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In Bobby Whitlock's musical career, there's been a Domino effect



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Bobby Whitlock and CoCo Carmel

Keyboardist and songwriter Bobby Whitlock has played with some of rock's most revered names and institutions, from his days apprenticing at Stax Records to his stint in the celebrated traveling soul/rock caravan Delaney & Bonnie & Friends to the legendary one-two punch of Derek and the Dominos' "Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs" and George Harrison's "All Things Must Pass." But touring with his wife and musical partner, CoCo Carmel — the two play the Bull Run in Shirley on Saturday — he's chosen a different approach after a one-shot gig with Italian guitarist Tolo Marton. "After the set, we said, 'This is what we need to do. Every time we play, let's have a different guitar player,'" says Whitlock. "Everybody wants to play these great songs. I would, too. I love playing 'Tell The Truth,' 'Bell Bottom Blues,' and our version of 'Layla.' And it all fits like a hand to a glove."

It's a natural continuation of Whitlock's longstanding belief in "the flow of life" that's served as the core principle underlying his projects, including his ongoing one with Carmel. "We're free to be together and to create and do what we do," he says. "That's why it flourishes. That's why the music was so good with Delaney & Bonnie & Friends and Derek and the Dominos. Hell, nobody told anybody what to do. Who's gonna tell anybody what to do?"

Q. What did you learn from Delaney & Bonnie about being on the road as a married couple?

A. Everything not to do. How not to conduct yourself, you know? It was a lot of fun, a lot of camaraderie, but behind the scenes, it was hell. It was too much whiskey and too much cocaine going down and those two were fighting it out all the time. There was a bunch of crying in the dressing room and hell-raising every day and night. That's why everybody peeled away, because it was just too intense. But I learned so much about music and songs and production and vocal placement, just listening and watching, from Delaney Bramlett. I learned more than I can probably ever, ever recount.

Q. How much did you know who the object of Eric Clapton's affections were when you were recording the "Layla" album? Did you know that you were helping one of your friends write an intense suite of love songs to the wife of another of your friends?

A. Yeah, I knew about that. But we didn't know that that record was gonna be as big as it turned out to be when we were writing it. We were writing songs just to sing our own song. Of course, we all knew what was going on with Eric and Pattie [Boyd, wife of George Harrison], because he confided it. We were close. Everybody knew that he was hung up on George's wife. We knew how he felt about it, but we didn't talk about it. And he didn't talk about it. He confided in me with a lot of stuff, but it wasn't his focus. What he had to say about it all came out in song and in his guitar playing.

Q. It sure did.

A. That's how Eric talked.

Q. Since the breakup of Derek and the Dominos, you've steered clear of being either a part of a band or a member of someone else's band, focusing pretty much exclusively on your own solo work. Why is that?

A. I didn't want to be a band member. With Derek and the Dominos, I wasn't a band member. We weren't hired. That was mine and Eric's band. We were all equal members. We all shared equally in everything. I wasn't gonna play for anybody. I've never been a sideman. Even when I was with Delaney & Bonnie, I owned part of the band. I owned a percentage of it. So I've never been a sideman to anybody. I've always been real independent. I've always been on my own. I've always been myself.

Q. You took a substantial break from about 1976 to 1999, but you did poke your head out for some occasional session work. What inspired you to resume your career in 1999?

A. It just happened. I'd always been going out doing something here, something there. I turned a pole barn that I had into a beautiful, beautiful recording facility. I was on that hill in Mississippi for going on 10 years, just waiting. I had to go do some growing myself, some personal growing, and just waiting for a time to leave and get back out into the world, to do what or with whom I do not know and I did not know then. But I knew I wasn't destined to be stranded on that hill outside of Waterford, Mississippi, for the rest of my days. I was put here for a purpose, and I had to fulfill it. I had to finish out whatever was put before me.

BOBBY WHITLOCK AND COCO CARMEL

At the Bull Run, Shirley, June 10 at 8 p.m. Tickets \$26, 978-425-4311, www.bullrunrestaurant.com