

JOHN FULLBRIGHT

ALL THE WAY FROM OKEMAH, OKLAHOMA



John Fullbright performs during CD release party at Waterloo Records, N. Lamar, Austin, Tx. on May 22, 2012

John Fullbright's sophomore recording and studio debut *FROM THE GROUND UP* released *Stateside* early May, was recorded at 115 Recording Studio in Norman, Oklahoma; a facility owned and operated by Wes Sharon. I began the interview by asking John how he had met Wes.

"It was through mutual acquaintances in Norman, Oklahoma," he said. "It's not a very big town; kind of a college town and everybody knows each other. I'd been into his studio a couple of times and he had talked about us working together. I wanted to make a demo so that I could pitch it to whomever and make this record in Nashville or something. I got a handful of musicians that I trusted and we went into the studio. About three hours later we walked out with what we all agreed was going to end up being an album." Three of the album's band songs were completed during the aforementioned session. "We decided to record the album in Norman."

I wondered if musician and band leader, Mike McClure had been one of the mutual acquaintances:

"I guess he'd be one of them," John said. In 2008, John contributed keyboards on McClure's album *DID7*. "I've been a huge McClure fan since I was in high school. He's a great songwriter. Amongst younger guys trying to write songs in that country genre, he's known. When he called, I was going to college, but hated it." Fullbright enrolled at Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant intending to study music. "He asked if I had a keyboard. I said: 'No.' and he said: 'Go get one.' I left college and worked with McClure for about a year, then branched out after deciding to write songs for a living."

The handful of musicians that joined Fullbright at 115 Recording Studio included a trio of guitarists. Terry 'Buffalo' Ware has long been an Oklahoma legend; Andrew Hardin was Tom Russell's sideman of choice for over two decades and finally, there was Ryan Engleman. "He's been a hired gun in a lot of bands. Currently Ryan is a member of the Turnpike Troubadours; a Norman band I was in for a little while. Like I said, it's a small community."

Fats Kaplin contributes violin and pedal steel guitar. "I met Fats through Kevin Welch. I played my *Fat Man* song at Folk

Alliance in Memphis one time and asked him to sit in on violin. It was another of those moments where we finished playing and looked at each other and said: 'that kind of has to happen on the album.' Plus he's Fats. He is the 'Fat Man.'" The drum stool was occupied by Giovanni Carnuccio III. "He's also in the Turnpike Troubadours. I played with him several times in McClure's studio. McClure would use him for a number of bands. It was a perfect fit."

When I put it to John that he'd chosen musicians with whom he already enjoyed a working relationship, he replied: "Absolutely." Rounding out the coterie of session players was organist, John Knudson and solo recording artist, Jess Klein. "She drove up from Austin. She's the only other harmony voice on the album. I just love her to death. I think she's a really fantastic songwriter."

On Tuesday February 17, the eve of the 2009 Folk Alliance Conference, John Fullbright performed at Greg Johnson's listening room, The Blue Door in Oklahoma City. I'll let John relate what occurred next: "We recorded my performance the night before Folk Alliance began. Travis Linville, who recorded it, was also going to Folk Alliance. We arranged the gig to get gas money so we could go. We went to bed, woke up the next day and drove to Memphis and began passing out burned copies of the live record, and told people it would be released officially in a few months. That was only the third or fourth time I played The Blue Door. I was very nervous. I can still hear that on the record." Fullbright added: "First time I played the club was with Joe Melton; the second time I opened for Kevin Welch. It was Kevin's idea to make the live record."

The first time John had entered the portals of The Blue Door was for a wake organised by Mike McClure in honour of legendary Oklahoma musician Bob Childers. That was in late April 2008, a week after Childers passed. John continued: "A few months later I had a gig at the State Fair in Oklahoma City for this winery. Greg was running the stage—he was m'ing and maybe running sound. That's the first real set of mine he had heard and he liked what I played. He called me up a few days later and said he thought I had serious potential and asked if I wanted a manager."

LIVE AT THE BLUE DOOR was officially released on Greg Johnson's imprint Blue Door Records during late July 2009 and in Europe by Continental Song City early last year. John's new album, the twelve-song *FROM THE GROUND UP* includes studio interpretations of *Jericho*, *Satan & St. Paul*, *All The Time In The World* and *Moving*. I wondered if this Okemah, Oklahoma bred musician had agonised over re-recording material from his live album. "A little, but they were intended to be played with a band when they were written. They weren't intended to be played solo forever. To put them to rest I had to record them with a band I trusted. I can move past them now."

