



Porter Square Rag

The Country Blues of Bill McQuaid

By Ken Chang
Photograph by Mark Gillard

Bill McQuaid has a nice little story about how guitarist Bertrand Laurence helped him pick out the clunky 1931 National steel that he uses today.

“It’s funny,” says McQuaid. “You find what you’re looking for when you least expect it. So I had a wooden dreadnaught, not a very good blues guitar. And it came time when I wanted to buy a blues guitar. I had really been getting into the country blues. And I talked to Bertrand, and Bertrand suggested, ‘Look for a National, but look for an *old* National.’ Okay. So I’m game. So I started looking at Music Emporium, at Elderly, at all these places that should have them. Then one day, my car broke down, it was in the garage, and I walked by Guitar Center, and there it was hanging on a wall collecting dust. Grabbed a ladder, pulled it down, played it. It had a really screwed up fretboard—Depression-era maple dyed black to look like ebony—but it sounded amazing. Put it back on the wall, went home. Lost a couple nights of sleep thinking about it. Brought Bertrand down to the store, we played it for each other. He looked at me with a very serious expression on his face, and said, “This is a goose pimple guitar.” With his French accent, okay: “This is a *gooz peem-pile guitar*.” And he’s very serious. And he said, ‘If you buy this, you’re in deep.’ And I said, ‘Well, I’m in deep in more than one way...’”

McQuaid bought the guitar, of course, and since then he’s been carving out a bluesy niche in the local music scene. For the modern practitioner of country blues, it can be an uphill battle getting into venues, as the music is usually misconstrued as too tame for the rock clubs, too old-fashioned for the jazz clubs, and too harsh for the singer-songwriter crowds. Yet McQuaid, whose repertoire draws from ragtime, Delta blues, hokum tunes, and boogie-woogie, is finding that the variety of his material keeps people tuned in, regardless of the venue.

“One of the challenges is trying to keep things new,” says McQuaid, who is based in Cambridge. “What I’m doing by definition is old. But delivering it to a new audience, in a sense, is introducing people to something new, and it’s refreshing to people who haven’t heard it before. And with the Americana crowd, the roots resurgence, there’s a lot of room for this.”

If McQuaid sounds like he's shooting for a broad audience, well, that's because he is. While his repertoire falls squarely within traditional blues styles, most of his performances have been at folk music and singer-songwriter venues that tend to fall under the blues radar. So how does the "non-blues" audience respond to prewar acoustic blues? Surprisingly well—McQuaid is continually winning over listeners who aren't expecting to hear Blind Boy Fuller or Barbecue Bob tunes on a night out. And it's not just McQuaid's repertoire that does the trick; his interpretation and his delivery of the music draw immediate respect from new listeners—they may not know who wrote the song or even the genre it belongs to, but they can sense the seriousness (and difficulty) of his craft in his playing and singing. For McQuaid, the challenge of playing in front of a new audience is solved by seeing it as made up of people who dig the blues but just don't know it yet.

"I kind of feel like the bad boy of the folk scene and the good boy of the blues scene," he says. "The beauty of the country blues is it crosses over genres. I actually opened up for a jam band called the Knot, formerly known as Slipknot. But the Grateful Dead crowd likes country blues. So it's just a very interesting and strange and wonderful genre, and ironically, most of my audiences aren't blues audiences. But I would like to aim more gigs at the blues crowd."

Many Boston-area blues fans got their official introduction to McQuaid at the 2004 Boston Blues Challenge solo/duo competition, held last July at Johnny D's in Somerville. McQuaid, one of the five finalists selected, took the stage last, and played a Delta blues-heavy set that won over the late-night crowd with renditions of songs by Son House, Tommy Johnson, and Robert Johnson. Much of the chatter following McQuaid's set fell into the so-where's-this-guy-from category; few people in the room were aware that he had been playing around Cambridge for years.

"The Blues Challenge was suggested to me by my friend Johnny Mac," recalls McQuaid. "Johnny plays gigs with me now and then. I wasn't really associated with the blues community. I was more associated with the Americana crowd—bands that play at Toad, Tir na nÓg, Plough & Stars—and the folk community. And this was a great opportunity for me to get involved with the blues community. And I just handled it like any other gig; I really don't take it too seriously, I just like to have fun. I take my music seriously, but the performance has to be taken at a different level. I wanted the people in the crowd to have a good time more than I wanted to show off in any way, shape, or form. And that's just the way I gig, and the way I handle it."

