

Interview with Larry "Mud" Morganfield, Muddy Water's eldest son

Exclusive Interview with: Larry "Mud" Morganfield

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Photos: © José Gallois

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His legendary father McKinley Morganfield aka Muddy Waters (1913-1983) scored a few major hits in the early fifties, including "Hoochie Coochie Man", "I Just Want To Make Love To You" and "I'am Ready". And when he came to Europe (England) in 1958 - his eldest son Larry is still a toddler of barely four years - Muddy's biggest hit "Mannish Boy" was a fact, worldwide. As emerged later, The Father of the Electric Blues would affect generations of musicians. Because blues music was only acoustic music at that time. Muddy Waters is therefore generally regarded as the inventor of the electric blues and paved the way for many electric blues and rock and roll bands and artists (with their wild lifestyles). Larry "Mud" Morganfield (born: Sept 27th 1954) is the eldest son of Muddy Waters and both physically and vocally a striking resemblance to his father. When you see him perform, or if you listen to his latest album 'Son of the Seventh Son', you'll see and hear the living legacy of Muddy Waters. In 2007, Larry and his younger brother the blues singer and guitarist "Big Bill" Morganfield, organized a tribute concert for their father, along with a number of professional musicians. Combined with a performance in the same year at the Chicago Blues Festival, the audience did recognize and appreciate Mud Morganfield immediately. Resulting in two beautiful albums 'Fall Waters Fall' (2008) and 'Son of a Seventh Son' (2012), plus various live performances, mainly in the U.S. and in Europe. In April of this year 'the eldest son of a seventh son' was back from Chicago on a short tour through the Netherlands and Great Britain. We could intercept him in a hotel in the centre of The Hague, for an interview in the lobby. It was the day after the occurrence in the Trojan Horse club, The Hague. Just before he left for two more Dutch performances in Terneuzen (Saturday) and Amsterdam (Sunday).

Hello, mister Morganfield, in October 2013 we made a photo report of your appearance in LantarenVenster Rotterdam. But now on this tour you are playing with a whole different band. How does it actually work with European backing bands?

- In Rotterdam it was a double concert with James Yancy Jones, better known as Taildragger. There we were with The Rhythm Room All-Stars as a backing band, with Bob Corritore on the blues harp. And now I have a very good British blues harp player in the band, Steve West Weston. These are musicians that I have hired for this tour in consultation with my booking agent Mike Hellier. Mike is a great guy, he also plays the drums in this band. And we also play with:

stand-up bass player Ian Jennings, a Danish blues guitarist Ronni Boysen and pianist Eric Ranzoni, a guy with Italian roots. Reliable booking agencies are so important, because they do more than just control appearances.

Sometimes you tell short life stories for song introductions on stage. And with a funky song like 'Catfishing' you ask the ladies in the audience to come on stage and dance to the music. How important is that interaction with the audience for you?

- Very important, no doubt about it! People come to a blues concert to be entertained. And not just only to mourn about a lost lover or a broken heart. Of course it does depend on the entourage of the room. In the three Dutch gigs we have twice standing audience and one time sitting people. When people are sitting down, the emphasis will be more likely to make that voice introductions.

You have a dark blues voice, and you are using it optimally with very many feelings in the songs. Are you doing anything special to keep that voice in shape?

- No, nothing special. I drink tea and this [pointing to the bottle of water that he holds in his hand during the interview - TBA?] No voice exercises, no yoga ... no nothing like that. I've even never had singing lessons, not at all, ha ha. I am happy blessed with a voice that I have inherited from my father. And I'm trying to use it as effectively as possible in a no-nonsense way.

Are you a Mannish Boy or Hoochie Coochie Man?

- I love women and I have ten children, so you tell me? Hahaha!

[Read Wikipedia for an explanation of the meaning of hoochie coochie - TBA?]

Is the song "Blues in My Shoes" from the album Son of a Seventh Son autobiographical?

- Yes, absolutely. It's about my life in Chicago, where I grew up, and a pretty rough area. Although I'm a son of Muddy Waters, I really learned to stand up for myself. Sometimes I literally had to fight to survive when I was a kid. Chicago was a very violent city, and it still is. But it's my hometown and I wouldn't have to miss those days for the world. Because it gave me blues, you know.

You are the Son of a Seventh Son. How are your six uncles doing?

- My what, sick ankles? I have no bad ankles dude! Just a little pain in the back.

Uh, I mean ...

