

# JOHN CAMPBELL

although it might have been marketed a bit more by the label. There are many stories around John of strange things happening, ghost stories etc. It is well known that John had the ability to perform mind boggling magic, especially close up card tricks. He was also known to perform extremely difficult trick shots on the pool table. Pretty impressive for a man with severely reduced vision. I think more than anything this says it all about his dexterity and speed of hand movement. Despite these voodoo images everybody who ever met John talks enthusiastically about how he never took a dislike to anyone. He seems to have been one of life's true gentlemen, always charming, always freely giving his time. He had a gift of making contact with his audience, making them feel special and meeting and chatting easily after shows. On stage though he became transformed playing with ferocious intent and passion. Witnessing a single gig often made people lifetime disciples.

John was also very generous towards other musicians, especially if he thought he could see potential in young performers. He enjoyed passing on skills and techniques. Perhaps one of the better known youngsters he helped is Malcolm Wellborne a.k.a. Papa Mali. Help that Mali acknowledges at most live shows even now. John's bassist Jimmy Pettit tells of a trip to Stockholm when John gifted a handmade Trussart guitar worth at least 5k dollars to a young unknown Ukrainian because he had sensed something special in the young man's playing.

Around the time of signing for Elektra John started to assemble a top class band to record and tour with him. Grammy award winning producer Dennis Walker was brought on board to produce and help write. Walker had achieved great success with introducing Robert Cray to a wider audience. The album One Believer was released in September 1991. It is a powerful album with dark imagery and social comment made even more powerful by John's growling vocals and a tight band supporting his fluid playing. Having settled on a lineup of Zonder Kennedy, Jimmy Pettit (Joe Ely Band) and Davis McLarty the band supported Buddy Guy on a gruelling tour of U.S. and Europe. Witnesses tell of a band on fire, most people after the shows talking more about John Campbell than the headliners. John often got the chance to jam with Buddy at these shows sometimes joined by special guests like Sonny Landreth. John mostly came out on top. Less than a year after "One Believer" and straight from the tour the band went back to the studio with Dennis Walker to record "Howlin' Mercy". This time it was completed in just a few days, capturing even more the raw energy of a well drilled road honed band. John's vocals were even more unworldly and the dark imagery just as powerful. Almost immediately they were back on tour, this time co-headlining with Chris Whitley, and then in the New Year back again touring U.S.A. and Europe. By now Robert Medici (John Cale, Lou Reed, Roger Daltry) had replaced McLarty on drums. In June '93 John was starting to rehearse a third Elektra release in as many years and preparing for another national tour with Buddy Guy. Tommy Shannon, Stevie Ray Vaughans bass player, had joined John in the studio for rehearsals.

Less than two weeks later John had died. He had poor health ever since the accident, his lung never fully reflat, and the constant touring and workload must have taken its toll. He had always struggled to sleep, talking about a recurring nightmare that he would die whilst asleep. This proved to be true cause John suffered heart failure sleeping at home in New York.

John had married his third wife Dolly two years earlier and left a daughter Paris just six months old. The wedding ceremony had been performed by ordained minister Dr. John and the best man was the president of the New York & East Coast chapter of Hells Angels.

The funeral service was attended by many top musicians who had been touched by John. Buddy Guy broke off his tour to attend and remains a family friend to this day. Tony award winning actress Elizabeth Wilson was a friend and read a poem dedicated to John's memory, while Dr. John delivered a eulogy saying, 'he gave us more than music, he gave himself. He came from that delta roots and Mississippi mud and showed us the way to something much higher'. John's body was cremated and his remains were driven by a Hells Angels escort through New York before being taken to the family church in Baton Rouge.

A few weeks after the funeral a benefit concert was held to raise funds for John's daughter Paris. Those performing were Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Chris Whitley, John's band calling themselves Cruel 13 ( John died on 13<sup>th</sup> June), and special guests Voodoo Children which included members of Metallica and John Popper of Blues Traveller, all big fans.

I don't think Elektra ever gave the CDs John recorded for them enough promotion at the time. Most people discovered him through his live performances. It is thought that John planned to issue some live recordings before his passing. A surprising number of musicians make a point of praising John whenever they can. This list includes, Big George Watt, Innes Sibun, Hans Theessink, Jack Michaels and Michael

John studied the old blues masters and was the best I ever heard at combining the delta roots with some Louisiana swamp, Texas country blues, New York urban grit and pure rock attitude and making it sound new and vibrant.

If you are interested in discovering more about John check out Tom Geigers awesome web site [www.devilinmycloset.net](http://www.devilinmycloset.net) or the accompanying Yahoo group. There are lots of memories and stories shared by John's family, band mates, friends and fans.

Next year marks twenty years since John died. Down the years there have been many reunions and celebrations of his life and music at the various places he called home, from Shreveport to Baton Rouge and others. I think it's about time Elektra re-issued One Believer and Howlin' Mercy complete with any unreleased material there might be and with sleeve notes that re-evaluate John's true position in the blues canon.

John Campbell was not only an amazing blues musician but a unique, wonderful human being.