Although he didn't win (not that it wasn't close—the competition judge writing this article had McQuaid winning by a few points), McQuaid remains upbeat about the Blues Challenge experience.

"I felt that when I left that place," he says, "it was a complete win for me because I got introduced to a number of people: the blues society; Brendan Hogan—I gave him a CD, and he started playing the music on WGBH; Holly Harris got my name, heard about it; Dan Gewertz for the *Herald* wrote it up and gave us a nice report. And also the fellow who does "Blue Light Central" [WSRK deejay Mark Drnek], I gave him a CD. So I got radio play from two or three deejays off of that night, a write-up in the *Herald*, I got some gigs out of it. Through Dana [Westover, booker for Johnny D's, and also one of the competition judges], I got into Johnny D's. So it was a win for me, and it was a blast."

McQuaid's optimism is buoyed by the fact that he has a strong album to back up his act. Released in 2004, *Passing It On* is a tribute not only to prewar blues masters such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Skip James, and Willie McTell, but also to the modern-day teachers who helped McQuaid navigate the

Juke Joint Session

Producer Frank Coakley on *Passing It On*

Frank Coakley's many producing credits include Elijah Wald's *Street Corner Cowboys*, Fishken & Groves's *Going to the West*, and Geoff Bartley's *One Kind Word and Hear That Wind Howl*. Coakley recorded Bill McQuaid's debut album, *Passing It On*, at Wellspring Sound in 2004. Some of the producer's comments on the recording sessions follow.

ON THE PREPRODUCTION:

We started out, the idea was that it would be a solo record, and maybe have someone sit in on harmonica or something like that. But then as we worked on the songs more and more, we realized we wanted to flesh the songs out a little bit more.

You know, one of the things we felt wasn't heard enough was the fact that a lot of the blues, when they were played back in the '20s and '30s, were played in juke joints, and, sure, it might be an individual artist, whether it's it Charlie Patton, Son House, or whoever playing the gig, but people would sit in with him, and it would become the local string band. You know, it would be a jam. And everyone would get up and dance. I mean, that's what the blues was all about, was going out getting a little juke joint going, so people would

drink and dance and have a good time. It was dancing music. And we really thought that having an ensemble, having other guys sitting in, would really give that feel to it.

Basically I was listening to the same things that Bill was listening to. And we would do our practice recordings—he has a small home studio, and so I would listen to what he was doing, we'd compare it to what the original recording sounded like, and we'd talk about his playing and where he wanted to go with the song. So it really was just sort of honing Bill's performance so that it flowed naturally and had the same sort of immediacy that the original recordings had. That stuff was done in a couple of takes in front of a microphone in the old days. So part of what we had in mind was to recreate that, but also to get the spontaneity and immediacy, and just the power of what the original blues players did.

ON THE ARRANGEMENTS:

Bill had his arrangements pretty well in hand. By the time we got the guys together, we did a couple of rehearsals, I think it was two or three rehearsals with the guys, before we went in, just so that we could let them know what the arrangements were. So that was pretty straight-ahead stuff for the guys who were playing. I mean, they're all pros. And part of what the rehearsals were for was to see what these guys would

bring to it, what they would add to it. And really what happened was that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. It was very synergistic. It became bigger than what we expected. All of a sudden some of these songs took on a life of their own. And that's what happens in a good recording session—the song just comes to life, and it becomes a thing of its own. And that happened with, I would say, just about every song on the record, they just really came alive.

I mean, there were a couple songs we tried that we didn't feel were ready, and we dropped those. We took a couple whacks at 'em and said, "No, we'll let that one sit for a little bit." Those songs are now in Bill's repertoire, but we decided that those didn't work yet for that particular record—they weren't "there yet," if you will.

One of the things that we really enjoyed most in the session was the fact that we got all the guys in the room together and let them go. Yeah, we did some cleanups with some overdubs and stuff like that, just to perfect a couple things and clean up some vocal stuff. But what happened when we had all those guys in the room together was just amazing, and that's basically what you hear on the record.

ON JIM FITTING AND STEVE SADLER:

I had seen Jimmy play around town over the years—you know, Treat Her Right and all that kind of stuff. So

music—namely, Paul Rishell, Bertrand Laurence, Geoff Bartley, and Scott Ainslie. The album showcases McQuaid in a loose-knit acoustic band made up of Jim Fitting on harmonica, Paul Kochanski on upright bass, and Steve Sadler on Dobro, 12-string guitar, and mandolin. The result is a bluesy string-band romp, similar in spirit to the raucous Howard Armstrong combos that used to burn it up on “State Street Rag” and the like.

