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Angela Strehli by Paul Moore

A graduate of the Texas school of blues, and instrumental in the establishing of the now renowned Antone's venue and label, **Angela Strehli** tells her story to Trevor Hodgett

Low-key blues



“I consider being able to make a record a real privilege, I really do,” asserts Texan blues singer Angela Strehli. “There must be a lot of artists out there who don’t get opportunities like I’ve had to record so I’ve always wanted to be sure that I’ve enough songs to make an album that’s worthy of being recorded, and to have a concept that I can really get into.”

The concept of Strehli’s recently released album, *Ace Of Blues*, which includes songs associated with Otis Rush, Elmore James, Jimmy Reed and other blues immortals, is certainly pretty clear. “I’m paying tribute to artists who inspired me by doing a song of theirs that maybe people haven’t heard so much, and trying to turn them on to those artists,” she says. “It was fun and easy to make and when making a record is fun and easy, you pretty much think, ‘Oh, we’re doing the right thing!’”

The album begins with a consummately sung version of the Bobby Bland-associated ‘Two Steps From The Blues’. Strehli admits she

found the song challenging to sing. “It’s easier to just rock out on a song and I can sing really tough but the approach on that was really subtle. It’s weird to open a record that way but it made sense to me somehow; that it was so subtle it could draw you in instead of just hitting you over the head.”

There are terrific versions also of Howlin’ Wolf’s ‘Howlin’ For My Darling’ and Muddy Waters’s Willie Dixon-composed ‘I Live The Life I Love’. In fact, as a young woman, in 1966, Strehli saw both Wolf and Muddy play in Chicago clubs. The opportunity came when she was sent as a representative by the University



Angela on stage, 1972

of Texas’s Young Women’s Christian Association to a conference in the city. “Muddy had his wonderful band with [pianist] Otis Spann and I actually went up to the table he was sitting at and met him,” she recalls. “I think he was impressed that somebody from Texas was so obsessed with blues that they would manage to get up there and go around listening to everybody.”

ANGELA STREHLI | ACE OF BLUES

“Angela Strehli has a voice as big as Texas.” - *No Depression*

“...a true genius of the genre.” - *Holler*

“Sweet and spare...this one is bluer than blue. 4 STARS.” - *Mojo Magazine*

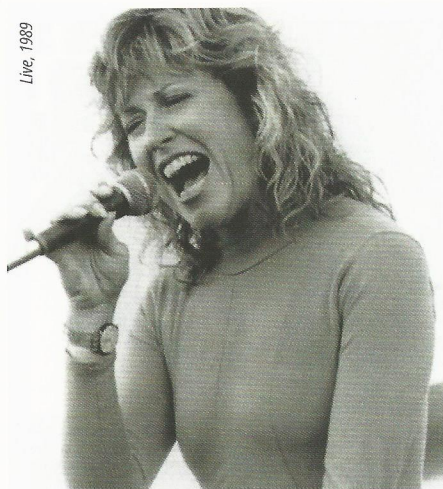


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Live, 1989



"I went to Wolf's club, Silvio's, as well and that was mind-blowing. I didn't have the right clothes, which was embarrassing, but it didn't stop me! It was New Year's Eve and everybody was dressed to the nines and all the women, they might have been wearing hats and I just had my jeans and boots and whatever. It was jam-packed and Wolf was at the door leading into the music room, because it was his club, greeting people or making sure that nobody was there who shouldn't be there. But he let me in!"

Strehli insists that she didn't feel intimidated in what must have been an alien environment for a young, white Texan girl. "Not at all because I've always found that when you do something like that, people see you and see you're alone and think, 'Gosh, they must really want to be here,' and look out for you. When it came to music I would go anywhere and I just found people very welcoming and it made the whole experience even better."

On the O.V. Wright-associated 'Ace Of Spades' Strehli adds some lyrics reminiscing about Antone's, the Austin club named after Clifford Antone, which became one of the most celebrated blues clubs in the world. "I was one of the founders," she says. "We got to present our heroes so Antone's was like going to college for us. We couldn't afford to bring an artist [plus] his band from Chicago or wherever so we put together a wonderful house band, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, with [guitarist] Jimmie Vaughan and [harmonica player] Kim Wilson and the artists came to trust us that there'd be a well-rehearsed house band who were knowledgeable about their recordings and able to do whatever they wanted, so that gave us a good reputation."

