

SOUNDS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND ALL OVER THE WORLD



# Dirty Linen

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Folk & World Music

Dirty Linen Issue #127 ~ December 2006/January 2007

## HARRY MANX

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and Western Blues

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**H**arry Manx is practically in a class of his own. During the 25 years that he spent honing his craft and earning a living as a musician in Europe and Asia, Manx never seemed especially interested in the trappings of either fame or fortune. Shortly after he arrived back in Canada at the age of 45, however, following a 12-year sojourn in India, Manx's career took on a whole new twist. His reputation, his renown, and, presumably, his bank account all grew in leaps and bounds within a few years. Not only did his soul-stirring music find a large new audience, but at times it almost seemed as if he had made a pact at the proverbial crossroads — but with a supreme being in a remote part of India rather than with the devil in the American South.

When asked in 2002 how he felt about becoming an acclaimed, sought-after, and award-winning performer so suddenly after a life of anonymity, Manx replied wryly that it was like being put in a catapult and hurled

into a whole new world. His signature style, an “East meets West” fusion of blues and Indian music, follows in the footsteps of such pioneering work as that of Joe Harriott and John Mayer and their Indo-Jazz Fusions in the 60s, John McLaughlin's work with Shakti in the 70s, and Ashwan Batish's innovative *Sitar Power* debut in 1987. Manx's Indo-blues hybrid, which has the benefit of vocals — strong vocals, to boot — seems destined to be the most universally appealing yet. It's a style that's a direct byproduct of the nomadic life he has led, a life that has resulted in Manx's highly compelling and charismatic musical persona.

Born on the Isle of Man, Manx emigrated to Ontario with his parents when he was six years old. He started doing sound for a band when he was 15 years old and gradually worked his way up to becoming a regular sound man at the well-known El Mocambo club in Toronto, where he worked with a slew of blues legends. Although Manx doesn't

consider himself to be a blues artist per se, he does admit that blues is at the heart of much of his work. “I've always had one foot in the blues from those days when I mixed sound for such artists as Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, and Hound Dog Taylor,” said Manx. “What I got from those artists is a groove that's fairly similar to theirs. That's what I'm particularly interested in...the groove, and that's the way I play blues today.

“I went to Europe when I was 20, and I started making money as a busker,” recalled Manx. “I've worked only as a musician since then. I played Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, and Neil Young, the type of familiar material that people want to hear from a street performer. Few people know that I was actually a one-man band with a drum-and-bass feel to my sound. I still have that one-man band sound.”

Although Manx lived and played in quite a few European cities, his first venue was the streets of Paris. He played mandolin while his brother played guitar. When asked how he

managed to make a living as a busker in a city such as Paris, he replied, "We always managed to make just enough to pay our hotel and eat, not much more." One day a clown hired them to go to Switzerland with him and they never got back to Paris. "My brother settled in Germany and has been a musician for 30 years."

In 1979 Manx made his first trek to India, the country that ended up having such an impact on his life and music. Two years later, the love of a woman brought him to Japan, where he would spend a lot of time over the ensuing years. It was a place where he was able to make a good living as a musician, and so he kept visiting regularly even after moving to India in the late 80s. It was in Japan that he eventually overheard the sounds of a mohan veena emanating from a small record store in a mall. The next time Manx returned to India, where he had been living for seven years, he sought out Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, the musician he had heard and also the inventor of the instrument. In the hands of a master, the mohan veena, a sitar-guitar hybrid with 20 strings (12 of them sympathetic), creates a very emotive and shimmering sound. Manx was smitten.

Bhatt, who has recorded with such icons as Béla Fleck and Taj Mahal, is especially known for *A Meeting By the River*, a collaboration with Ry Cooder that won a Grammy. Manx befriended Bhatt and gave him a DAT machine so that he could play back his own music. Bhatt reciprocated by giving Manx a mohan veena, the instrument that would later become a crucial component of Manx's trademark blues/raga sound. He also became Manx's mentor and invited him to move in with him and his extended family of 20 or so. Manx stayed five years.

While in India, Manx was more involved with meditation than with music, but to master his new instrument he started practicing three or four hours every morning. One might very well ask how Manx survived in India for so long. A busker's life in India must surely be more of a challenge than it would be in Europe. "I used to bounce between Japan and India," said Manx. "I had an agent in Japan who found me some gigs,

mostly in shopping malls. I played every town of any size in Japan and I'd make \$5,000 or so within a few weeks. I could then go back to India and live like a king for three or four months."