Passing It On was produced by Frank Coakley, who has recorded a number of local roots musicians, including Geoff Bartley, Fishken & Groves, and Elijah Wald. Part of the fun of recording *Passing It On*, Coakley remembers, was just keeping pace with McQuaid’s excitement: “We went into the studio, and boy, he just took off. It was probably one of the best recording sessions I’ve ever done.”

Not a bad compliment for a recording artist’s first album. Perhaps even more striking is just how fast McQuaid has picked up a feel for country blues; it’s been only six years since he started out at open mikes, and he wasn’t playing any blues back then. McQuaid gives a lot of credit to the musicians who have shared ideas with him, and on *Passing It On* it was important for him to express his gratitude.

“We had recorded and produced the CD,” McQuaid explains, “and we were working on the cover art and I didn’t have a title, and I came into Toad for a beer with Frank after we mastered it. Paul Rishell and Annie Raines were playing here, and that’s when I decided that the concept of ‘passing it on’ was going to be the title. Paul was one of my teachers along the way. By the time I’d gotten to Paul, I had already studied fingerstyle guitar. And it’s kind of an interesting progression—I started as a songwriter, started going to open mikes, saw Geoff Bartley play, and decided I needed to learn fingerstyle. At that time I had just moved to Porter Square. Then I met Bertrand Laurence, and I started studying Nash-

ville fingerstyle, all kinds of fingerstyle guitar playing—Chet Atkins, Merle Travis, Jerry Reed, Jorma Kaukonen. And I was spending a lot of time on the pieces. Bertrand was a great teacher, and he got me through the rudiments.

“Then I got introduced to the country blues from him. I learned a Mississippi John Hurt song and a Blind Boy Fuller song, and I realized that with these songs, I was able to learn them faster and was having more fun because there’s singing involved, and I love to sing. And I started to get videotapes, tablature, and one day I met Paul Rishell. And I took a lesson with him and he taught me seven songs in one lesson, gave me a history lesson, and told me that in order to get this music down you have to really listen to the original masters and have a true appreciation. And you’re not going to get that [just by] studying tablature. The whole scheme was how to really pay respect to the original masters, how to *perform* the country blues. It’s not only the technical guitar parts that a lot of the guitar nerds love. It’s getting that down so you can see through it, and then claiming it your own in some way.”

Rishell’s advice still resonates deeply for McQuaid. Of course, it also opened up a huge quandary artistically: how do you “respectfully” perform music that was invented 80 years ago and still make it your own? That’s something McQuaid is still figuring out. But he’s getting closer to the answer with each performance—and his fans can already sense him grasping it.

“Bill has just absolutely blossomed and matured over the past couple years as a performer,” observes Coakley. “I mean, he’s always played well, but as far as playing the blues out, as far as being a live performer, he’s just really come into his own recently, and he just continually astounds me with some of the stuff he comes up with and how good he’s getting...I’ve never met anyone who’s worked so hard. I mean, he listened to the blues from the original recordings, from the artists who wrote

I knew Jimmy and seen him play and knew he was a fantastic harmonica player. So he was my first choice when we did decide to add some harmonica. So that’s how that came about.

Steve is my secret weapon. You know, I’ve produced a number of records, and he’s one of my go-to guys, he just has this huge musical brain. I mean, you put anything with strings and a pickup in front of him, and he’s gonna make it sing. He’s just an amazing, amazing musician. He just gets it. Plus he’s a delightful guy. And I thought that Steve and Bill would hit it off, which they did, musically.

One of my favorite performances with the two of them was when they played “Statesboro Blues.” We went back to the original Willie McTell version, which was actually played very slowly. I mean, most people know “Statesboro” through the Allman Brothers, I guess, and that’s a rock ‘n’ roll song. But you listen to the original Willie McTell and it’s kind of slow, and so we said, “Well let’s start this one out slow.” And Steve was playing mandolin, and then we also had Steve add an octave mandolin, I believe is the way it went. But we just wanted it to be eerie, and we just started very slow, and let it build—so the tempo builds through the song. That performance, with the two of them working off of each was just, you know, the hair on the back of my neck just stood up when they did it.

