

A photograph of Rick Estrin, a man with a mustache and sunglasses, wearing a light-colored suit jacket over a dark shirt with a graphic. He is smiling and holding a harmonica in his right hand and a microphone in his left. The background is dark with green bokeh lights.

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RICK ESTRIN

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RICK ESTRIN
& THE NIGHTCATS
Somewhere Else

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By Matt MacDonald

“Yeah, I’m enjoying this more than ever, and the band is at a real peak right now.” Rick Estrin, speaking over the phone from California, is sharing his thoughts on The Nightcats. Somewhat surprisingly – in contrast to the glib loquaciousness with which the singer/songwriter/harp master typically delivers his extensive repertoire of songs – he is speaking slowly and thoughtfully, choosing his words with care, and frequently pausing to find just the right one to make his point.

“I mean, I feel good,” he goes on. “I’ll always feel comfortable playing old school shuffles and blues like that... But I can really feel these more contemporary grooves that we’re doing now. And, rhythmically, it’s cool, man. It’s exciting for me to be doing something a little different. And it’s interesting that it’s been... it’s been an evolution.”

With a unique stage presence and flair matching The Nightcats’ style of music and showmanship, Estrin has been fronting different incarnations of the group since 1976, when he was invited by blues guitar heavyweight Charlie Baty to head up from San Francisco to join him in Sacramento. Their partnership, prolific recorded output, and onstage dynamics would make Little Charlie and the Nightcats one of the most in-demand blues bands in the world, and the two would keep their paired success going until Baty’s retirement in 2008.

The Hits Keep Coming is the band’s new release, and its sixth since it became Rick Estrin and The Nightcats. Beyond just switching front names, the band’s sound has also changed in the years since Little Charlie’s departure. Prior to that, it had been mostly straight and jump blues and a healthy dose of tongue-in-cheek humor, with Estrin writing songs tailored to Baty’s style as well as his own, while the rhythm section completed the ensemble.

Since then, however, the quartet has steadily become more creatively collaborative, and so – while it’s still moving in the same general direction as before – they are discovering new routes to their destination.

This happened over decades, with Lorenzo Farrell (keys, left hand bass) dating back to the Little Charlie days, Kid Andersen (guitar) coming on in 2008 as Baty’s replacement, and Derrick “D’Mar” Martin (drums) filling out the quartet with a wildly inspired flourish in 2018. With Estrin, these talented and creative musicians and personalities are putting their distinctive marks on where The Nightcats are now, and where they are going next.

This can easily be heard on the new album. While that old style sound is prominent, Estrin’s writing – always as sharp as his suits – dives deeper, and several songs sound unexpectedly contemporary. From the title track, to “Somewhere Else” to a nuanced and layered interpretation of Leonard Cohen’s “Everybody Knows,” the difference between these Nightcats and those sung of in the fun and idiosyncratic “Whatever Happened To Dobie Strange?” is clear.

And it almost never happened, but for – as Estrin referred to it – “serendipity.”

Baty had been threatening to retire for “at least 10 years. Over 10 years.” So nobody took him seriously. Then he went ahead and *did* it in 2008. “You know, to me, I mean... that guy was... he was a phenomenal, one-of-a-kind player and performer,” Estrin said of the stunned uncertainty that the event brought on. “And so, I didn’t want it to be just a diminished version of Little Charlie and The Nightcats, but I wanted to keep it going, and I didn’t know who could do it.”

Estrin actually did know of one person – the only person, really – whom he believed could handle the gig, but had thought that Kid Andersen was in Charlie Musselwhite’s

band. “I knew him, and I knew what kind of ears he had, and what he understood, and what he was capable of somewhat, and I just knew he’d be the perfect guy,” he explained. “So it just was serendipity. He called me about something else one day...”

Estrin told him that Little Charlie had left The Nightcats and Andersen told him that he was no longer with Musselwhite and, by the end of the call, Kid was in the band. To which Estrin nodded to the music of chance – “There probably would not have been a post-Little Charlie Nightcats without the luck that he was able to do it at that time.”

Bruce Iglauer is on the phone from Chicago. He has a lot going on, but he makes time to talk. “When Rick says that Kid is pretty much the only guitar player who could have stepped into Little Charlie’s role, he’s right,” he enthusiastically volunteers. “Kid continues to amaze me.”

The founder and CEO of Alligator Records signed Little Charlie and The Nightcats in 1986 after hearing their demo, going out to Sacramento to see them for himself, and immediately realizing that he had found a band that was ready to roll.

All The Way Crazy came out in 1987 and The Nightcats have been with Alligator ever since, putting Iglauer in a unique place to observe their evolution over most of four decades.

“Little Charlie was a brilliant guitar player who loved to play both straight blues and jump, swing... swinging jump music, and I would say that Kid Andersen kind of loves to play everything,” he said of the two guitarists’ styles and ranges. “So they are perhaps more experimental, musically, than they were in the Little Charlie and the Nightcats configuration.”

Iglauer went further in his comparison. “Charlie also had this great musical sense of humor where in the middle of a serious blues solo, he’d quote a TV theme, for example. And he’d just... he loved to surprise people.

“And Kid – because Kid has a broader repertoire, stylistically – Kid surprises people even more! And so I think that it’s been a progression but... they’re able to go down more paths now than the original band could. And, of course, Lorenzo as a soloist adds to that. And as a songwriter.” He touched on *The Hits Keep Coming* to illustrate his point. “And so songs like ‘Whatever Happened To Dobie Strange’ probably never would have happened with the old band. But now, with Kid and Lorenzo spurring Rick’s imagination, this kind of creativity happens more regularly.”