As well as unrecorded songs earmarked for the studio album, I wondered if Fullbright had continued composing songs during the 115 Recording Studio sessions. Having acquiesced that that had been the case, he continued: "Dustin Welch (Kevin's talented son) and I co-wrote *Gawd Above* and I wrote

Daydreamer. They are my two favourites. I think they're stronger songs, which is nice. That the last two I've written are the strongest songs on the record bodes well for the future."

As for older songs, John intimated: "There were a couple more from the live record that we tried to flesh out. *Blameless* we tried, but it didn't work... and *Justice*. They were fine, and we laid them down for sure but they weren't as strong as the others, and in the end they weren't mastered." Did those recordings have a future? "We'll see. Every song has a different point that it wants to make, and if I decide that it would make a good point squeezed between two newer songs then I'll put it there."

The FROM THE GROUND UP liner credits Wes Sharon and John Fullbright as producers. I asked if sharing that credit had been intentional. "Sort of," he said. "I'm new to all this, and didn't totally understand what a producer does, and how that's different from an engineer and so on. This record was me and him sitting at a soundboard mostly. It was night and day for two weeks straight, just locked in there with Wes," he laughs. "It was a hell of a lot of work but I'm really proud of how it turned out."

Had there been a break between the two weeks John had just mentioned and the initial recording session at the 115 Recording Studio? "No we carried straight on. Wes started blocking out studio time pretty much that first day, because we were going to jump back in. Most of the songs were recorded live with me and the musicians playing. *Daydreamer* we kind of put together."

"I also got involved in mixing the songs. That was also very new to me. Wes mentioned that he doesn't always like an artist to be there mixing with him but I enjoyed it. I know he did too. That said, it's the most tedious thing you could ever conceive."

While FROM THE GROUND UP was Fullbright's first taste of being 'the artist' whose name would adorn a studio recorded album, he'd been in that environment when recording DID7. "I've been in a lot of studios and cut my teeth with McClure and Travis Linville. I'd sit around and pretend I was an organ player. I knew the process fairly well, but the mechanics of making a record were new to me."

During early 2010 Fullbright was involved in recording sessions at Cedar Creek Studio in south Austin, home to Music Road Records, but that album project was abandoned. "You give me too much credit," was Fullbright's retort to my suggestion that he had heard '...finished recordings of his songs in his head before entering a studio.' He added: "I knew I had a handful of band songs and a handful of solo songs. I had long talks with Wes about how we were going to put that together. This was a very difficult record to sequence. That was a particularly



L. to R. Tony 'Buffalo' Ware and John Fullbright on mainstage at Kerrville Folk Festival, Kerrville, Tx. on June 3, 2012

stressful thing, putting the songs in an order that would make sense."

Digital technology allows the almost instant creation of countless differently sequenced CDRs. The approach has become de rigeur for artists and producers. "The whole way through we talked about how we were going to do it. I credit Wes more than myself with how it finally was put together and I think it works."

Nashville based company Thirty Tigers will oversee the North American distribution of FROM THE GROUND UP released on the newly founded imprint, Blue Dirt Records. It was a natural progression, since the LIVE AT THE BLUE DOOR liner confirms John's publishing company as Blue Dirt Songs.

"It was kind of a little joke.

One thing that Greg and I agreed

when we met and decided to work together, we absolutely would not be called Red Dirt." Wikipedia credits 'red dirt' as a music genre that takes its name from the colour of soil found in Oklahoma. "There was no intention that Blue be a reference to Greg's club. Bluegrass could be a possible reference point."

Fullbright's music is a rich amalgam of folk, country, blues, bluegrass and jazz influences. I asked him if he could explain that marriage. "It's whatever moves me at the time. My first real playing experience with other people was bluegrass. There's a special place in my heart for bluegrass. These were older people that would drag me along whenever they'd go play with their friends at picking parties in somebody's garage. Growing up during the 1990s, you could hear any genre of music you wanted at any time. It wasn't a case of listening to just one genre; everything was mixed together. When I started writing songs—whatever point I wanted to make, that's the genre I picked."

While we were talking, John was on his way from Okemah to the Lubbock, Texas venue The Blue Light for the opening date of a national tour to promote FROM THE GROUND UP. In previous weeks the twenty-three year old musician undertook performances at venues on America's three coasts including, for the second consecutive year, a main stage set at the Kerrville Folk Festival. "It has been kind of sporadic so far, but this is definitely one of the longer tours that I've done."

In my Maverick review of FROM THE GROUND, I alluded to the manner in which Fullbright placed '...a uniquely personal imprint on each of his FROM THE GROUND UP songs. A stylistically diverse, roots music gem, it's absolutely one of this year's finest.' Hopefully we'll see John Fullbright undertake a UK tour before long. The evidence presented on FROM THE GROUND certainly confirms this singer-songwriter as one whom we're going to hear much, much more from. **Arthur Wood**