ON BARBECUE BOB’S “YO YO BLUES”:

I felt like I really wanted to have one of the songs on the CD just really jump up, you know, be a real dance tune. And you know, Bill was working hard at it, and it was one of those songs that wasn’t quite there in rehearsals, but we said, “Let’s go with it, this has great potential.” And Bill, as usual, just worked his ass off, and really went after the song.

But then when we added Paul Kochanski on bass, that’s when that song just took off. It just gave it that sort of rock bottom: it just propelled the song, and it just took off and had tremendous energy. The bass really helped. And it was just one of those songs we weren’t quite sure if that was going to make it or not. Bill wasn’t quite sure if he was there with it, and then we got a take that just absolutely worked, and so we went with it. And in fact, that song as Bill plays it now is much, much better. He had just sort of mastered that song when we did the record, and now it’s one of his most solid songs in his repertoire.

To me, that’s an important thing. You know, anytime you make a CD with an artist, especially their first or second CD, it’s a real growing process. And that’s one of the things that a CD will do for an artist: it does sort of take you to the next level, because you want the CD to be as good as you possibly can, so you push yourself. And part of my role as a producer is to push the artist a little bit, to get them to the next level.

ON HIS APPROACH TO RECORDING:

I guess the thing is, I specialize in acoustic recordings. I don’t put the music through all kinds of boxes and computers and all that kind of stuff. I don’t try to make it ‘perfect’ in the musical sense. Especially the blues. You know, the blues isn’t about having perfect time, the blues isn’t about having a perfect groove, or playing every note just perfectly. It’s about the feeling you play with, and letting that come through in the recording. So to me, that’s what you look for in a great blues recording. You want that moment just to live on the record, you want it to pop—that moment of inspiration. You’re just looking for that great take where everyone was just into the song, and especially with Bill, just getting him to knock it out of the park.

You know, a lot of these songs we took multiple takes at, but I would never go more than three or four takes. And if it wasn’t working, we’d just move on. And a couple songs we had to come back to a couple times. We’d say, “Let’s go back to this next week,” or, “Toward the end of the sessions, we’ll come back and revisit this one”—if it wasn’t quite working.

But I’d say almost half the songs we got in the first or second take. We might do a vocal overdub to clean a few things up. But when we had all those guys together it was just amazing.

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ON LETTING PLAYERS RUN WITH IT:

When I'm working with people of that caliber, far be it for me to tell them what to play. To me, that's just backward. You have these great players, and basically, you say, "Okay, you guys know this material, we've run it down. Just take it where it goes." And everyone had enough respect for each other to trust each other.

Jim Fitting, I mean, some of the harp parts that he came up with I just would never have imagined. He's just such a master. And everyone would just react to what everyone else was doing. When Jim would come up with these incredible harp parts, everyone would react to it, and play and go with it. So I let the players take the song where it feels like it's going. And maybe we'll hear something and say, "No, that probably didn't work, we didn't want to go there," and everyone pretty much knows it when it goes down. So on the second take we'll just tighten it up just a little bit, change things slightly. But I pretty much leave it up to the players to come up with their own parts.

ON MCQUAID'S ENGINEERING EXPERIENCE:

It's a huge factor. There is a comfort level for Bill in being in a studio that was a tremendous advantage for him. Because he knew the process, he knew how I worked, he knows how the studio works, so he had a sense of being a recording artist. To me, being a recording artist and being a live performance artist are really two different skill sets. And Bill had a good sense of what it would take in the studio to make a great recording. So that was a real advantage for him to know the process.

ON THE "ILLINOIS EFFECT":

That was stuff that I did when we mixed the record. We recorded everything dry, and pretty flat, and "Illinois" is really the only song where I sort of got into the black arts in the studio, and started plugging things in. But it's such a spooky song—it's a very, very spooky song—and I felt like we could play with this just a little bit. And I felt that running his National through an organ Leslie would just give it a little wobble, a slightly spookier sound, and it just seemed like a good idea to try at the time. I wasn't wedded to it, and I said, "Well, let's give it a shot." I mean, I kind of liked it. So I actually took his guitar, recorded it dry, and ran it into an old Fender Blackface, I think it was a Deluxe, an old tube amp, and then I sent that signal—I mean, I kind of crunched it up a little bit—and I sent that signal to the organ Leslie, and put that in a big studio, and put a couple mikes in the room just so I could hear a big room sound with the organ Leslie. And then I put that on separate tracks, and then when I mixed it down, I just added a little bit of that behind the guitar. It doesn't overpower the guitar, but it just gives it a slightly different sound. It sort of gives a little extra spook to the track!

the songs, and he really just pays attention, and he wants to be as true to the artists who wrote the songs originally. And I can think of few players who really take it to that level, and are able to pull that off. You know, he's always been able to play that style, and get what those guys were doing. But now he *owns* it. He's playing traditional blues, but he's just very sure of himself, he has a great confidence, and he's really singing out in a great way."

