

THE BOOGIE MAN

Boogie pianist Ben Waters has a new record out, entitled 'Boogie 4 Stu', paying tribute to Ian Stewart, a founding member of The Rolling Stones, who went on to become their road manager. As a long term fan of Stewart and his playing, Ben talked to his friend Charlie Watts about paying tribute with an album. Watts immediately wanted to be a part of it, which led to fellow Stones Mick Jagger, Ronnie Wood and Keith Richards hurling themselves into the fray. Ex-Stones man Bill Wyman threw his name into the hat, along with fellow gifted ivory tinkler Jools Holland. With a star studded guest list, a portrait of Ian Stewart being commissioned by Sir Peter Blake for the cover and proceeds from the album going toward raising funds for the British Heart Foundation, James Gaden thought it was time Ben got to tell people all about it.

Ben, you're an experienced pianist in your own right and have worked with a host of big names - for readers unfamiliar with your work, can you provide a brief overview of your work to date?

I started playing piano when I was about 14ish. My first exposure to this kind of music was Ian Stewart playing at my aunt and uncle's 25th wedding anniversary. Shortly after this, Fats Domino's 60th Birthday was on TV with Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis. I really fell in love with the music and wanted to start playing.

I loved it so much I never felt like I was practising and used to spend all day on the piano. I started doing gigs very quickly and made my first album at the age of 18 called 'Take It Home'. It was very rough and ready, but was picked up by Andy Kershaw and John Peel, who both used to play it on their Radio 1 programmes. Both of them were a real help to me.

Since then I have made 5 or 6 other albums and have been continually touring for 20 odd years. I did a lot with Chris Jagger, we toured the US, Australia, Canada, The West Indies, Europe and Scandinavia together, writing songs, recording and having a generally good time. Chris introduced me to lots of very good musicians. I also toured with Shakin' Stevens extensively and actually did my biggest ever gig with him to 200,000 people in Vienna.

I have been lucky enough to work with, in no particular order, just a stream of consciousness: Ray Davies, Charlie Watts, Mick Jagger, Ron Wood, Bill Wyman, Keith Richards, PJ Harvey, Screaming Lord Such, The Teenagers, Chick Willis, Big Bill Morganfield, Nine Below Zero, Jools Holland, Axel Zwingenberger, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Richard Berry, The Big Town Playboys, Dr Feelgood... there are a few more, have a look at www.benwaters.com

Your new record was originally planned to be a solo album but became a tribute to Ian Stewart. How did that happen?

Actually, I had always intended the album to be a tribute to Stu. My wife said to me the other day "You have wanted to make this album ever since I have known you..." we met 20 years ago.

I just decided it was about time I did it and hadn't made any big plans at all. I booked a studio in Weymouth and was going to record it solo.

However, you've managed to attract a whole host of guest stars, from Jools Holland to most of the Stones themselves. Was it hard work getting them all involved?

No - as soon as everyone knew it was for Stu they all wanted to be involved - Charlie Watts was very instrumental talking to his band mates and said that Keith should definitely be on it otherwise he would be upset. They all loved Stu and they all wanted to be there for him. I asked Jools Holland if I could hire his studio. He said no, but that I could have it for free and that he would like to play on the album too, as Ian was a mate!

You co-wrote the title track with Jools. Was that the first part of the album you recorded, or did you write it later to bolster the choice of cover versions?

It took about ten minutes to write this piece in the studio - Jools said that Stu loved Lionel Hampton and there was a great piano duet with Milt Buckner and Lionel and that we should do something similar - so that's what we did!

There's a whole host of covers spanning many great artists, from Ray Charles to Big Joe Turner to Bob Dylan... how hard was it to narrow down which ones to record?

I picked all the songs myself... and I tried to pick songs I thought Stu would have liked.

The first song - 'Boogie Woogie Stomp' was by Albert Ammons. I knew Stu loved him. In fact when Stu got his first gold record for playing with the Stones, he slid the glass off the front, took the gold record out and replaced it with an Albert Ammons record. He said he deserved it more!

'Rooming House Boogie' by Amos Milburn - Stu loved Amos. When I first started to play I used Stu's collection of videos he had collected over the years. There was tons of Amos on there and I know he loved his playing

'Worried Life Blues'. This was one of Stu's absolute favourite tunes. Everyone who knew him told me that.



'Boogie For Stu', as I mentioned just then, this was because of his love for Lionel Hampton.

'Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor' - Jools Holland had quite a few chats with Ian Stewart and they both really liked Jimmy Jancy - hence the choice.

'Midnight Blues' - We all loved this tune so that was always going on the record.

'Lonely Avenue' - This came from Stu's own record collection and we recorded it on his old piano. PJ Harvey was really determined to find something close to his heart.

'Watching The River Flow' - Stu used to say Bob Dylan only ever wrote one decent tune! He loved it so we recorded it.

'Roll 'Em Pete' - sung by Hamish Maxwell, Stu's best man. Stu had bought Hamish Big Joe Turner's 'Boss Of The Blues' album.

'Suitcase Blues' - Every boogie woogie pianist I have ever met loves this tune and is again by the boogie woogie king Albert Ammons.

'Bring It On Home' - This is my favourite track on the album. It features Stu quite a lot which is quite rare. First time I heard the album after it was finished this one sent shivers up my spine. I am really proud this track is on the album.

With that inclusion of Ian playing 'Bring It On Home' live at Montreux, do you think this album will help educate people about Ian Stewart and his music?

When I first started doing gigs people used to ask who my influences were. I used to say Ian Stewart and a lot of people would say 'who?' I found that really sad and wanted to tell everyone about this fantastic pianist, who not only formed the Rolling Stones, but did more for the British live music scene than most other people. When I did my first album in 1992 I did a version of 'Bring It On Home' in Stu's style. I spent a long time learning how he played it. He really was a massive influence on me and as far as I am concerned he was as good as it gets. I hope it educates a few people about him and at least if someone asks me after a gig who he is I can know tell them to buy the album, learn about him and listen how great he was. It's also a nice feeling to know that the money is going to help people with heart conditions.

You mentioned the excellent version of Bob Dylan's 'Watchin' The River Flow' featuring Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Ronnie Wood, Charlie Watts and Bill Wyman. What was it about that track that attracted such star power?

It was more by luck than judgement. There genuinely wasn't any plan to turn this into a big star studded track. It was a tune that Stu loved that just happened to get everyone on board.

I think the album would appeal to any Stones fan, as well as anybody with a liking for Jools Holland's style. How would you describe the album to somebody?

Like I say, there wasn't any big plans for the album, it all just happened very naturally and I think this comes across when you hear the music. We weren't trying to change the world or come up with any ground breaking album, we were just celebrating someone's life and wanted to do music he loved. When we did the initial recording it was like a party, no one knew that Mick and Keith would get involved. It's a very relaxed uncomplicated album with little or no overdubs - basically it's like a live gig, but recorded in a fantastic studio.

People who have heard it say it takes them back to the early days of the Stones when they were playing Blues and Boogie.

I believe you've recently played a show at the Ambassador's Theatre to promote 'Boogie For Stu' and had a host of guests - can you tell me how that went?

Fantastically - everyone put 120% into it and there was a magical atmosphere, along with a great turn out. We had Jools and Ronnie Wood there, Mick Hucknall, Mick Taylor, Shakin' Stevens - great!