



PIAZZA WITH THE LOT

ROD PIAZZA IS STILL PRODUCING SOME OF THE MOST INFECTIOUS BLUES OF HIS FORTY-YEAR CAREER.

- BY SAM FELL -

It's a Tuesday, the week has just begun, and I've got the blues. My feet are tappin' like Fred Astaire's, my fingers are clickin' and I'm wavin' them in the air like I'm worshipping at the altar of the groove and I can feel it man, can ya feel it? It's infectious and vibrant and I can't stop; the sweat drips off my nose and my ears thud with the thick bass, biting harmonica searing my brain like a well cooked piece of meat, thick and juicy, oh man, you have to be feeling these blues, yeah, I've got the blues.

I've had these blues all week long and there's no sign of them letting up. They blare from the headphones of my walkman or the speaker of the little stereo on my desk, they make me tap

my feet and jive in public places, like on the tram, and if the bewildered people around me, avoiding eye contact, could only hear what's going on right here, then they'd be jumping and dancing on public transport as well, it's inevitable.

'What are these damn blues?' you're asking. 'Whose blues are these man, come on, share the knowledge.' These are the blues of Rod Piazza, the jumpin', jivin' West Coast sounds of Piazza and the Mighty Flyers, a cure for what ails you, the party-est blues around, oh yeah. The piano/guitar duels, the tingling harp solos, the solid beat that digs a massive hole, builds a foundation out of it and fires the rhythms and grooves off the top like one of those slingshot bungee things, raining the fun times down over the heads of whoever is lucky enough to be standing underneath... that's what I'm talking about.

Piazza, born in Riverside, California in 1947, is one

of those guys who caught the blues bug at a young age and never let go. He's one of the white guys who saw the masters plying their trade back in the day and had to get a piece of that smooth action. Listening to blues records is where Piazza learnt his Mississippi Sax chops, then as a youngster sat in on a jam session with George 'Harmonica' Smith, and the seeds of the dream were sown.

Piazza formed his first band, The Dirty Blues Band, in 1967, but by the end of the following year, the name had changed to Bacon Fat, and featured Smith as dual harp player. They released two records as the Fat before Piazza went solo in 1974, forming the Chicago Flying Saucer Band the year after, which evolved into the Mighty Flyers, the cats we see him with today. They recorded their first record in 1980, and let me tell you ladies and gents, they haven't looked back since.

I got a chance to chat with Piazza recently - although it almost didn't happen, thanks to a single wrong digit in the phone number - but we sorted it, and despite the fact the phone connection was straight out of the '60s, we managed to talk the business, and that business is the blues. It's been 13 years since Piazza was last in our fair country, but goddamn, they're back this month, and they're bringin' the blues with them.

"Yeah, it's been a while, quite some time, but I can tell you, we're looking forward to getting back to Australia," Piazza laughs. "You can expect to see one of the most hardworking bands on the planet too. This is no one man show, this is a band, an ensemble, all fine musicians, we're gonna be bringing a fine show with us." The Mighty Flyers have quite the live reputation, with Piazza known to wander through the crowd while playing, jumping up on bars to duel with the piano (played by his wife, Honey Piazza, incidentally) and guitar. "Oh yeah, I don't do that as much now," he laughs, "but there'll definitely be some of that."

Piazza has certainly had the time to perfect his art, and over that time playing and leading various bands, he would have seen a lot. The music industry itself has changed immeasurably, so I put it to him, that given he's no doubt seen it all, seen the popularity of the blues wax and wane, how is it being a bluesman in 2007?

"Well, it's a lot harder," he says, which I actually find surprising; surely with the internet and faster travel modes, it'd be a lot easier. "No, not really. Things like the events of 9/11 for example, they've had a very negative effect on, not only the blues, but music in general. People are paranoid, they're scared to go out, and

obviously less people going out, means less people at live shows. There have been a lot of venues and bands who've been hit by that.