McQuaid and Coakley first met at the Cantab Lounge in Cambridge. At the time, McQuaid, who freelances as a recording engineer, had been working with Bertrand Laurence (the deal being that in exchange for his engineering hours, McQuaid got guitar lessons), and Coakley had been producing one of Geoff Bartley's albums.

"Bill and I just started talking about music," Coakley recalls, "and in particular the blues, which we both loved. And we wound up sitting up till about three in the morning talking about the blues. He had his guitar out and was just playing things, and we just hit it off. From there, we did a couple projects where he worked as an engineer for me and as an assistant producer on a couple projects that I was doing, and we sort of just collaborated on that. Then finally it was time for him to do his record, and there was no way in hell I wasn't going to do his record."

The recording sessions took place at Wellspring Sound, in Acton, where Coakley and McQuaid had previously worked together as producer and engineer. Now on opposite sides of the glass, the two kept their working relationship intact. McQuaid knew he was in good hands—and not just good hands, but good hands in a good studio.

"What I learned was, as an engineer, to get a great team," he says. "And the first ingredient is to get a great producer, and to build a great team around you, so I could do my job. And Frank Coakley was part of that. And the mixer, Huck Bennert. And we did it in an environment where we're used to working in: Wellspring. We knew all the toys, we knew all the microphones."

Within these comfy surroundings, however, lurked a potentially big unknown: the band. The musicians Coakley tapped to round out the session—

Jim Fitting, Paul Kochanski, and Steve Sadler—were not too familiar with McQuaid musically. (Granted, Fitting, Kochanski, and Sadler all knew each other from their years as working musicians on the Boston scene.) Most of the preproduction work had involved only McQuaid and Coakley, since they had originally conceived the album as a solo recording.

"We did a lot of preproduction," adds McQuaid. "I recorded about 25 solo pieces, and we critiqued them. And then it was a question of how do we want to do it. And we immediately said we want to perform it live—that's the way the music is. And we knew that we could do a traditional, solo, organic-sounding recording, or we could do something that was a more modern recording that still captured the real essence—like a 'nouveau blues cuisine'—and we would add different flavors and instruments that younger people were used to listening to."

After opting for the ensemble approach, McQuaid and Coakley started talking about musicians. The vintage of the material (mostly Depression-era blues and ragtime numbers) demanded players who knew traditional styles inside out. But Coakley also wanted players who weren't chained to the idioms, so that they could improvise off of each other. Fitting and Sadler were at the top of his list.

"I had jammed with Jim Fitting before," notes McQuaid. "He just brought over a bottle of wine one night, and we jammed, had a real good time. And Steve Sadler, I had worked with him in the studio—he's just an amazing player, very adaptable. Now the thing is, Steve is not a blues musician per se. I mean, he plays on all kinds of stuff. He has a profound love for the blues, but he's just a creative player. Jim Fitting is more like a rock 'n' roll harmonica player. Now, the two of them together, it's quite a combination, because Jim has more ideas than almost any musician I've ever played with, and Sadler will hear those ideas and work them—he hears it and he can move on a dime. And it created a very interesting dynamic. I was very loose with my requests for the players, and Frank also had some input, but it was going to sound like what maybe a juke joint sounded like. So instead of recreating the songs verbatim, we let it roll like a jam might have happened. And then we added Paul Ko-

chanski on upright bass. And upright bass is not necessarily a country blues instrument at all, but we wanted it on a string-band arrangement. We actually tried to get Howard Armstrong to play fiddle on one of the songs, but he was in the hospital when we called him, and he passed away shortly thereafter."