That creativity, and the excitement that goes along with it, has been spurred on by the band’s most recent addition. Before drummer Derrick “D’Mar” Martin joined The Nightcats in 2018, he had worked with a string of other blues musicians. And before *that*, he spent the first 17 years of his career with Little Richard, perfecting his penchant for “jumpin’ the kit” and other eye popping acrobatics while playing his stick music on anything within reach as he roamed the bandstand and beyond – all while keeping everything moving right along in the larger-than-life stream of consciousness in which his boss existed and operated.

“D’Mar is such a hyper-conscientious musician and a phenomenal showman that it’s just tightened *everything* up,” Estrin said of the drummer’s impact. “I always thought... we were always showmanship oriented, and always prided ourselves on giving 100%, but there was another level to it that we’re now on and striving for all the time.”

He elaborated on what that required from the rest of the band. “That just made us all have to focus more, and try a little harder, and be a little more *on*... especially speaking



for myself. I had to do more... so I don't risk becoming an afterthought in my own band."

Yet, for all of that, the songs are at the heart of things. As a kid starting out in San Francisco, Estrin befriended soul singer Rodger Collins – who'd just had a hit with "She's Looking Good" – and it was Collins who taught him about songwriting.

"They're almost like rules, you know? Where you don't settle, you don't give in," Estrin said of what he learned. "You keep tweaking it until it's *right*. And small things can make a huge difference. And, you just... it's got to make sense. It's got to match up meter-wise. And there are exceptions to all these rules. And, in the end, the only real rule is: Is it good enough?"

Prior to The Nightcats getting signed, Estrin would write when inspiration would strike. And so, by the time the band was making *All The Way Crazy*, "I had maybe five or six songs that I felt were good enough to go on a record." All of them went onto their debut.

But it was soon after that – when the pressure was on for a follow-up – that he discovered something else about his songwriting process. "What I learned was that...I don't have to wait for inspiration. I can induce inspiration by making myself uncomfortable, by trying when nothing is coming, and enduring prolonged concentrated frustration until something happens."

He might sit down with the guitar (he writes most of his songs that way), or pick up a harp, searching for a riff to match a lyric phrase. Or he may just stare at the titles on his bookshelf, or try whatever else he thinks might help. "I mean, I just keep that in mind: that's what I'm trying to do right now. I'm trying to find something I can latch onto that will... crack a door in my brain."

Most importantly, he keeps on pushing. "Sometimes I get a free one that's just a gift, but most often it requires getting on the cusp of giving myself a mental hernia..." Pausing, he chuckles, then finishes. "...To get that shit where I want it to be."

Iglauer takes a moment to check his files on *All The Way Crazy*, which he produced, and which was recorded over two nights, while commenting on how smoothly it went, and how good the songs were. "I was very excited, and continue to be very excited by Rick's songwriting, which is just so consistently excellent, and often funny and insightful."

He went into Estrin's ability to write to his vocal strengths in order to deliver his songs most effectively. "Rick is a natural storyteller," Iglauer said of one of Estrin's most distinctive characteristics, citing a track from *The Hits Keep Coming* as a reference. "He can make things appear in your

imagination in a way that not a lot of other singers can. So... when he does a song more like 'I Finally Hit The Bottom,' you can see the little movie going in your brain."

As Estrin described it, his songs for *The Hits Keep Coming* came about in their usual manner, with the fog of the pandemic (during which the band released innovative videos put together by Andersen... "That was amazing work, what Kid was able to do: keep us alive during that break.") slowly lifting, a realization ("Oh, shit! I'd better come up with some songs!"), and then the familiar struggle resulting – once again – in songs that were *good enough*.

Asked about how he *knows* when they're good enough, Estrin gave credit to a reliable internal compass. "That tells me when it's exactly what I wanted to say, exactly how I wanted to say it, and that it couldn't be any clearer if it didn't rhyme. And so I think that's what I... what I mean."

It's then that the excitement kicks in for him, because that's when he brings in the band. He will roughly sketch out what he has on guitar, and everyone will work through it to give it a more refined shape. "If it's not working for me, that's when I'll say something. But, other than that, it's a cooperative effort,"

Estrin said of the process, which usually plays out in Andersen's Greaseland Studios. "We understand each other, and everybody contributes. And everybody's ideas are generally either just about what I envisioned or a little better, or could be something that took a whole other turn and it's, like, way better than what I had in mind."

As for their live shows, which have drawn rave reviews going all the way back to the days of Dobie Strange, Estrin had this to say about the group's goal when on the bandstand. "If we don't just kick those people's asses and blow their minds, and just have them going out of their mind, there's something wrong. That's really how we feel." Iglauer, speaking from experience, added another angle. "I should never be surprised to be surprised by anything this band comes up with."

So Rick Estrin and The Nightcats are going somewhere else, letting the songs dictate which way they're headed next, traveling new paths to familiar destinations, and doing the most positive kind of damage en route.

"I think that, professionally, I mean, we... the band has just continued to get tighter, and the show has continued to get tighter, and we're all having a great time playing together and hanging out together, traveling together, and all that," Estrin summed up near the end of our call. "I mean, all of that is really in a better place than it's ever been." - BMM