

TIA GOUTTEBEL

Tia is a French blues singer and guitar player. She started touring with her own band, Tia & The Patient Wolves, in 2002. She recorded several EPs and two albums, *Foggy Head*, *Warm Heart* (2007) and *Travellin' with My Guitar* (2011). Later came *Lil' Bird* (2017) under her sole name, Tia. She received the Cognac Blues Passions Award in 2012. Today, while still heading her own band, Tia & Her Band, she also tours solo, and as a duo, Tia & The Groove Box, with percussionist Marc Glomeau.

Besides, in 2012, she started playing with Gilles Chabenat (hurdy gurdy) and Marc Glomeau (percussions) in a trio called Hypnotic Wheels –which later became Muddy Gurdy, recording two albums so far, *Hypnotic Wheels* (2014) and the critically acclaimed *Muddy Gurdy* (2018). They won the Coup de cœur Musiques du monde (World Music Award) from the prestigious Académie Charles Cros and were finalists for the Blues Prize from the just as prestigious Académie du Jazz.

Throughout my career I performed at festivals in France, Belgium, the UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the US and Poland. She has opened for Charlie Musselwhite, Ben Harper, John Mayall, Jimmy Johnson, Angela Brown, Beverly Jo Scott and many more. She also shared the stage with the likes of Joe Louis Walker, Tad Robinson, Alex Schultz, Kirk Fletcher, Cedric Burnside, Skip Martin (Kool & The Gang), Murali Coryell, Rick Estrin, Al Blake, Lynwood Slim and Larry Garner.

STATEMENT

I started playing music when I was six. My mum asked us – my two sisters and I – if we wanted to try out an instrument. She wasn't a musician herself, hadn't learn music, but she had the desire to offer us a chance to take up sport or music. I picked the guitar. She enrolled me in a two-day workshop to discover the instrument – how magical for a six-year-old girl! I enjoyed it so much that she bought me a little classical guitar. I still remember exactly how I felt! As soon as I got my guitar I went to the balcony of our flat and screamed: "I have a guitar!" I attended the conservatory for several years, until I was kicked out when I was ten. I never really understood why. I really wanted to continue, so my mother found a private school.

Several years later, at the *lycée*, I was, once again, following a classical form of teaching. I felt so uncomfortable that I quit school. I did take the final exam though, the *baccalauréat* as an external candidate. I had to analyse several classical works and sit a practical exam with my instrument. I went in front of the examiners with my electric guitar and played a song recorded by B.B. King – something unheard of for them! In France, musical styles are very compartmentalized. It was kind of unreal. The examiners enjoyed my performance. As for me, I enjoyed explaining to them what I

knew about the blues, who B.B. King was, etc. I was glad to have an audience who, for once, listened to my view of music. And I passed!

I discovered the blues with musicians like Muddy Waters, Big Bill Broonzy, Bessie Smith... It made me feel good, a wonderful sensation, very soothing. I still love that direct emotion. At the time none of my friends were listening to the blues, except for a young guy, Ivan, whom I had met at a gig. We became close friends, and I don't know how, but we always ended our nights out in the green rooms with the musicians!

One night we attended a performance by Magic Slim. We had nobody to drive us back, so we asked the musicians if they could help us. They were so nice to us, and even invited us for dinner, telling the organizers that we were cousins of theirs – an anecdote which still makes me smile today! Honestly, I think that the blues gave a meaning to my life.

My influences? There are so many! Not only in blues but also in gospel, soul, funk, rhythm and blues and rock and roll. If I had to pick a few, I would name Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, and Freddie King for their music, the energy they put into their singing and their guitar playing. I would add Eddie Taylor, Luther “Snake Boy” Johnson and Robert Lockwood Jr for their discreet although essential role in blues music and their rich guitar playing, B.B. King for his humanity, Little Esther, Etta James, Candi Staton for their voices – so unique! – Nina Simone, Mavis Staples and J.B. Lenoir for their engaged lyrics, Sam Cooke, O.V. Wright, Skip James and Al Green for their incredible singing, the harp players Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, Carey Bell, George Smith... Mississippi Fred McDowell, Jessie Mae Hemphill and R.L. Burnside introduced me to North Mississippi hill country blues, a form of blues which became essential in my life later on.

