

From Gerald Clark with love: A personal update

 By Johann M. Smith

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A month ago, Gerald Clark released "Black Water"; it came bearing more weight than any recent blues attempt from SA, primarily because the 13-track album was hallmarked with the public's official stamp of higher regard - because (as the public knows very well) it's the album that was launched the same night that Clark had to undergo surgery to remove a growth that was obstructing his vocal chords.



In an exclusive interview, Gerald Clark let's spill on what's been occupying him during recovery and whereto from here. But before passing on the relevant info, here's a belated but necessary review of "Black Water". Before you skip to the bottom, here's why: you wouldn't be wrong in thinking this review comes late, as it requires a minimum of 30 days and 30 nights to appreciate any Clark (and blues) album. It's true that he deserves anything but a willy-nilly rushed fanfare review with empty hype and expected sympathy. However, the real reason comes from a deeply rooted respect for music: in essence, now that the shock of his surgery has cooled down, any speck of artistic credibility BW might or might not have can be discovered. Because, strictly speaking, this album firstly needs to be judged by its own merit only. Full stop*.

A different guitar, a different shade of blue

The blues, what more can be said - both from the artists who still make them and the humble folk who review them. For nearly a century, dictionaries have been twisted, torn and exhausted as much as the guitars in the blues they have attempted to describe. Suffice it to say, an apt description remains elusive, as much as the blues remains a quintessential craft that all musicians (yes, even John Lee Hooker) will never permanently master. If I told you anything more than that, it would be more than you ever needed to know.

Still reading? Good. Let's give it one more stab and hope that we draw new blood: enter Gerald Clark's "Black Water". Firstly, dearest ladies and gentlemen, don't expect the usual prostituting pass around of a Fender Strat and its tinny squeal. Rather, anticipate the dazzling harmony of a single coil Gibson sporting a hollow body: single coil because the sound is more crude, and with two coils the sound gets dampened and flattened for louder playing (therefore, managing with one is also evidence of delicate finger-work); and hollow body because, like an acoustic, the strings carry a ring further.

The result is more Elmore James fluidity than Led Zeppelin bombast, that's simply put: rich sleaze not filthy garage. Under and throughout its soothingly elegant and subtly intoxicating. Like any good diddle expected on the playlist of a smokey New York establishment (frequented only by worldly patrons oblivious to the idea of skinny jeans), BW is an attempt au fait with fine taste.

[Live Music :: Gerald Clark :: Black Water](#) from [Goosebump Productions](#) on [Vimeo](#).

A right to sing the blues

The first track is encouragingly titled It Ain't You. The first lines claim what the name might only suggest: he's earned the right to sing the blues. Guitars start heavy, as if trudging through muddy waters (yeah corny pun, couldn't resist), and, very much like a greeting expected from a sweaty tired regular finding comfort on his favourite bar stool, Clark opens up discreetly already seeming sick of attempting anything social: "Well ... " he pauses, takes a silent breath, and hits a note that stretches across the next four bars, "I've beeeeeeeeeen aroooooooooound".

Like most bands nowadays subscribing to the blues as a hip creative outlet, it's mostly sans bass guitar from start to finish. But, notably, Clark doesn't mimic the familiar classics with cult statuses more recognisable than the music they created (e.g. ever notice how many know Robert Johnson's Crossroads tale, compared to how many actually know his songs?). He just does what he loves, just like the legends who gave it to him.

And with a degree of integrity, BW doesn't cleverly disguise its sources of inspiration. Clark gives noticeable recognition usually awarded ad nauseam to names rife in most modern blues bands, to ones we need more reminding of. Case and point with track three, Giving Up On Love, an adequate aide mémoire of Sonny Boy Williamson II - an influential 1950s' figure known for a certain aptitude and allure that has made a very welcome reappearance in "Black Water".

Concrete validation

Ultimately, he's achieved the concrete validation that's always been beckoning and slightly lacking, highlighting the love he has for the beauty in blues' uglier cousin: Chicago house, to which he's always added a trademark country ring with token accentuated accents - only this time it's inseparable and part of the whole he's crafted for so long, that simple but always difficult melody usually familiar with your elders, not trendoid friends.

And in doing so, the curly orange-headed white dude from SA once again reveals why he deserves devoted attention; he's taken so-called soft blues and unveiled its forgotten lucid charm that lost its flicker in the abyss of kitsch two decades ago - only so because it was over-played one too many times, and for a damn good reason. Hopefully, one day he'll be added to the South African blues legacy left by Albert Frost, not a postmodern victim considered for his exceptional flattery of dead American icons. Only a fan's love can tell.