The band's rehearsals—all two of them—didn't do much to suggest the coherence of the finished recorded product. Coakley was much more concerned with getting the right feeling in the studio than he was with prearranging the parts. He also expected that the musicians would figure out how to elevate the music when it came time to record—which they did. The catalyst turned out to be Jim Fitting, who, after years of playing with rock acts such as the Coots, the The, and Treat Her Right, was experiencing a personal sort of Renaissance by getting back to his acoustic roots on *Passing It On*.

"It was really up my alley," says Fitting, "because it's kind of where I first started playing. My brother played Dobro and all that acoustic stuff, and so when I first started playing harmonica back when I was a teenager, that's what I was doing. And then I've kind of moved away from that over the years playing in rock 'n' roll bands. So it was really fun to go back to that style—like the Robert Johnson song, 'Kind Hearted Woman.' We played that one together for years, my brother and I.

"For me, going back to that kind of material after not really doing it for years and years, I think it brought out some good things in me and in my technique. Just getting together and playing, I'm at my best without thinking about it too much, and then when you play you find something that works and jump on it. I'm able to do that when I'm lucky, and I was lucky a couple times to find good parts with Bill's stuff. Like 'Green Rocky Road,' the parts that I found on that, that rhythm part for me is my favorite part of the whole record, and they made the harmonica sound beautiful—the harmonica sounds fucking awesome on that. That's my beat, in a sense, that I can get a rhythmic pattern over that. That's a pattern that I've had in my head for a while, but I never had a chance to record it. It just was a nice coincidence that I was able to use it on that song."

In addition to standards such as "Big Road Blues" and "Statesboro Blues," *Passing It On* offers a handful of lesser

known gems, such as "Green Rocky Road," Barbecue Bob's "Yo Yo Blues," Son House's "Depot Blues," Skip James's "Illinois Blues," and Dave Van Ronk's "Sunday Street." The list may seem a bit scattershot, but for McQuaid it makes perfect sense.

"I embraced this music not thinking I was going to be recording a CD," he says, "and I developed a large repertoire. By the time I recorded, I had about 60 or 70 songs in my repertoire, and they're all quirky, they're all interesting. The reason why I chose some of these songs [for *Passing It On*] is because I had tried them on the crowd for so long. You know, I'd play at open mike and I took the ones that really got a good response. We experimented with a lot of songs with the ensemble, and some strange results happened. You know, some songs just popped, and instead of fighting it we went with it. We were eating a lot of Redbones barbecue—Redbones donated some ribs—and we were drinking some beer, and we were just having a good time hanging out as friends, and we were just trying to let it create itself. And we kept the songs that worked."

Being an engineer himself, McQuaid was keenly aware of the recording setups used, and how they enhanced the sound or the musicians' performance. "We wanted to keep it organic," he explains. "So the effects on the CD are not digital effects, they're more acoustic effects. For instance, I hired musicians, and they're not gonna screw up. I might screw up, so they stuck me in an isolation booth, and they put all these mikes around me, and we performed live. And in the case that I screwed up I'd have the option to go back and fix something. So I'm not in the same room as them, and we used electrostatic speakers—played me through the room, re-miked me through electrostatic speakers and got an ambient sound."

(As Jim Fitting points out, "It sounded so good on the headphones, it was a blast. I mean, we had a really good time recording. You know, I know Paul Rishell very well, and Bill studied with Paul, and Paul is fucking awesome, and that's such a high plane to be trying to achieve, such a high level of quality. So maybe Bill was paranoid about [making a mistake]. But we didn't have to do many takes. He was spot-on and clean, and doing both the vocals and the guitar parts. We were just trying to keep up with him.")

The recording team's choice of microphones was another important detail. "We selected very interesting microphones for the National," McQuaid recalls. "Drum microphones—Sennheiser microphones. We used a Blueberry microphone for the vocals. So we used a Deluxe, you know, a big diaphragm mike, for the vocals. We used a ribbon microphone for the harmonica, and during one of the songs the harmonica stuck to the magnet—*ping!* Of course, for Skip James, we had to do something extra special, and we decided to pipe the guitar and re-amp it, and we stuck it through an amplifier, which we did on a number of songs. It was just my National, but we re-amped the pickup. And we said, 'Geez, this just isn't enough. We need to route it into the A-Room, into this big basketball court arena, and then we need to stick it through a Leslie speaker.' And I think by the time we were done we had about nine tracks for the guitar. And of course if you listen on the most expensive speakers available, you'll be able to hear all the little nuances that we captured." He adds, with a laugh, "On a boom box, it really won't work!"