Strehli is often described as having been Antone's stage manager. "Yeah, I did whatever," she says. "I was sort of the hostess in a way, making the artists

feel at home and appreciated." Strehli often sat in with her heroes in Antone's. "At the time there were a lot of blues purists who criticised people like me because we were white and middle class. Why did we think we could sing or perform the blues? And I didn't have an answer.

"I just knew it was in our hearts and that we were willing to do anything to try and learn. And we got to learn at the feet of people like Muddy Waters. Muddy was the opposite of those purists. He embraced us and was so glad we wanted to learn and wanted to learn the styles right. He knew when he saw us in action that we were serious. And if you're on stage with somebody like that, which I was a couple of times doing back-ups, it's heavy learning. So that was a great thrill."

Ace Of Blues does in fact include one original song, 'SRV', which Strehli first released on her previous album, 2005's *Blue Highway*. The song, of course, is a tribute to Stevie Ray Vaughan who died horrifyingly in a helicopter crash in 1990. "Stevie meant a lot to me and I to him," says Strehli. "He would come to Antone's all the time in the daytime in the hope of meeting some of his heroes. He had been working in a band or two and had decided he was going to go for it and sing as well as play.

"He admired my singing a lot so he said, 'How do I go about being able to be the front singer?' And I said, 'Stevie, take one song you love and just do that song for however long it takes until you think you're doing it great.' Well, of course, he decided to do 'Texas Flood', which I had always done in my live set, it eventually being even the title track of his first album. So that did it for me having it in my set! I had to stop singing it."

Vaughan, who later repaid his debt to Strehli by including her on some of his most prestigious performances, is evoked with real warm-heartedness and fondness in the song. "He was absolutely a sweetheart," smiles Strehli. "When he started getting some real big attention he took me to the CBS International Convention in Hawaii. And then Carnegie Hall! That was something you could tell the folks: 'Well, Mom and Dad, I know you've been kind of wondering about this career of mine but...'"

Vaughan unfortunately struggled for years with substance abuse. Strehli wasn't tempted to join him on that self-destructive path. "I didn't have any interest in substances," she says. "Pot might be one exception to the rule but I wouldn't even do that for many

years. I didn't have a booking agent or manager and so I had to be on it, so I avoided all that. And I saw what it did to musicians I loved and I didn't want to put myself in that position. I'll take a slug of whisky before I sing because it calms me down and clears my throat but that's it."

Strehli's career actually started slowly and her first album, *Soul Shake*, wasn't released until 1987, when she was already in her forties. "I really did have patience with myself," she explains. "I was raised in a nice, protective, middle-class atmosphere and I got to attend college and all that stuff, and that's all pretty privileged. But blues is about real life: if you're going to sing it, you have to live a little so I thought I'd better have some real experiences so that I could put the music across sincerely. That's the difference with pop music: you're trying to tell the truth about things. So I didn't rush myself."

Strehli's first albums were released on Antone's Records, a label she herself began that was associated with the club. "I wanted to record but back then Austin didn't have any kind of music business. I thought, 'Well, if I can



Photo: Paul Moore

gather some money together, it doesn't take that much to put a record out....' So that's what happened. I did get some help from a fan and I got my dad to put some money in and we got Antone's off the ground."

I ask Strehli about Clifford Antone's involvement in the label. "Well, he was absent during a certain period of time but the first thing I did was hire a consultant and she was very smart and knew the business." Clifford Antone's absence was in fact because he was serving time after a drug conviction. "I don't call marijuana drugs," argues Strehli. "But we had a President, Ronald Reagan, who was determined to make that kind of thing a big deal. It was ridiculous, a waste of good lives. I knew people who went off the rails doing real drugs like cocaine. That was very popular. I avoided that and Clifford absolutely would not stand for anybody around him that promoted those kinds of things. So it was a shame."

Oddly, perhaps, for someone who has been involved in running a club and has performed in innumerable clubs, Strehli isn't entirely a fan of the club experience. "I am a little bit of a loner. I didn't enjoy going to hear someone at a club and people would talk to me. I really did not like that. I was there to hear the band, not talk about myself. So I'm sure I got a reputation for being aloof [but] I just don't enjoy that skill of being social."