I could go on, most likely forever. Basically, each and every track has got 'it'. By it, I mean that something your ears (and your soul's hidden nerves) are always open for, that certain magic beyond description: not just a blues ting, but something that replaced poetry with a twang and said more than any straight statement ever try to preach to broken hearts possessed by the blue devils.

And, if 'it' is what you need; if 'it' is what you've been desperately searching for. Gerald Clark on Black Water owns it.

And now, the reason why you're probably reading this.

Gerald Clark : A personal update

He's confirmed it several times already and it's no different this time: Gerald Clark will be back come the end of October for his national "Black Water" tour during November and December (official dates and places TBC). However, coming any day now is the video launch of BW - produced and directed by the international award-nominated Yesterfang (Mr Cat & The



Jackal, Captain Stu).

Also, as some fans have been suspecting for long, he's reviewing logistics for a possible international tour. And, very surprisingly, he's crafting a little project that he intends to pitch for TV. Details remain a mystery - whether he fully recovers emotionally or physically, for all intents and purposes he appears to be in a nonspecific broad state of recovery and reflection - almost losing his voice was no doubt a reminder that sometimes life is unnecessarily blue and unfair.

While still in recovery, Clark spends the bulk of his borrowed time finding his spiritual kicks riding stallions on a farm located in Mossel Bay. And so, without much rock 'n' roll humdrum, here's a little bit more about something else that's also near and dear to Gerald Clark's heart: horses.

Do you own a horse? What's his/her name?

Not yet, but I'm busy training one in Stellenbosch called Shilwan. His grandfather is from a well-known bloodline called Zhadan. His mother is the only mare that survived the tragic flu that crippled horse breeds in 1999. All the others sadly passed away on the Rozendal farm in Stellenbosch.

How long have you been fostering this passion?

I was already on a horse when I was a few months old. My father passed away four days after my second birthday, for which he bought me saddle horse that was at the time a five-time SA champion. So my grandfather always used to fetch us when I grew up. He used to purchase neglected herds that he nurtured back to health and would school and sell as riding horses. My uncle, who joined the SA Defence Force, also trained horses that patrolled the border of Angola - he eventually worked for a certain Michael de Kock a famous horseracing trainer.

Can you recommend any farms or organisations that other horse lovers can contact to get involved?

The SarukArabian farm in Albertinia is the only one of its kind in SA. They look after a herd of 200, from which a selected few are owned by overseas clients, like the Sheik from Abu Dhabi who's a current a world champion; the prince of Bahrein; and Ernie Els' wife, Liezle Els. They're also in a constant state of training a dozen horses at a time for international races.

They have an open day on 15 December that will showcase pure-bred desert Arabian stallions and a few top breeding mares. It will happen at Gourits River, and in junction with a photo and art exhibition. There will also be a Moroccan potjie with 'n moerse pot constantly fired up all day long. This year we're also stocking up on craft beers available on tap.

Any performances by yourself?

My band and I will be playing a few blues tunes before sunset and delivered in two sets and, afterwards, we're going to rely on some recorded favourites, 'geen doef-doef kak gaan gespeel word nie' - myself and the dude from the Great Apes (also son of a farm owner) are the DJs the whole night. Anybody who enjoys horses, music and art is welcome to join us.

Interested campers can reach him through his media contacts found online at www.geraldclark.co.za

Get well soon Gerald Clark, and please don't ever consider being cool like all the others.

P.S. As a parting thought and a friendly remark to certain critics out there: Whether it's a part of Clark's marketing spiel or not, it doesn't matter, don't ever compare him to Jack Johnson - that's like comparing Jesus Freaks to the Pope. If you really need a generic scape goat you can pin him on, try Ben Harper.

**Just to make sure nobody gets upset: It's not other reviews haven't fairly judged BW, but like any rational individual familiar with blues devils, and the commitment involved in wrestling the little vexing bastards using your soul, will understand: vocal chords are no doubt any singer's most valuable asset, but its only second to what they've given their lives, learning how to express and justly articulating what's most important - whatever ticks true in their heart. All things considered, Clark can be proud no matter what hassles him medically, he's already accomplished much tougher feats with music anyway.*

ABOUT JOHANN M. SMITH

Johann MSmith is a music journalist turned content hacker. Known as the IDMMAG launch designer, Johann specialises in entertainment, travel and social commentary. Or as he puts it: "I speak as and for companies through social and design."

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