up,” she says. “I learned piano as a child, played guitar as a teenager, I played folk music in college, played rock 'n' roll in my first band ... .”

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It is with her blues recordings, though, that Ball has achieved her greatest acclaim and industry recognition. Among numerous recent accolades, she has received two Grammy nominations – for 2003's *So Many Rivers* and 1998's *Sing It!* – which, after more than two decades of professional performing, Ball considered a sweet validation. “It just felt like a wonderful honor to be chosen out of all the albums out there,” she says. “It felt really great.”

Ball's talents also earned her a place on the 1999 PBS special *In Performance at the White House*, where she had the pleasure of performing for, and meeting, President Bill Clinton. (“He's a smart, sexy, interesting man,” says Ball. “Not necessarily in that order.”)

At this year's Blues Fest, Ball will perform both old favorites and tunes from the singer's recent *Live! Marcia Ball Down the Road*, which she recorded during a performance in Chico, California.

*Down the Road*

stands as Ball's first live CD, which her fans consider long overdue. “People have been asking for one,” she says, “and it's something we've been meaning to do for a long time.”

Clearly, Marcia Ball has many more career highlights to look forward to. After the release of *So Many Rivers*

, a *Billboard*

magazine review stated: “In 2001, *Presumed Innocent*

was the best album Ball ever released. It's 2003 now, and *So Many Rivers*

is the best album Ball has ever tracked. This could go on for years.” And when asked if she concurred with the

*Billboard*

piece – if, indeed, she found her skill and love of music growing annually – her response is as elegant and understated as the singer herself: “Well,” she admits, “I sure am

*enjoying* it.”