

The Paul Speidel Band Story

Guitarist **Paul Speidel** has been a leading light on the Boston music scene for more than two decades--this is his band's 20th anniversary year--and that's no small achievement. Guitarists come and go all the time in this city of major-league music schools, but Paul belongs to that small group of superlative players who've dug in their heels here and insist on keeping Blues and Jazz, in their various permutations, vital and probing for the long haul.



Paul's four feature albums--*The Paul Speidel Band*; *Guitar Bass Drums*; *Playing Stages*; and *Retrorocket*--not only testify to the high level of his and his band's playing, but also to the value of his rather uncommon musical strategy. Aside from the early years of the band, he has chosen not to employ a singer. He's joined the select company of guitar-playing bandleaders Ronnie Earl, Dave Specter and Jimmy Thackery, among others, who exhibit a strong sense of personal style and conviction. The Paul Speidel Band recordings, and the countless hours of gigs behind them, document the journey of this hard-working band--and this unique leader, who found his "voice" in bringing the tradition of guitar-playing forward into the present-day.

THE BEGINNING--For a musician who cares deeply about great American roots music, Chicago was the ideal place for fledgling guitarist Paul to grow up, in the 1970s. He heard the Blues on local radio stations and experienced gritty local Blues first hand. One special encounter was a concert at his high school by Lonnie "Guitar Junior" Brooks, a Louisianan who mastered the world-famous Chicago Blues style after moving to the Windy City in the early-1960s. Another stellar real-deal Blues guitarist Paul looked up to was former drummer Frank "Son" Seals, whose dirty tone and riffs torched many a South Side tavern and reached a global audience through Alligator Records. Like many other teenagers studying guitar, Paul immersed himself in the Blues-Rock stylings of Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and their peers. He also listened hard to the Jazz-Rock innovations of trumpeter Miles Davis, with and without guitar whiz John McLaughlin. Shaping his musical sensibility further through formal music studies of various styles, Paul began working a wide variety of paying gigs. Then, after kicking around in a few bands and a stint in the Denver-area music scene, Paul moved to Boston in 1990, where his career would take flight.

BEANTOWN BLUES--While Paul settled in as a teacher of Blues and Jazz through the public school system, the metropolitan Boston area underwent a Blues boom during the early-1990s. With all of Blues America and even the national mainstream press paying close attention, actor Dan Ackroyd and Hard Rock Café founder Isaac Tiggett opened their Original House of Blues club in Harvard Square, Cambridge. With several other clubs also actively booking Blues artists, Paul was soon appearing on stage with many of the area's luminaries: guitarists Jay Geils, Chris "Stovall" Brown and Gerry Beaudoin; singers George Leh, Shirley Lewis, and Toni Lynn Washington; and singer-harp players such as James Montgomery and Silas Hubbard, Jr.



BAND LAUNCH--Paul has a gift for playing Blues and Jazz with equal facility and understanding, and it was a Jazz gig in early 1994, that resulted in him heading his own band. The story goes like this: he was a sideman in a straight-ahead quartet for a two-night booking. The first night was a lousy draw and altogether forgettable, so on the second evening the flummoxed leader of the quartet stuck Paul out front. Energized and unleashing his creativity, Paul had a blast improvising over rockin' Blues-based rhythms and funky R&B beats. It felt so right, he asked drummer **Brendan Byrnes** and singer-bassist **John Wiesner** to form a power trio, which soon found work showcasing their alluring meld of Blues, Jazz and Funk (with local veteran **Kenny Larsen** sometimes subbing for John). Not always using a trio format, Paul would sometimes augment the band with, say, Weepin' Willie on vocals or "Sax Gordon" Beadle on R&B tenor. In these settings, and in a duo with bass or as a solo performer, Paul evidenced his considerable technique and his unguarded soulfulness.

BLUES SHOWCASE--Paul also did his part heating up the 1990s Blues renaissance by founding and hosting the Sunday Night Blues Jam Session in Newton. With stalwarts



like Shirley Lewis and harp player Lowdown Towne stopping by, the Session became so popular it gave rise to the Blues Showcase, a series of concerts organized by Paul that featured worthies who had earned national and international acclaim, like guitarist Duke Robillard, the Paul Rishell & Annie Raines duo, singers like Michelle Willson, and pianists like Dave Maxwell and Alizon

Lissance of the Lovedogs. The Showcase, like the Jam, was wildly popular with club-goers, also receiving rave press notices from the Boston Globe and the New England-region music tabloids.