I also love many contemporary musicians, such as James Hunter (from the UK), Billy Boy Arnold, Jimmie Vaughan, Sue Foley and Harrison Kennedy (from Canada), John Boutté, Kim Wilson, John Nemeth, Rusty Zinn, Marquise Knox, Cedric Burnside, Tad Robinson, Carolyn Wonderland, Alabama Shakes... As well as European performers, like the Belgian Marc Tee and Big Dave, the French Youssef Remadna, Nico Duportal, Don Cavalli, Theo Lawrence, Anthony Stelmaszack and Malted Milk, the British Big Joe Louis and George Sueref, and so many more.

We didn't have the internet when I started listening to the blues. I used to listen to Patrick Verbeke's wonderful radio show. A musician himself, he always invited people who were on tour in Paris. He used to tell stories about the songs, about the musicians... I was hooked! I also spent quite some time in the library and, of course, at record stores.

After the *lycée*, I attended university for... two weeks! Something very special happened to me then: I met a band of musicians after their gig in my hometown of Clermont-Ferrand, in central France. They were from Louisiana and Chicago, and most of them were old enough to be my parents. I had brought my guitar. I was already playing electric guitar at the time, and had started to learn some blues songs. They asked me: “What are you doing tomorrow? You should come with us!” I was just barely eighteen

at the time, and the situation at home was pretty tough. So the following day I hit the road with them. It was magical! They encouraged me to sing, so I started singing. Blues music is based on a true oral tradition – people pass it on to other people. Even though it lasted just a couple of weeks, I learned and understood so many things. I was lucky to experience this adventure on the road with these older black bluesmen and women.

When I play and sing, I try to be myself, to be as sincere as I can. I don't want to imitate the people I love. I want to sound like Tia. I sing the stories I live. And if I do sing and play a cover, I choose lyrics which suit me or change them if needed. You will never hear me singing that I used to pick cotton or things like that. Sometimes I adapt the lyrics. For example, with J.B. Lenoir's ‘Down in Mississippi’ I sing “...down in Mississippi where *he* was born.”

I started performing with my band, Tia & The Patient Wolves, in 2002. We toured a lot, played in clubs and cafés at first, and at festivals later on. I recorded several EPs and two albums with this band. We mostly did covers.

I didn't enjoy studio work back then. It is very different now: I have come to love it. Maybe because I am more experienced, even though I am conscious that we learn all our lives, which is a good thing as we never get bored! With live music, you share one moment in the same room with the audience, and it's already over. Recording in the studio, for me, is like painting a picture. The result is there to stay. It is the picture of a moment. It is also very pleasant to see the evolution of a song – from the start, when you compose, alone in your bedroom, to the final version with the band.

When I compose and write lyrics, I tell stories, I talk about people, places, feelings... I use images, play with words, give double meanings. That is one of the aspects I really love in blues music: the language. Blues artists had no other choice but to find alternate ways to say what they really wanted to say. In 2017, I was ready to get more personal. That is when I recorded *Lil' Bird* under my sole name, Tia. I wrote most of the songs. My partner, Marc Glomeau, helped me for the pre-production. Most of the time I have ideas for the music (or at least an atmosphere), the rhythm and the lyrics at the same time (the rhythm is probably the most important thing in music). I try to follow through with my idea till it ends with the recording. But I also allow myself to listen to other musicians' ideas, like Marc's, who also happens to be a percussionist.

I also really love playing live. I love to travel, to meet new people, to perform in new venues. It is a life that is very rich, both socially and emotionally. We share something special with other people.

Audiences can be very different from one area to another, even within one country. In France, the audience won't be the same in the north, where I lived for a while, or in the centre, where I live now. There are several venues in particular where I love to play. One of them is in Belgium, in an old farm, La Madelonne, lost in the countryside. The venue is run by Claude Lentz, a guy who is passionate about his work. So many masters have performed there over the years – Dizzie Gillespie, Memphis Slim, Dexter Gordon

and so many more. The atmosphere is crazy, and the people love and respect music.

I particularly enjoy smaller and medium venues, which allow us to be close to the audience. Sensations are so different at bigger venues or at festivals. But as I said earlier, every gig is different. I also think that the owner or manager helps create part of the atmosphere.

