

JOHNNY MARS



Photo by @JasonHolt

Johnny Mars is a veteran bluesman originally from the Southern States but now based in the UK. I met up with him for an informal chat over coffee about his career in music and his global vision, The Anthem Project, which involves promoting music as therapy for schoolchildren across the continent.

Johnny was born in the Southern States in 1942 and was surrounded by music from an early age. Johnny said that, "I fell asleep listening to the music on the radio and the sound of the rain pattering on the tin roof." Johnny's musical influences in the early days were Muddy Waters, BB King and Little Walter amongst others. Aged 9 Johnny was given his first musical instrument and although, "My harmonica defined me," he was forced to practice out in the car due to the lack of suitable space in the family home. Johnny's character was formed by his mother, perhaps his biggest influence, "Mama kept us in. She

taught me honesty so that if something got broken I would say who did it." Despite her influence and the insistence that there should be 'no Blues on Sunday', Johnny smiled as he reminisced, "When she went to church my harmonica came straight out." An early indication that, although, "My mother ruled the roost," Johnny's desire to play music was irresistible.

THE EARLY DAYS

Johnny moved to New York aged 14 and, "I first played in Upstate New York." Johnny became part of the burgeoning scene in New York and he casually told me that, "I played on a bill with Jimi in Greenwich Village around 1965." Although he was in and around the excitement and sharing the stage with the prime movers Johnny admitted that, "I had to leave the scene. I was a young father with two young daughters to support and I had no money at the

time." Johnny left music and started working in factories cleaning to pay the bills but was drawn back to the new scene emerging in California in 1967. Johnny's pedigree was an introduction to such luminaries as The Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin and Santana and he found himself on the fringes of another happening, "I was on a bill with Alice Cooper back then. I was still struggling to support my two (now estranged) daughters but the scene got real crazy." When pressed, Johnny shook his head and said, "It was all drugs, violence and bikers." Despite being around Greenwich Village, Woodstock and cutting records like 'Deep in the Wilderness' whilst others became household names Johnny looks back on that period with affection, "I don't regret any of it."

Johnny moved to the UK in 1972 where he made his first European album, the aptly titled, Blues from Mars. This album changed his plans and instead of moving to Paris Johnny found

himself on the bill at the 100 Club playing a benefit for Howlin' Wolf. Johnny's face lights up as he recalls, "I'm here right now because of all that. I supported BB King on his European tour and his manager told me that 'anyone who can get the Hammersmith Odeon on their feet before BB King- well, I'm impressed'. I even got to jam with BB King so how can I have any regrets? My view is that whatever the time is the time is now."

In the nineties Johnny was a featured soloist on a Banarama album and, "If you watch the video for one of their hits that's me- The Preacher Man."

THE ANTHEM PROJECT

Johnny became more animated as we moved from his illustrious past to the present, "Music has changed a lot but I still believe that music has a message. Just imagine that you have two stadiums; in one you can go see politicians for free and in the other you have to pay so see musicians. Which one do you think that most people would choose?" Warming to his theme now Johnny explained, "My idea is a global project. We can harness the power of music to make changes for the good of everyone. I believe that this will bring people together so I have to drive this forward." I asked about how the government cuts to the arts would affect his project, "It makes the whole thing more relevant. The schools are under pressure so with the help of other people we can make this happen."

Johnny has been dreaming of using his professional skills and experience to drive forward an ambitious project with schools, teachers and schoolchildren. Johnny has

been enthusing young generations with the harmonica which started the idea of "Dare to Dream, Aim to Achieve" and now he is keen to see his own words and music be performed by school children across the South West region. An inspiring vision of school children coming together to sing and enjoy the love of music that Johnny hopes will encourage them into developing their own musical talents. An ambitious project which is driven by Johnny as the Musical Director and by working closely with music teachers to develop a choir of enriching voices to perform the "Anthem". Johnny's dream is to see the anthem become a global and inspiring song that is performed by school children around the world and to involve some global artists to enhance the project and create a universal anthem that will spread hope, peace and togetherness throughout our world and by bringing schoolchildren together in song to be a part of a global concept that will be a lasting imprint in the lives of all those who get involved and testimonial of endorsement from Johnny.

I WANT THE ANTHEM PROJECT TO BE A FRANCHISE ON A GLOBAL SCALE

It's already attracted Suzuki who see it as a way to showcase their instruments. We can teach each school to write their own anthem based on our model." Although the project is to be pioneered in the South West Johnny feels that, "I need support from other artists. This is especially relevant now as an antidote to the soulless stuff coming out of shows like X Factor." Asked about the project's USP Johnny fired back, "It's all-inclusive with no losers." Asked about artists that Johnny would like to get involved he said wistfully, "I listen to Blues. I would love to get Stevie Wonder involved so I'm working on one of his songs at the moment. 'Isn't She Lovely' could be about Mother Nature for my project." As an aside to this Johnny added, "Why not the Stones? I could ask Mick why he didn't get me to play harmonica on their latest album."

Johnny wrapped up our chat by concluding, "Do you know what? No matter how much money I had I would still do this. It can happen and it will happen by tapping into the right current and getting top people to support it."

HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED?

It is hoped that businesses will now come forward and offer financial help to this project and that Johnny's vision can become a reality. It's a truly uplifting and ambitious project offering so many ways to get involved, whether you're a business person, a school teacher or even a parent who wants their school to get involved, Johnny is keen to hear from everyone, please contact him via email info@johnnymars.co.uk. Visit his website www.johnnymarsfoundation.co.uk.