Although *Passing It On* has been in release for less than a year, McQuaid is already thinking ahead to his next album. "I would like to do it within a year," he says. "I would like to go back into the studio in a year and just do it. I've been through the process, and I know I can pull it off. I have a lot of ideas for songs, and some originals. It's not going to be a dramatic departure in the production. But the music itself will be more Piedmont-oriented, and I feel I've got to get that out of my system before I move on."

McQuaid had originally planned to include some ragtime blues on *Passing It On*—songs like Blind Blake's "Sweet Jivin' Mama" and "Police Dog Blues"—but they never quite gelled as well as the Delta blues material during the sessions. Since then, he has continued to work hard on his Piedmont repertoire, and made it a staple of his live shows.

As for his future return to the recording studio, McQuaid hints that he might be bringing along a couple new instruments with him. "I have a bizarre desire to have banjo on the next one," he says. "I've been listening to a lot of Dock Boggs." When not playing his National or his clawhammer banjo, McQuaid has been practicing more with

his 12-string guitar, which he also hopes to record with.

“Leadbelly,” he says. “That’s something that’s still beyond me that I’m working on.”

Sure enough, McQuaid has gone through this process of study many, many times before—and his fans have come to realize that it always pays off for him (and them) with a great song in the end.

McQuaid finds it hard to imagine his baptism into the blues happening anywhere other than his own backyard.

“Cambridge is such a rich town for music,” he says. “I met Geoff Bartley by going to his open mike at the Cantab. I met Scott Ainslie, who wrote the Robert Johnson transcriptions [*Robert Johnson: At the Crossroads* (1992)], by going to the WUMB Summer Acoustic Music Week. I met Reverend Robert Jones. I met Doug MacLeod through the Blues Fest last summer. And every one I meet, I take lessons from—just show me, show me what you know. And sometimes I’ll even show them. But it’s just that these venues around here give everybody an opportunity to help this music. And the roots music is just everywhere around here. I mean, coming out, hanging out, and listening to people is also a great way to network and to raise the bar. There are just so many amazing musicians in this town that I came out and raised my expectations of myself, and it made me want to strive to better myself—to the point where I don’t think I could have been motivated like this by just listening to records. Coming out and seeing people do it in front of you just opens doors.”

In particular, McQuaid remembers his encounter with MacLeod, who ran a guitar workshop at the 2004 Boston Blues Festival, as a turning point: “He said a few very philosophical things that opened up a lot of doors. And it’s that this is an expression—it’s you expressing yourself—and whatever you want to say is okay for you to say it. And the way you say it is okay. And it’s kind of given me a license to be myself, and it’s really a great thing, you know, because you want to respect

the masters, you want to learn the idiom, you want to understand to the best of our ability. Of course, we’re not picking cotton and living the life that they lived, but we’re able to learn about it. And there’s a trap that is something that the originals didn’t fall into: not being yourself. And Doug gave me license to be myself.

“I mean, without sounding completely unoriginal, Paul Rishell said—and I paraphrase—‘I’m a server, I’m a waiter, serving you this dish.’ And there’s no way that you, me—you know, I’m a white guy playing the blues—or even a black man playing the blues today will know what it was like to be black in Mississippi in 1929. It’s not that way anymore. You can read books, you can meet Honeyboy Edwards and read about it. So there’s this approach you have to take. I mean, you’re not going to be that person. I find that reading about the originals, the more information, the more knowledge I have about it, the better I am at trying to serve it up. But it’s something to be taken very seriously. And I deeply respect the people that wrote this music. I consider them to be geniuses. And with that respect, you begin to be able to deliver it.

There are times when he performs that McQuaid can make the blues look remarkably easy. To his listeners, the songs may sound complete, but McQuaid thinks of his approach to music as a constant work in progress. With each technique learned, there is also a history that must be learned, and the puzzle of how to find self-expression within these contexts is never easily defined.

“Learning the music, and playing it note for note, is not the whole thing,” McQuaid explains. “It’s the beginning. When you can actually play it, sing it, and have the thing come together without clamping up too much, you are finally able to start to deliver it. And when you get a deeper feeling for performing it, now you’re on track—now you’re beginning your journey. And that’s the beauty of it, that it’s so rich and deep, and it just keeps going.”

Visit www.billmcquaid.net for information on McQuaid’s performance schedule. The album *Passing It On* is available on CD Baby at www.cdbaby.com/cd/billmcquaid.