- Whaha ... I understand the joke, though I just didn't understand the question well. But, I'm fine with my six uncles. But you should not attach too much importance to the album 'title' because the word says it all: it's just a label.

Can blues music and humour actually go together according to you?

- Certainly, humour is a part of life and therefore also in the music. Just listen how happy gospel music can sound. I am convinced that entertainment is an essential part of any live music. Together it creates artists who can entertain a larger audience. And without the audience we would all be singing in the shower.

It is said that your father, the legendary blues artist Muddy Waters, is the inventor of electric blues. He was a great example for contemporary rock and roll bands. Is that so?

- Yes, that's true. Pops set the stage for a lot of great stuff. Blues, rock and R&B ... to me it all came from the gospel music. You've heard all the stories of the cotton plantations and work songs, I suppose. Though, I wouldn't claim that my father has "invented" the electric blues. But in an era of blues performers playing their sigarbox guitars, he surely electrified the guitar sound. So he changed 'modern pop music' at that time drastically, and he was able to lay foundation for the Chicago Blues sound.

So he was not much at home during your childhood in Chicago. What is still your best memory of him?

- Luckily I kept good contact with him until his death [Muddy Waters died April 30, 1983 at age 70 of a heart attack in his sleep - TBA?] I'm raised primarily by my mother Mildred, and thus having the surname Williams, because Momma and Pops were not married. And that was hard for her because a woman can make her daughter a lady, but it's hard to make a brat a gentleman. But she has done well and now she is 81 years old, we often call each other on the phone [in the NSJC Mud sang her a special request "Forty Days and Forty Nights" - TBA?] When I was a child, she took me along to my fathers gigs in a bar sometimes, and of course I saw and heard him playing guitar and singing at home several times. Those are still the most beautiful memories.

And the drum kit that you received from him as a child at Christmas?

- Yeah haha, even multiple drum kits in succession! I got the first when I was about 6 or 7 years old but hit that thing to smithereens, too excited. A year later I got another one from him. Now I rarely drum but I still play the bass. Only not when I'm going on stage. I already can read the critics' comments: "He's a great singer but his bass sucks". No, we won't start that, haha. But I do compose and write my own songs with the bass guitar. My lyrics are about life itself, and writing a good lyric is more than a nursery rhyme like: "Mary had a little lamb; its fleece was white as snow." Writing a great song requires a lot of creativity.

Muddy had a major influence on an entire generation of blues and rock artists in the sixties and seventies. Artists like Bob Dylan & the Band, Jimmy Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Cream with Eric Clapton, Johnny Winter, Alvin Lee, Rory Gallagher etc. Are you aware of that?

- Oh yes, and my father saw or heard himself his predecessors playing guitar, like Son House, Robert Johnson, Big Bill Broonzy and all those cats. And he was influenced by them. When he plugged his electric guitar into an amp and played "I Can't Be Satisfied" in the late forties, he became famous with it and got success himself. Other artists after him liked it very much and did it as well. So these are the artists you mention, and so it always will remain from generation to generation.

Muddy Waters has composed a lot of beautiful songs. One of them "You Can't Lose What You Ain't Never Had" is also on your recent album. Why actually that song?

- It did not really matter what song it would be. He has made so many good songs, so we just picked one. That was YCLWYANH from the album The Real Folk Blues from 1966. Also "Short Dress Woman" from the album Folk Singer (1964) is on the Son of a Seventh Son album. He has not written that song himself but he did recorded it and played it live. I have promised myself that every album I make has to contain at least one Muddy Waters song. Just out of gratitude and as a tribute to my father.

You now recorded two studio albums: 'Fall Waters Fall' (2008) and 'Son of a Seventh Son' (2012). When can we expect a third album, and what will be on it?

- It will be a full Muddy Waters tribute album. The schedule for the U.S. release is May 2014 and the working title is "Pops". Kim Wilson and Barrelhouse Chuck will appear on it. It will be something like the Little Walter Memorial/Tribute by the Chicago blues harmonica player Billy Branch and the Sons of Blues. That doesn't mean that I always have to keep the same style to handle. I mean, you probably will never hear me singing rock-blues, but I can vary sufficiently with rhythm-and-blues and natural blues music, you know. Because I like to be open-minded and music is universal. So my fourth studio album will undoubtedly stylistically different from the previous three albums.

In 2012 we have interviewed Zakiya Hooker, the daughter of the father of the Boogie, John Lee Hooker. She has had the privilege to make a record and play live with him in the early nineties. Have you had that opportunity also with Muddy Waters?

