



## Bernie Pearl

### Better Late Than Never

**A**T AN AGE WHEN MOST folks are thinking more about spending time in an easy chair or touring the country in a motorhome, 68-year-old Bernie Pearl is making his big push. His new CD, *Live From Boulevard Music*, captures an acoustic blues wizard who fully understands the nuances of the music.

"Mysinging and playing have both improved since recording that CD," he said. "I feel like I'm progressing, paying more attention, and enjoying it that much more."

Pearl's musical journey began in the early 1950s when two siblings became involved in the West Coast folk scene. "My brother had a folksong club at U.C.L.A. and made a deal on a dozen guitars from a dealer; they'd sold 11 and my brother asked if I wanted a guitar. That's how I got in."

Pearl was aware of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, as well as Leadbelly, Reverend Gary Davis and Brownie McGhee, and Sonny Terry. "But I really became attached to the blues when I started actually seeing the blues artists. My brother, Ed, opened

The Ashgrove club in 1958. His first act was Brownie McGhee. I remember going to see a folk artist, and his opening act was Jesse Fuller. When I heard him, I started marching to a different drummer. It was a revelation. Then came Lightnin' Hopkins, and I was gone!"

Pearl earned a degree at U.C.L.A. but says, "In the back of my mind, I thought I might become a professional blues artist."

His journey included Pearl picking up the electric guitar along the way. "Willie Dixon came to the Ashgrove and served as the connection for people like Johnny Shines, Walter Horton, and Magic Sam. I had the Ashgrove house blues band for years, so when someone came to town, I had a band."

As for guitars, Bernie still has a Martin OO-17 he bought from his brother when he was 16. He also

has a National that he treasures. "I took it to National's Huntington Beach factory when I first got it. The nephew of the original owners looked in his catalog and records and said, 'Well, I don't show it because there's an 'X,' which means it's an experimental guitar.' I've been told it's a Style O, but I'm not sure. But it's the engraving that makes it special. He estimated that since it's a kind of deco artwork that it would be late '30s or early '40s. Bob Brozman, who has done as much study on Nationals as anyone, told me it's one of three that were made in this model. I gig with that and a nice Kona acoustic lap steel."

Pearl uses a microphone to amplify the sound of his acoustics and when it's time to electrify, he reaches first for a Gibson ES-355, which is not a common slide-style guitar.

"There's a guy—a longshoreman—who started making guitars. He gave me one and told me it would be on indefinite loan as long as I gave out some of his business cards at gigs. He made a few of the guitars and disappeared. He called it a Nele, because he fused National and Telecaster concepts. It looks like a Tele, but it's got a resonator in it. It's got a real nice sound."

Pearl on occasion also uses a couple of older guitars though he's not sure of their age. One is an Epiphone, the other a Kalamazoo. His amp of choice is a Music Man with four 10" speakers. His style of picking has evolved over the years, too; he is now down to just a thumbpick and his fingers on both electric and acoustic. "I used to use a plectrum for electric, but decided 10 or 12 years ago I just wasn't comfortable with it."

While Pearl's new live disc highlights his acoustic playing, he says he hopes to expand a bit with his next recording. "I'm working on the record. It's self-produced and should be out early next year. Chances are it'll be a combination of electric and traditional old country-blues on acoustic. The electric stuff will probably lean toward a '50s-style Junior Parker kind of thing. I really have an affinity for that music."

Beyond that, Pearl's plans are pretty simple. "I'm just doing what comes naturally. At this point I don't want to go back. I'm exploring my own musicality." — *John Heidt*

