



# Davy Knowles

BY DAVE RUBIN

**DAVY KNOWLES, THE 21-YEAR-OLD** fiery guitarist, lead singer, and songwriter for the explosive power trio Back Door Slam, hails from the tiny Isle of Man in the Irish Sea. Besides the blues, Knowles cites the ancient Celtic music played on the island as an influence—as it was for his hero, the late Irish guitarist Rory Gallagher. With the muscular backing of bassist Adam Jones and drummer Ross Doyle, Knowles has emerged as a thoroughly modern, Stratocaster-wielding troubadour, spreading the news with slamming original blues-rock and tender acoustic ballads on the band's debut album, *Roll Away* [Blix Street].

**Do you often have to explain that the band name comes from a Robert Cray song?**

Absolutely, which is a shame, because the song is on Cray's stunning album called *Time Will Tell*. Then there is the blues lore about the Back Door Man, as in, "You open your front door and you hear your back door slam."

**How did your journey to the blues begin?**

My dad showed me the barre chords to "Sultans of Swing" and the Stones' version of "Route 66" on acoustic guitar when I was around 12 years old, and I learned how to play them, though my hands hurt for about a month. My blues obsession began

with John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers' "Beano" album with Eric Clapton. His version of "Hide Away" made me seek out every magazine article about him I could find in order to learn about his influences. Eventually, I worked my way back to Freddie King, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Willie Johnson, and the Delta blues artists.

**What are the biggest challenges of playing in a trio?**

The battles for me are overcompensating for there not being enough sound by filling in too much, and overplaying solos so much that the structure of the song goes to pot. Having a really busy bass player in Adam makes my job a little easier, especially playing live when the adrenalin is flowing.

**Your lone cover is Blind Joe Reynolds' "Outside Woman Blues," which is similar to the Cream recording on *Disraeli Gears*. Have you ever thought about doing a very different version of a classic blues the way Clapton did with that one and "Crossroads"?**

An incredibly important part of the blues heritage is "stealing" someone else's song and making it your own. I am looking for one, and would love to put it on the next album. I've been listening to a lot of Big Bill Broonzy and trying to get one of his songs down, because he was progressive, embellished his songs in various ways, and

played ragtime in addition to blues.

Of course, Clapton recorded what has become the standard version of Broonzy's "Key to the Highway."

That's true. You know, I sympathize with Clapton 100 percent regarding the criticism of his career after the Bluesbreakers, Cream, and Derek and the Dominoes. Imagine the pressure he experienced after being hailed as a guitar god. Recording *461 Ocean Boulevard* was incredibly brave. It's probably my

favorite album of his, and he hardly plays any solos at all. The songs are great. His voice isn't, but it's perfect for the songs.

Your interest in country blues recently resulted in the purchase of a National resonator guitar.

I bought a 1934 National Triolian because I am the biggest Rory Gallagher nut, and he had a 1932 model. I also have a 1944 Martin mandolin like his. Where I grew up, there is this long Celtic tradition dating back to the Vikings. As soon as I

found Gallagher, I heard his Celtic influence along with the blues, and it completely clicked with me because I was always hearing that music on the Isle of Man. Gallagher played Irish jigs and reels that combine fiddle, guitar, and "Irish whistle" or flutes—but he played them in a bluesy way. Besides electric guitar and slide, he also played acoustic guitar, mandolin, alto saxophone, and harmonica. I think he took his inspiration from different instrumentalists, not just guitar players. You can hear it in the intro to "A Million Miles Away" and "Tattoo'd Lady," both from *Tattoo*. More than anything, he was this working-man's symbol. He didn't dress flashy, he had this beat up Strat, and he didn't use any pedals except a treble booster into his Vox AC30. He just did everything with his fingers.

**What is your current setup?**

My guitars are a '62 Stratocaster reissue with Fender's SCN noiseless pickups, a Stevie Ray Vaughan Strat with Rio Grande pickups, a Japanese Fender Mustang, and a recent Gibson J-45 acoustic. My only "effect" is a Dunlop Crybaby wah pedal plugged into a cranked Heritage Collection Vox AC30. I also have a '65 Fender Twin that I plan on using for a clean sound. I keep it real basic because I don't want to be tap dancing when I'm playing [laughs].

**Do you use open tunings?**

I like open G (D, G, D, G, B, D, low to high) and D (D, A, D, F#, A, D, low to high). "Too Good for Me" is in DADGAD for that Celtic sound, though the slide part on that track is in D.

**Are you concerned about being pigeonholed as a heavy blues-rock guitarist?**

I think it's good to be pigeonholed, but you've got to be careful as to *how* you get pigeonholed. I don't want to only be thought of as a straight blues or "old school" player. It's where my passion lies, but as far as *Roll Away* goes, I was really happy to have those three acoustic tracks—"Stay," "Too Good for Me," and "Roll Away"—that aren't blues, possibly to throw people off a little bit.

**How do you manage to overcome so many of the usual clichés of blues-rock soloing?**

Sometimes you do have to fall back on them, because they're great. But it's important onstage to push yourself to play something new, like reaching over an extra fret to see if it works. If it doesn't, that's all right, no one's going to go ape—at least then I've tried it instead of just playing the same five notes over and over again. ■

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