BAND HITS IT STRIDE--As the new millennium approached, Paul built on the Newton success by getting his band in the rotation for regular gigs at top music rooms Ryles and the Plough & Stars, both in Cambridge, plus landmark corner bars throughout the Greater Boston area. With raw Blues its lifeblood, no matter the venue, Paul's band refurbished shuffles with trademark infusions of Jazz improvisation, Funk, and Rock.



Assisting Paul were Brendan on drums and bassist **Steve Conahan** (with alternates **John Turner** or **Jesse Williams**). Reacting to the advent of a national Jump Jazz/Swing craze late in the '90s, Paul communicated with the swinging properties of his guitar, had Steve switch over to an acoustic bass, and asked Brendan to push the beat into new rhythmic territories, drawing on every drumming tradition from Big Band to Be-Bop (with **Bobby Caban** sometimes subbing for Brendan).

Paul's previous work with Jazz-Blues artists like Duke Robillard, Gerry Beaudoin, and Jay Geils stood him in good stead when bringing a Bluesy feel to the Jazz overtones that often dominated the setlist. As their reputation grew, major artist-drawing music hot spots from Johnny D's and the Bull Run to the Acton Jazz Cafe were soon including the Paul Speidel Band in their schedules.

FINALLY, AN ALBUM--With countless club and private-party performances, numerous band rehearsals, a few studio demos, and so much more under his belt, Paul made plans for his band's first album. It was a long, thoughtful process--acquiring the right gear, composing and arranging, solidifying their musical identity as an instrumental trio. The hard work paid off though--with dividends--in 2004, when the album titled *The Paul Speidel Band* (a.k.a. *Blues Extensions, Vol. 1*) appeared. Paul was now joined by Brendan and **Ed Spargo** on electric bass (initially a "sub" but after 2002, often part of the three-piece). Clearly ten years of sweat and experimentation with mixed Blues, Jazz, and Funk went into the making of "D-Bop Blues" and seven more songs, most carrying an edgy Blues feeling. With Paul out front and in his glory, the band's sound world is at once tight and loose-limbed, respectful of tradition and forward-looking.



LIVE BLUES EXTENSIONS--The next year, in 2005, Paul brought out his first concert album, *Guitar Bass Drums (Live, Vol. 1)*, which had been expertly recorded at one of the band's favorite local haunts on two wintry nights. This hard-working, no-nonsense group cut to the issue very well indeed, their Jazz conception linked to authentic Blues emotion. Ten instrumentals sounded as though forged by ironsmiths (Paul, Brendan, and bassist **Steve Skop**) that had spent many club hours hammering out bass lines, grooves, and head arrangements for original tunes by the guitarist. Highlights include "The Bounce," where Paul's lickety-split fast fingerings invite awed smiles; and the rough 'n' ready, hard-charging "TX," with its shades of Stevie Ray Vaughan and other Lone Star guitar heroes. Still one more high spot, "Solar Winds," finds Paul getting surprisingly close to a Hendrix-like lyricism. Next up was 2009's *Playing Stages (Live, Vol. 2)*, recorded at three venues in 2007-2008, with the same personnel as *Vol. 1*. (Steve's on nine tracks, Ed replaces him on "Chicken Train"). It's a veritable trove of virtuosic guitar playing, and further proof of the worth of the Paul Speidel Band's mix of precise technique, invention, tradition and sincere emotion.

LATEST ALBUM--Paul's assured way with the Blues, judging from his intonation and his riffing and so much else, is all over his latest album, *Retrorocket (Blues Extensions, Vol. 2)*, released at the end of 2010. Paul's playing on a dozen specially selected tracks



recorded between fall 2004--late 2010, is bold and purposeful. The extent of his invention seems almost limitless. The Chicago-transplant lights fires under his songs, but he knows instinctively how to control the resulting blaze. Supported again by Ed and Steve on basses and Brendan on drums, Paul does some of his best playing ever in the studio. He approaches sweet tenderness in "Mary, Please Come Home," distills the essence of Blues-Jazz playing on "Pete's Blues," and

gives dramatic definition to "She Chills Me." Paul, like a kindred spirit of Roy Buchanan or Link Wray, throws down with authority on "Hard Wire", the first on this offering of exceptional tracks. *Retrorocket* broke top state and national radio charts by early 2011.

BOTTOM LINE--No matter the calendar date, the Paul Speidel Band--finalists in the annual Boston Blues Challenge and recipients of glowing reviews in *Downbeat* from the legendary roots writer Frank-John Hadley--infuses its music with an uncommon intelligence and resourcefulness that transforms the great Blues past into something fresh and challenging. With twenty years' momentum driving them forward, they keep on rolling in concerts and in the studio. Remember, Paul's in it for keeps.

[In Memoriam: Bobby Caban]