



WOODBRAIN'S NEW *SWIMMING IN TURPENTINE* EXPANDS THE FRONTIERS OF BLUES AND ROOTS MUSIC

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With a guitar/harmonica/bass/drums line-up, **Woodbrain** might be mistaken for a typical blues collective — at least until this fiery Portland, Oregon, foursome begins to play.

Or maybe a better description is “ignites,” because the instant Woodbrain dives into a bold original like “Dig” or reinvigorates an old-school classic like “Shake ’em On Down” on their Yellow Dog Records debut *Swimming in Turpentine* it’s obvious they are potentially a major evolutionary force in the genre. Or several genres at once.

Woodbrain’s energy is incendiary; their music deeply rooted in tradition. And yet their songwriting and improvisation pull those roots in all kinds of directions informed by the generations of Son House, Jimi Hendrix, and John Coltrane. Without sacrificing an iota of heart or soul, their sound effortlessly skirts boundaries to reach blues, rock, Americana, and jam scene listeners alike.

“Our base is the pre-1940 rural music of the Mississippi Delta and the Appalachian Mountains,” explains Woodbrain vocalist/songwriter/guitarist **Joe McMurrian**. “It’s a sound influenced by Robert Pete Williams, Skip James, Robert Johnson, Buddy Guy and R.L. Burnside as well as Dock Boggs and Roscoe Holcomb. But we’re not ignorant of what’s happened since, like Cream, Led Zeppelin, Hendrix and modern jazz. So we roll all of that into our chemistry as a band.”

Woodbrain’s soaring musical spontaneity developed over a two-year period of intensive performing throughout the Pacific Northwest, documented on 2007’s self-released *JMQ Live at the White Eagle* and 2008’s *JMQ Get That Dirt—LIVE*.

“We learned to feed off each other, on stage and in the studio,” McMurrian continues. “It’s telepathy now. We’ve worked through so many ideas on stage in the past few years that we instinctually know what’s coming from each other, yet we never do it the same way twice.”

The live discs were credited to the Joe McMurrian Quartet, but, as McMurrian observes, “every member of this band contributes so fully to the music that we needed a new name to reflect that. When we play it’s all about the interweaving, the call-and-response, and the harmonic support we give each other, even while what we’re playing constantly changes and evolves around the themes of the songs.”

Woodbrain’s progressive ensemble approach was captured with grace and urgency when McMurrian, harmonica player **David Lipkind**, bassist **Jason Honl**, and drummer **Jimi Bott** entered the studio with engineer **Sean Flora** (the **Shins**, the **Black Keys**) to record *Swimming in Turpentine*.

The lyrics of songs like McMurrian’s autobiographical “Port Chicago Highway,” with its moody slide guitar introduction and heart-pounding bass, and the shimmering “Hurricane Town” explore freedom and desire — themes often at the core of the earliest American roots music.

Freedom also abounds in *Swimming in Turpentine*’s arrangements, which often evolved as the tape rolled. “Northbound,” for example, is a traveling song with a sense of relentless drive, implying all sorts of avenues for live musical exploration as it unfolds.

Bukka White’s “Shake ’em On Down” becomes a sonic playground for McMurrian’s grinding slide and Lipkind’s astonishing, effects-laden harmonica playing. Both musicians stretch their instruments’ voices in fresh tonal directions, intertwining until they are indistinguishable.

Even the acoustic “Black Water Side” — a Bert Jansch tune that Led Zeppelin cut as the instrumental “Black Mountain Side” — unreels as a playful jam. Woodbrain transforms the

number's middle into a chugging rhythmic juggernaut that ultimately relents to a beatific resolution. And "Dig" — which the band learned 10 minutes before it was recorded — features McMurrian on wah-wah slide banjo as Lipkind, Honl, and Bott swirl around him, creating a rustic sonic vista.

The allusion to landscape makes sense. "I hold a master's degree in painting," says McMurrian, whose visual creations, which lean toward abstraction and fractured reality, are featured as the album artwork for *Swimming in Turpentine*. "Studying art helped me understand the whole process of creating and improvising, which surprisingly for me transfers over to the auditory realm seamlessly."

He's also been playing the guitar since he was 10. McMurrian's father was a steel guitarist who favored country music and tutored his son in the finer points of Hank Williams and Willie Nelson. But McMurrian veered toward rock in his teen years, grabbing hold of an electric guitar and even playing for a brief time in the Bay Area's '80s thrash scene.

That changed in 1986 when he got a copy of *Robert Johnson — The Complete Recordings*. "I'd grown up hearing Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Lightning Hopkins, but I became obsessed with Johnson," McMurrian says.

His obsession spread to other architects of early blues and mountain music, as well as to the finger picking, slide virtuosity, and open tunings of modern interpreters like Ry Cooder, Leo Kottke and John Fahey that today figure in Woodbrain's distinctive soundscape.

At first McMurrian pursued his new muse alone, touring and recording the 2004 solo acoustic album *Dredge*. But as the group that would become Woodbrain began to coalesce — an earlier line-up with Honl and Lipkind cut the live *Rain of Days* in 2006 — McMurrian returned electric guitar to his palette and began writing more consciously for the band.

The rest of Woodbrain's line-up is equally stellar and dedicated. Lipkind is a third-generation harmonica player from St. Louis whose wide sonic range ricochets from Little Walter to Jason Ricci and beyond. He's made recordings and live appearances with a mile-long list of bands from the roots and rock worlds, ranging from **Supersuckers** to **Hillstomp** to **Mark Lemhouse**, who's also recorded for Yellow Dog.

Honl's blend of jazz chops and a rock sensibility that echoes the taste and pyrotechnics of Jack Bruce gives the native Portlander, whose earlier bands include **Big Mouth Bass** and **Pieces**, a pivotal role in Woodbrain's improvisational game plan. And Bott is one of the most recorded drummers in blues. A former member of the **Fabulous Thunderbirds**, **Rod Piazza & the Mighty Flyers**, and **Mark Hummel's** band, this powerhouse player has appeared on more than 60 albums, including fellow Yellow Dog artist **Fiona Boyes' Blues Woman**, and is a 10-time Blues Music Award nominee for drummer of the year. He's also won the Cascade Blues Association (CBA)'s Muddy Waters Award for Blues Drummer of the Year six times and in 2008 was inducted into their Hall of Fame.

The CBA has also nominated Woodbrain in the Best New Act category, and the Blues Foundation voted *Rain of Days* as a finalist in its 2006 Best Self-Produced CD competition.

But like fellow roots-based new music trailblazers Derek Trucks, Medeski Martin & Wood, and Widespread Panic, it is the exhilaration of making music within a profound tradition, and yet without boundaries, that keeps Woodbrain's creative fires blazing.

"What's really exciting about this band," says McMurrian, "is that we can play in any number of traditions and be entirely true to them. And then we can kick that wide open and play a 20-minute song if we want to. It's a very open-ended philosophy and not every band is capable of pursuing it the way we do."

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