Surprisingly, in the 90s, Strehli left Texas and moved to California. "I think people in Texas just looked at it like a kidnapping," she laughs. In fact it was romance that took her from Texas for she had met her future husband, Bob Brown, in San Francisco when she played Slim's, which Brown had started with Boz Scaggs. "I was forty-four, I'd never been engaged, never married, nothing. I didn't think it was going to happen to me. I mean... I didn't care. I wasn't looking."

As well as having a solo career Strehli sings with The Blues Broads alongside Tracy Nelson, Dorothy Morrison and Annie Sampson. "Those girls are so much fun and such wonderful singers," she says delightedly. "We're four really individual singers and we all have a chance to do our style but then we can make different combinations together and it's powerful stuff and fun. It's lonely up there if you're the only singer so having three great singers with you is just the best."

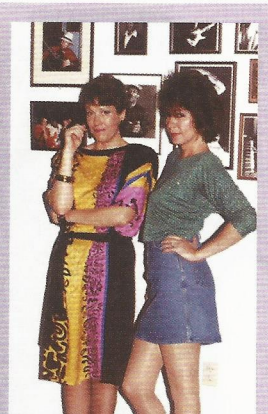
Strehli acknowledges that her voice has changed. "As you age your vocal cords literally thicken so my range has descended quite a bit. I've had to change all the keys I used to sing in. It's hard for my brain to accept, really, so that's been the challenge." Early in her career Strehli had come close to permanently damaging her voice.

"I developed polyps because back when I started singing, monitors didn't exist so the band was blaring from behind you, your microphone was coming from behind you and there was still smoking allowed, so with all of those things together I really struggled. So I took some lessons to prevent having a problem with my voice."

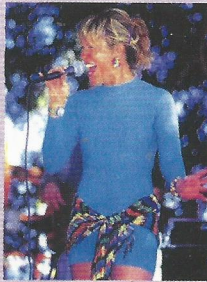
Our interview took place days before Strehli was scheduled to launch *Ace Of Blues* with a gig at Rancho Nicasio, the music venue and restaurant in Marin County that she runs with her husband. "I really do feel privileged to have a great recording that I like. We're just beginning to get it out there and I'm relying on my fans to embrace it, and they are. I can tell that, already. I'm thrilled - and I'm a low-key person - so that's wonderful. I'm feeling great about it." ♦



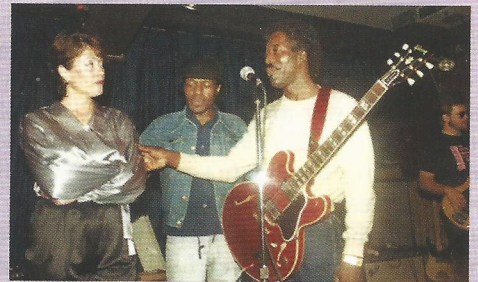
B.B. King, 1978



Lou Ann Barton, 1983



Santa Cruz Blues Festival, 1992



Junior Wells and Buddy Guy, 1982



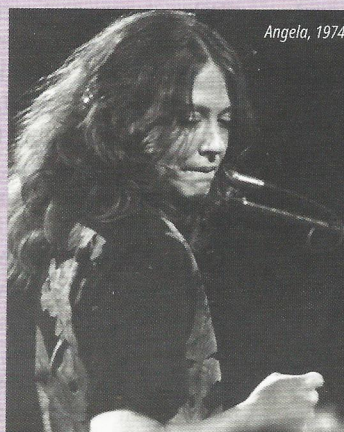
Southern Feeling, 1974



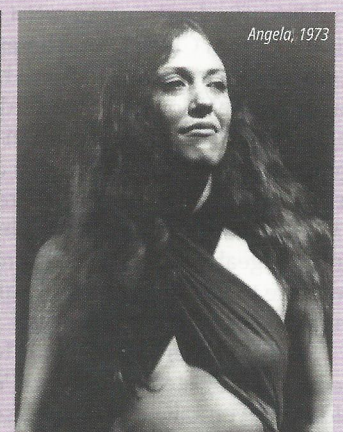
Etta James, 1987



Denny Freeman, 1986



Angela, 1974



Angela, 1973