

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Because not even classic-rock stations play *new* music by classic-rock artists, most of Dave Mason's younger fans find him through "a parent or a brother or sister - older - or rummaging around in their parents' stuff, I suppose - old albums," he said.

Those albums might include the first two Traffic records - Mason was a founding member - or the Jimi Hendrix Experience's *Electric Ladyland*, with Mason singing on "Crosstown Traffic," and memorably contributing the layers of acoustic guitars on "All Along the Watchtower," helping to wrest the song from Dylan and make it Jimi's. He also played bass and sitar on a few songs, although his work didn't make the final cut. "I have no idea whatever happened to those," he said in a recent phone interview, promoting his October 15 show at the Redstone Room. "I don't know where they ever went to."

Or it might be the Rolling Stones' *Beggars Banquet*, on which he played some drums and, on "Street Fighting Man," added some horn. Or separate albums by Paul McCartney and George Harrison. Or they might discover him from his solo work, including hit songs "Feelin' Alright" and "We Just Disagree."

That sort of introduction suggests that Mason's best days are behind him, and that's not true.

Based on last year's *26 Letters, 12 Notes* - his first solo studio album in two decades -

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Mason remains a vital artist. The All Music Guide gushed: "It reveals Mason not only as a solid, focused, and relevant songwriter in the rock idiom, but as an expressive vocalist of uncanny power and depth (he's actually gotten *better* over the decades). His guitar playing has continued to develop and grow: He is a far more interesting player than his peer Eric Clapton is at this stage of the game."

Them's fighting words for a lot of people, of course, and I would be more measured in my praise. But the 63-year-old Mason sounds like he's having a great time on this album, and his guitar has clarity and purpose that elevates some relatively mundane material. Other tracks - the instrumental "El Toro," the slow soul of "Good 2 U," and straightforward defiance of "Let Me Go" - are solid and sturdy without qualification. There's no sense of Mason looking back or trying to cash in; this is simply a collection of his recent work.

"I just started it for my own amusement, basically," Mason said. He describes the record as "bits and pieces of stuff accumulating" over five or six years. "I wasn't in any rush, anyway."

Mason isn't particularly chatty - he says he loves performing but doesn't like traveling, and one gets the sense he doesn't like interviews, either. When asked what had changed for him in the time between his newest album and the one before that, his response was "20 years."

But he suggested that he's improved with age. "I'm as good as I'm ever going to be at what I do," he said. "I'm about at my peak. And I know what it is I can do and I know what it is, more importantly, I can't do, although I like to push the envelope."

He's still performing 100 to 120 shows a year, and he seizes opportunities. He recorded and toured with Fleetwood Mac from 1994 and 1996, and he toured with Traffic bandmate Jim Capaldi in 1998.

Steve Winwood joined them at one show, but don't hold your breath for a Traffic reunion. "You have to ask Mr. Winwood," he said.

"We're all four different personalities and different musical tastes, but that's what made it interesting," he said of his Traffic time. "It wasn't my choice that it didn't work out long-term."

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Although Mason isn't a household name, his credits show him to be a significant contributor to the history of rock and roll. He said that although he knew Hendrix's work would last, he otherwise didn't have a sense of how iconic some of the music he played would become.

"We were too busy living it," he said.

*Dave Mason will perform on Thursday, October 15, at the Redstone Room (129 Main Street in Davenport). The show starts at 8:30 p.m., tickets are \$37.50, and the Whoozdads will also perform.*

For more information on Mason, visit [Dave-Mason.com](http://Dave-Mason.com).