Vishwa Mohan Bhatt played some of the bigger Canadian folk festivals this past summer. "I came here and got recognized as a student of his and now he's getting recognition being the teacher of me, so it has come



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full circle," Manx asserted with modest pride. "It's wonderful that I can give something back. Originally a man in Calcutta made the instruments, but now they're being made commercially in Bombay. At some point I hope to be able to come out with an instructional video and share my Hindustani slide technique so that musicians can integrate it into their own playing."

For a long time, Manx had no intention of ever moving back to the West. "I was very much at home in India. The place had become the norm for me," confided Manx. Nonetheless, in 1999 Manx decided to leave India after 12 years, the last five spent with Bhatt. He initially felt like a foreigner in Canada and went through some inevitable culture shock upon his return. He chose to settle down on

Salt Spring Island, off Vancouver Island, but immigration red tape caused delays for his wife, who is from Brazil, so he had to commute back and forth for a while. "I went to Brazil for six months and played most of the surfer bars between Rio and São Paulo."

When Manx arrived back in Canada, he didn't really have much of a backlog of original material. Nor did he have much of an idea on how to launch a career. "I had played on a lot of people's records, serving as a session musician in Japan and India...and I sold a cassette I did of other people's songs," Manx admitted. Shortly after moving to Salt Spring, he walked into a music store to rent a small cassette recorder to make a demo. The store owner, who seemed familiar, turned out to be Jordy Sharp, who had played in a band with Manx in Toronto 27 years earlier. Sharp suggested Manx do an album and brought him into Randy Bachman's studio, and he has served as Manx's producer ever since. Manx had only half a dozen originals, and Sharp told him he needed more. Manx wrote some of his most engaging songs while he was recording the album.

It just so happened that in the spring of 2001, just after Manx had released *Dog My Cat*, his debut, the North American Folk Alliance was held in Vancouver. A showcase at 2:30 a.m. only attracted a few people, but one of them was Fred Litwin of NorthernBlues Records. Litwin immediately signed Manx and reissued the album. Invitations to play Canada's biggest and best festivals soon followed. *Dog My Cat*, which was recorded in 11 hours, sold 30,000 copies.

"I thought I was going to continue being a street musician in Canada," mused Manx. "I had no concept of the recording industry and I had no clue as to where I would fit. Still, I was sort of pregnant with a lot of ideas, like a cloud ready to rain. I had learned a lot over the years and I had all these ideas which were ready to come out." *Wise and Otherwise*, the follow-up for the same label, won him a Juno nomination for Best Blues Album and was also voted Album of the Year in the *Penguin Eggs Critics' Poll*. In fact, in what can only be called a short recording career, Manx has won a number

of prestigious awards in Canada and received nominations for many more.

Though Manx's talent as a songwriter quickly blossomed and caught up with his performance abilities, he still made room on his albums for good covers. His debut included two Muddy Waters songs, one by Jimmy Reed, and the traditional "Reuben's Train." The follow-up included the traditional "Death Have Mercy," Van Morrison's "Crazy Love," Jimi Hendrix's "Foxy Lady," and "Only Then Will Your House Be Blessed," an old song popularized by Big Joe Williams. The highlight is probably an original raga-like tune called "The Gist of Madhuvanti" that segues into an enrapturing rendition of B.B. King's "The Thrill Is Gone." His subsequent studio albums, except for *Jubilee*, his collaboration with Kevin Breit, would have fewer covers and less of a blues flavor.

Although Manx's style isn't easy to classify, one writer termed it "Mysticissippi blues." It's an evocative and fair label. Much of Manx's time in India was spent meditating with different masters, and several decades of meditation and yoga have allowed Manx to delve deeper into the music, imbuing his work with an intangible spiritual quality. "I always cloak my messages with inspirational ideas in a story," explained Manx. "I also try and reach the listeners' hearts rather than their minds. With the mind, there's always a filtering of 'I agree' or 'I don't agree.' I like to engage

people's hearts, and that's the kind of music I like as well." Manx added that his songs are more involved in the struggles of the individual rather than in social issues.

"I spent quite a bit of time living in ashrams, and the focus was all about meditation, psychotherapy, and the arts. I've always had more interest in my own development as a person than I had in my music. I think my music has done well partly as a result of my years of meditation and looking at what is our lives. I can't take complete responsibility. My songs are a synthesis of everything I've absorbed. We're the sum of all of our experiences. I look at music as having two aspects. One is having something to say; the other, the ability to say it."