"Also, the fans of the blues, the older folks, well obviously they're getting older," he goes on with another laugh. "They don't come out as much anymore, and because the blues doesn't get played on the radio, there kids aren't hearing it, they aren't telling their friends about it, so all these factors combine to make it hard for music, live music in general.

"My deal is, that in the '60s, if you played traditional blues, and were white, you were caught in between rock and blues," he explains. "There was rock blues, and then the black artists, like from Chicago, they were still big, so you were caught between that, see? So you had to make it from that, you could ride on that. Today though, young artists, there are so many of them, so it's so much harder to make it, it's a lot harder being a bluesman in 2007 than it ever has been."

As a result, a lot of blues musicians, particularly the established ones like Piazza, make most of their money playing festivals, a great deal of which are over in Europe, Asia or Australia, which is great for us obviously. Still, Piazza, and many like him, just keep on going; it's the blues man, you can't shake that.

"Yeah, we've been lucky too I guess," he muses. "I think because we've got such a great live show and we can play in places all over the world. Like I said, a lot of the younger guys coming up, they're not as lucky because not as many people know them, they find it hard to make money. But you know, it's the blues, if you got into it to make money, you're in the wrong place man."

I ask him what's kept him going all this time, through the good times and the bad.

"I got into the blues because I had no other choice," he tells me. "It just got a hold of me and that's all I really cared about, there was nothing else. I was lucky, because when I was a kid, I had older brothers who would bring home these records, unlike today as I was saying, where kids just don't have any real exposure to the music. I got into the blues because there was something about the music that just got inside of me... I'll only stop when I can't physically play any more."

The passion Piazza exudes for his music is blatantly obvious, even down the terrible phone line, and is an obvious reason why the man is still doing so well and playing so strongly in the music today. This passion, over the past 27 years, the time

the Mighty Flyers have been busting it out, has resulted in a dozen records, all of which serve to show how passionate Rod Piazza is about the blues.

His latest record, the soon to be released *Thrillville*, is certainly no exception. This is the record that's been blaring from various speakers and has had me dancing on the tram, and is so much an accurate representation of Piazza's live show, it has me counting the seconds until he and the Flyers arrive in Australia late in September. It's certainly something he's very proud of, saying recently that it's "one of the strongest and toughest records I've ever made."

"Yeah, it does have a very live, free feel to it," he acknowledges when I suggest as such. "The thing with this record, is we didn't want to make such a retro record like guys do, where it comes off sounding so flat and not exciting, like where nothing exciting is jumping off the disc, and if I didn't achieve anything else, I think I did achieve that, it's got an excitement to it."

Without being immodest, he's hit the nail right on the head. *Thrillville* is indeed an exciting time, from the first note of opener, 'Hate To See You Go / Shake Your Hips', to the last shuffly groove of closer, 'Sad Hours'. I put it to Piazza, that given this is such a strong record in his opinion, it runs like a culmination of forty years spent singing and playing the blues.

"Yeah, that's a fair comment, I mean, it's got so many different turns, it's not just a group of songs or anything," he confirms. "I think throughout the 14 tunes, it keeps twisting and turning and that's why I say it's a combination of a lot of my past, because we covered a lot of different areas, and there were a lot of things we touched on. Yeah, we're real happy with this one."

You can't blame the man for being happy with *Thrillville*; like I said, it's full of energy, it gets you dancing, the bass is thumping inside my head and the harp is playing on my mind, even when I'm not hearing it. It's certainly a record that'll stand up over time. Which is what Rod Piazza and the mighty Flyers have done, and even in this fickle musical world, you can bet your walkman, your stereo, some trams and a slingshot bungy thing, that they'll be doing it for many more years to come.

Thrillville is available on Delta Groove through Only Blues Music. Rod Piazza and the Mighty Flyers play the Great Southern Blues and Rockabilly Festival on Saturday September 28. They also tour with The Holmes Brothers, details in the Gig Guide.

