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Delta Highway's on the Move

By Stacy A. Jeffress

Brandon Santini and Justin Sulek, the founding members of Delta Highway, were two twenty-somethings from North Carolina in search of kindred blues spirits when their \$200 van broke down 90 miles from Memphis in 2003. They decided against calling their parents for bus tickets back home and instead found a kind-hearted stranger driving a 1979 Caprice Classic to carry them, their guitars and amps the rest of the way into the blues mecca they had heard of but never seen. They went for broke, and fate dealt them a few lucky breaks as a reward.

One stroke of luck was meeting a local musician named Blue Blake on Beale Street their first night in town. Blue Blake needed a couple of roommates, which proved, as Brandon says, "Things seem to work out for us sometimes. Divine intervention." Brandon, who sings and plays harp, and Justin, a scorching guitarist, soon met other musicians and scored their first house gig playing at Mr. Handy's Blues Hall for a year. Brandon describes what that gig meant to the band, "It's priceless to have that kind of worldwide exposure without going anywhere. All the tourists are coming to see you; you're selling 30-50 CDs a night. They're taking them to France, they're taking them to Japan, all across the world, Kalamazoo, Michigan."

Delta Highway has recorded three CDs: the first, *Love is the Devil*, was a homemade effort recorded in an attic studio, then *Westbound Blues*, which received a favorable review in Blues Revue, was released in April of 2006, and most recently, *The Devil Had a Woman* came out last November. The band prefers performing and recording original songs but throws in a few covers. "Our most cover songs are like hill country, R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, some Muddy Waters, one song by the Wolf," says Justin.

By delving into blues music as teenagers, both Brandon and Justin went against the grain. Justin recalls, "I'd go to parties, and they'd be jamming to their stuff, and I'd kinda slide in some blues, Muddy Waters, and everybody looked at me, what is that? That's what I was into, always have been. Got probably 30-40 people converted into blues. Everybody knew me as the guitar player who played blues." Neither came from particularly musical backgrounds, although Brandon's grandmother was a lounge singer during World War II, and he claims rockabilly legend Johnny Horton as a distant cousin. While Justin's grandfather played accordion, his father listened to Buddy Guy records, and that exposure provided the impetus for what was to come.

Justin took up the guitar as a teenager. "As soon as I played guitar, I knew that's what I wanted to do. I would literally sit in my room and play along with these CDs, probably for hours. I had my girlfriend come over. I didn't even know she got there and already left, I wouldn't come out of my room." Brandon adds, "I think it's a fact he's lost 712 girlfriends because of playing guitar."

Brandon was a Blues Traveler fan who yearned to play harmonica the way his idol John Popper did. At age 15, he went to a music store and told the clerk what he wanted to purchase. "She said, 'What key?' I said, 'What's a key?' I had no idea. I got me a D harp, special 20. Never really had lessons. My lessons were listening to all the guys on the recordings, that's the best tool." Like Justin, he knew immediately that he wanted a career in music, "That's what I wanted to do. There's no doubt about it."

The two met while playing in bars in Burlington, North Carolina. Although they eventually formed an early incarnation of Delta Highway, the original bass player and drummer were not able to make the move to Memphis. The current rhythm section includes "Steady" Keven Eddy on drums and Paul Chase on bass.

The band plays a wide variety of blues, but Brandon describes north Mississippi hill country blues as "the love of our life...We love it all. We just incorporate anything we've heard, even beyond the blues." They do not play from a set list but prefer to respond to the audience's mood. Brandon keeps the crowd involved, frequently encouraging, "Somebody scream." There is also a sing-along when the tune "Turn on Your Love Light" morphs into "Mockingbird." Brandon learned his stage patter on Beale Street: "You have to be a showman. I see guys in Memphis and how they work the crowd. I incorporated it. ...People go to hear music to cut loose, and you've got to aid them in that. Having them sing is a lot of fun."

Delta Highway played 221 shows in 2007. XM Satellite Radio's Bluesville Program Director Bill Wax has been playing their music, and *The Devil Had a Woman* has appeared on the Bluesville and Blues Wax "Picks to Click" lists. They've opened for Kim Wilson and downed shots of cognac with Buddy Guy. In July they begin their first European tour at the Rootsway Festival in Parma, Italy. It's been a remarkable beginning to a journey that nearly ended when that \$200 van left them stranded 90 miles from Memphis just five years ago.

Delta Highway will appear at Uncle Bo's in Topeka on Friday, November 7th, at 8:30 pm.