As a performer, Manx has a magnetic appeal, one that has been called "the Harry Zone." The audience feels comfortable in his presence. Above and beyond his bewitching music he exudes an inner strength that the years of meditation have given him. He has also been honing his sense of humor, and the audiences relate to the fact that he doesn't take himself too seriously — just his music. As for his songs, he dismisses the kind of subjective material that singer/songwriters have done to death. "Too many songwriters narrate a little moment in their lives that has no impact on others. It seems almost self-indulgent. I try to produce more objective art. When your songs convey a perspective that inspires people, or

gets them to think or feel, people are going to want to get close to you."

After three albums for Northern Blues, Manx left the label. Asked why, he answers that it's simply a question of dollars and cents. He was initially prodded into it with *Road Ragas*, a live album that drew from gigs in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Germany. His fans kept asking for a live album, but his label had no interest in that project. He ended up releasing it on his own, along with a live DVD recorded in Australia. An official label would soon follow. "If you're going to be a musician, you might as well be a business person, too," Manx explained. He has sold over 150,000 albums, many of them at shows. Things have been going so well that his label, Dog My Cat, is now in a position to support other artists, such as Yeshe, a German living in Australia who plays African music. The other artists on the roster are fiddler Jaime RT and singer/songwriter Sarah Noni Metzner. The label is currently reissuing remastered versions of Manx's first albums, which had only been leased to NorthernBlues for five years.

On *Mantras for Madmen*, Manx's most recent album, John Reischman is featured on mandolin, which gives a slight country tinge to a few tracks, but country music doesn't seem to be part of Manx's listening habits. He admits that for the last 15 years he has been listening mostly to Indian music and old blues, although more recently he has acquired a fondness for

## DISCOGRAPHY

***Mantras for Madmen***  
Dog My Cat Records (2005)

***West Eats Meet***  
Dog My Cat Records (2004)

***Harry Manx Live***  
Dog My Cat Records (2004)

***Wild About Harry: Harry Manx  
Live at the Basement***  
DVD (2003)

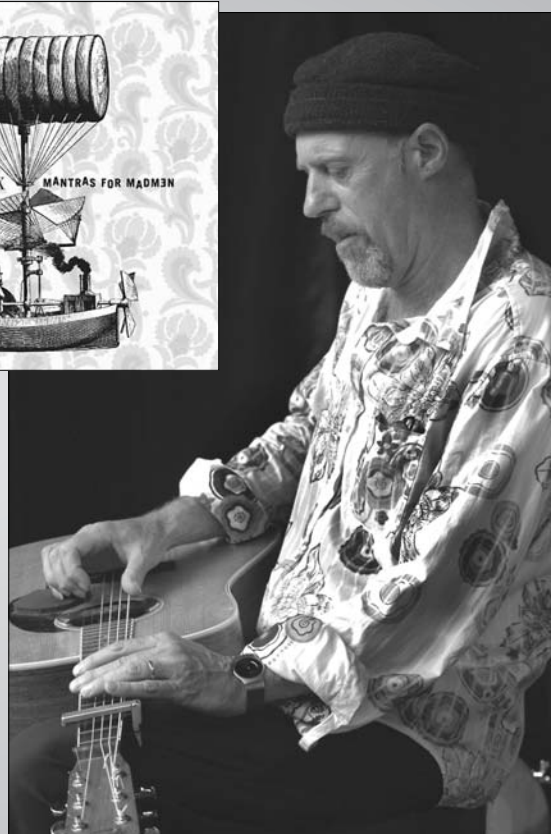
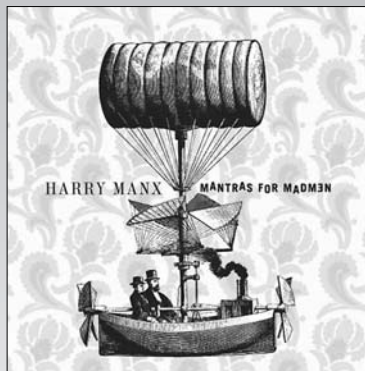
***Wise and Otherwise***  
NorthernBlues (2001)  
(to be reissued on Dog My Cat, 2007)

***Dog My Cat***  
NorthernBlues (2001)  
(reissued on Dog My Cat, 2006)

**HARRY MANX AND KEVIN BREIT**  
***In Good We Trust***  
Stony Plain (coming in 2007)

***Jubilee***  
NorthernBlues (2003)

[www.harrymanx.com](http://www.harrymanx.com)



Steve Manner

jazz, with Ernest Ranglin and Charlie Hunter being two of his current favorites.