- My father was too much a businessman to make music with his children. However, there were often musicians in our house with whom he spontaneously jammed with. They were professionals like Chuck Berry, Mike Bloomfield and Mick Jagger. In addition, William (born: June 19th 1956) and I just started to make professional music long after his death in 1983. Bill's debut album "Rising Son" was published in 1999 and I myself sing live on stage since 2007. My father always wished that one of his sons would succeed him, so that became two by now. I've spoken to John Lee Hooker Junior. in the early days. But he stepped out of the blues scene to preach the Word of God. He now wears a white collar and is called Reverent John Lee Hooker Jr.

This Sunday you're going to sing in the North Sea Jazz club in Amsterdam. The British blues singer/guitarist Ian Siegal also played there last Thursday. The next day he was seen on national television. How important is it, that blues music will be broadcasted on national radio and TV stations?

- Aaah, Ian Siegal, I haven't seen him for a while. How is he doing, does he still got that tattoo of my father on his arm? Hahaha, he's my buddy! He also toured the UK with my brother Big Bill and so did Big Joe Louis, he's something else. But to answer your question: broadcasting blues in the right way is essential. Many youth in the U.S. does not know much vintage blues song and they barely know the name Muddy Waters. So that's a good reason for media attention. But it's even better when they come to live performances to get a genuine blues feel. In Europe that is

happening more and more, that's a good thing.

Is the acclaimed 2002 biography 'Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters' an accurate representation of your father's life?

- Have you read it? 'The Mistress Wife' in the book is my mother and 'Poppa' is a nickname for me. Of course I do not know if everything in it is true. Simply because I have not been there all the time. The foreword by Keith Richards is okay and author Robert Gordon has written a nice paperback. When they send us the script at the time I went to late Willie Dixon's wife Marie Dixon with it. She's an insightful lady who knew my father well. She also checked and changed some things and then we were satisfied about the book.

Today April 19th it's worldwide Record Store Day. We celebrate this day with the release of numerous unique releases on vinyl and live in-store performances by many artists. Is a day like this also important to you?

- I've never heard of such a thing like Record Store Day, but it seems to me a particularly good day for the record companies. And if the unique releases on vinyl are also authorized, it is obviously attractive to collectors. But sometimes unauthorized expenditures are offered. Of me there is one too: "Blues Is in My Blood". That's just a re-release of "Live with the Dirty Aces" which came out earlier on the Blue Filth Records label in December 2008. That is already a good live CD with the rocky sound on it of the singer/blues harp player Giles Robson. But the master tapes were resold without my permission! They added the bonus track "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" and a six-minute spoken interview with me to it and re-released it on a different label [Blues Boulevard - TBA?] with a different title and new artwork ... What idiot would do that!

Last question: are you still in contact with your younger brother William "Big Bill" Morganfield?

- Yes of course, I talked to him on the phone yesterday. Along with William and music attorney Jay B. Ross from Chicago, we have established the Morganfield Foundation. For the preservation of the historic residence of Muddy Waters in Chicago. The house was built in 1879 and our father lived there in his fertile musical years between 1954 and 1974. The aim is to raise at least \$ 120,000 in 90 days to buy the house. And in the 2nd phase another \$ 150,000 for the restoration and to rebuild the house to a museum. Soon I hope to be able to have a conversation with Mick Jagger about it. And organise a possible benefit concert. During their Rolling Stones tour in 1981, they came to the Buddy Guy's Checkerboard Lounge club in Chicago, to see a Muddy Waters show and to play with him. It would be very nice if they could deliver my late father a similar tribute. It is not in our nature to beg for money but Muddy has meant so much to Chicago, Illinois and to the world that such a cultural attraction simply must come. For Muddy, and to spread the Blues Music's message, and to keep it alive [Meanwhile Mud is giving us a bunch of Foundation flyers, the brochure also can be **downloaded here** - TBA?]
<http://ph7i2.com/images/documents/Brochure-MF-final.pdf>

And while Mud Morganfield finally signs a promo photo for us, we say goodbye to him: thank you kindly for your time and good luck with the fundraising and with the upcoming concerts.

- Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it.

Also read the TBA? Concert photo review: Mud Morganfield live at the North Sea Jazz Club, Amsterdam, April 20th 2014: <http://www.thebluesalone.nl/2014/04/22/mud-morganfield-karaktervolle-kwaliteit-volgens-de-methode-traditionelle/>

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