These past few years many great things happened to me. In 2012 I was the very first woman to receive the prestigious Cognac Blues Passions Award. It gave me the opportunity, the following year, to perform on the main stage – a huge stage, in front of 7,000 people. I opened for a great legend, Charlie Musselwhite, who was performing with Ben Harper at the time.

In 2017, I recorded a second album with the Hypnotic Wheels trio, which, since then, changed its name to Muddy Gurdy. We travelled to North Mississippi to record with very special guests: Cedric Burnside, Shardé Thomas, Cameron Kimbrough and Pat Thomas. We recorded in live conditions, just like they used to do with field recordings, in different places such as Dockery Farms in Cleveland – where the blues supposedly was born – B.B. King’s Club Ebony in Indianola, and the private homes of friends who had special links with the blues in Como. The album was released and distributed by the American label VizzTone. It is a very special project, as we do something that has never been done before: play the blues with a hurdy-gurdy. It is new, but at the same time connected to the roots.

That same year I received an email from blues great Joe Louis Walker. He asked me to call him as soon as possible. He had watched some videos of me on YouTube. He told me he loved the way I play, especially Magic Sam’s ‘Lookin’ Good’, that Magic Sam would have been very proud of me. And he asked me if I wanted to join him to perform at the Mustique Island Blues Festival. Other great bluesmen would be there, on that small Caribbean island, such as Rick Estrin, Murali Coryell, Ian Siegal, Skip Martin (from Kool & the Gang), Amar Sundy. Needless to say, I spent two amazing weeks all together, performing every night and enjoying our days in luxury houses on an island in paradise. When I thanked Joe after the festival, he answered that I deserve it, that it was his turn to help the youngest the way elders had helped him.

I travelled back to the United States one year after our Muddy Gurdy recording. I wanted to go back to Mississippi, a place where I love to spend time. I also attended the Blues Music Awards for the third time and shared a table with the VizzTone team, Muddy Gurdy’s American label. Both co-founders were there: Richard Rosenblatt and Bob Margolin, who used to be Muddy Waters’s guitar player, as well as partner and publicist Amy Brat. That same week in Memphis I had the chance to share the stage with Bob for several songs. He later wrote me a note I will never forget: “When we played together in Memphis last week, with you leading us, you took me all the way with both your deep blues guitar playing and your singing, which is *you*, both deep blues and French. You are a blues player of the world, and I can tell you for sure

because I knew him: Muddy Waters is smiling and dancing when you play.”

Each visit to the US has been a new stage in my apprenticeship. I have been very lucky to be able to meet great musicians, to learn from them, even when I was just watching them. Because even that teaches you something. One day, while in Los Angeles, I happened to be in the studio with the Mannish Boys (the all-star band featuring Finis Tasby, Arthur Adams, Kirk Fletcher, Bobby Jones, Kid Ramos, Nick Curran, Franck Goldwasser, Fred Kaplan, Jimi Bott, Willie J. Campbell...) as they were recording. Kirk later invited me to his jam in Santa Monica – another incredible moment! At the end of the jam, drummer James Gadson (drummer for Bill Withers and so many others...) came to me, shook my hand and said: “Please, never stop playing music.”

I have worked hard to get where I am today. It has not always been *la vie en rose*... In music, just as in every other professional environment, being a woman can mean having to struggle. Even though most of the people I meet are wonderful, I too have had to deal with chauvinistic attitudes.

One example: I once started talking with a blues producer, telling him about my music, my career. He glanced at the CDs, photos and other material I had given him, looked up at me and said: “You are very beautiful.” I wasn’t expecting that kind of answer! I hate it when someone diverts from talk about my work to my looks.

Another example: I was at the beginning of my pregnancy. I was feeling really tired before a very important gig on a big stage. The people at the festival didn’t allow me to use our dressing room, which was reserved... for a male band! Me and my band only had a little tent to accommodate us, without even access to a bathroom! It was summertime, and it was hot. I had to get dressed in another tiny tent, in the dark...

More generally, some people have built their own image of what a blues female singer should sound like, should look like, should be... Why? Aren’t we all different, just like our male counterparts? It is very important that we grow within our own personality, that we manage to be who we really are, deep inside ourselves. When I see Robert Cray or when I see Buddy Guy, I see two incredible musicians who have their own attitudes, sounds, personalities. Why should it be different for women?



Photograph: Alain Hiot