While Manx is a highly compelling performer on his own, he occasionally seeks out collaborators for projects. His first notable collaboration was *Jubilee*, the album he recorded with Kevin Breit, a guitarist from Toronto who has played with Norah Jones and Cassandra Wilson, among others. Some of Manx's concerts have featured a back-up duo called the Urban Turbans (tabla and harmonium). A little over a year ago he hired Steve Marriner, a fabulous young harmonica player from Ottawa. He has also recently started doing shows with Michael Kaeshammer, an amazing pianist from the West Coast whose roots are in the boogie woogie tradition. "Where we meet is the blues," Manx pointed out. "We have fun on stage. We don't rehearse. We just fly by the seat of our pants."

Although Manx is very popular throughout Canada, not to mention Australia, where most of his touring dates sell out, he has only recently made his first foray into England. The U.S. market is also starting to open up, especially on the West Coast and in the Northeast, and Manx says that there's an "underground buzz" about him in the U.S. Last winter he played for a handful of people at a small Manhattan blues club in the Village. In the audience was the organizer of the New York Guitar Festival, who invited Manx to be part of the lineup.

When Manx found out that a tribute to Bruce Springsteen was part of the program, he quickly picked up a cassette of The Boss's greatest hits at a service station and familiarized himself with it in the car. At the show he played a couple of songs, one on the mohan veena and one on the cigar box guitar, a more refined version of a rather primitive instru-



Shari MacDonald

ment that features a bass string and three guitar strings. While Manx was paying homage to Springsteen, he looked down from the stage and saw the man himself sitting in the front row with his wife. Manx thought to himself: "Holy shit! I hope I don't screw this up!" After the two of them met backstage, Springsteen signed the cigar box guitar and asked Manx to send him his CDs.

Besides playing the mohan veena, the lap slide guitar, and regular acoustic guitar, Manx also plays the harmonica, although he doesn't play that instrument much since Steve Marriner became his sidekick. In recent years, Manx has also taken to playing the banjo, having

been attracted to it because it sounds sort of like the sarod from India. He has also undergone another change in that when he came back to Canada he only performed Indian music and blues, but now he draws from India mostly for the flavor. His performances seem to embody contradictory qualities. The music is sometimes raw yet soothing, and it can be simultaneously sensual and spiritual.

Many artists start out doing cover songs but gradually wean themselves away from that in favor of performing only their own material. Manx only included two covers on each of his last two albums: *West Eats Meet* includes "Sittin' On Top of the World" and Willie Dixon's "Help Me," while *Mantras for Madmen* features his renditions of J. J. Cale's "San Diego - Tijuana" and the Band's "It Makes No Difference." "I keep learning cover songs. In my live shows I play half covers. I like taking songs and twisting them around. You can gauge some artists' abilities and approach to their level of creativity by the way they tackle a cover song," explained Manx.

Manx's latest project was recorded and edited in four days in Toronto this past August. The session was intended to be a slide guitar album featuring Manx, Kevin Breit, and Greg Leisz.

Unfortunately, Leisz got sick at the last minute and had to bow out, so the album became a sequel of sorts to *Jubilee*. Manx contributed three new songs and two covers, including Springsteen's "I'm On Fire," which he had performed at the Springsteen tribute, and a new rendition of "Death Have Mercy," which he had recorded previously.

Breit brought along a few instrumental tunes and a few songs on which Manx sang lead; Breit provided the harmony vocals. Manx ended up playing drum beats with his feet. The two of them arranged and produced, with Breit adding jazzier, more chordal elements. Although they had initially considered adding a few overdubs, they decided against it. "The fullness of the sound turned out to be quite amazing," admitted Manx. "Kevin is very creative and an infectious player. The flame jumps from one candle to the other." The album, which will be released on the Stony Plain label in early 2007, will be called *In Good We Trust*, another off-the-wall title that reflects Manx's playful sense of humor.

When Manx is reminded of how successful he has become in merely a few years, he shrugs it off. "It's strange that you should mention that. I'm still trying to master failure and I feel that failure is underrated. The more you fail, the closer you are to succeeding. I keep on that track, so if it looks like success from the outside, I'm very happy with that. One becomes wise by learning all about one's ignorance."

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Steve Marriner

Manx jams with David Lindley at the Ottawa Bluesfest