



**Reba Russell**

*BluesWax* Sittin' In With

## Reba Russell

### Part One

By James Walker

Two Blues authorities, friends, and countless others have discovered **Reba Russell** and her band the same way: they heard her voice while walking in Memphis. Former Blues disc jockey in Joliet, Illinois, D'Arcy Ballinger, lucked across a performance at Handy Hall in 1997. Bernie Cox and wife Shelly were walking in Tom Lee Park during Memphis in May when they were knocked out by Russell's vocals accentuating a beautiful afternoon. They discovered she is an incredible humanitarian who may be the best contemporary vocalist out of Memphis. Ballinger says, "Reba is the real Queen of Memphis!"

When he reviewed Russell's latest CD, *Broke Down But Not Out*, nationally known author Art Tipaldi wrote in *BluesWax*, "I have been listening to Memphis singer Reba Russell since 1995. My first glimpse of her was on Beale Street in the Black Diamond on a Wednesday night. As she belted out the Blues, **James Cotton** came running in. He and Russell did a half hour of rockin' Blues. Since then, I've been hooked on that voice. I've seen her backing **Tracy Nelson**, **Jimmy Thackery**, and others. And I've caught her voice at festivals throughout the States, and every trip to Memphis means scouring the papers to see if Reba's performing during my short stay." *Broke Down But Not Out* was released in October 2005 and has been rewarded with several great reviews.

Explaining Reba's voice, Tipaldi wrote, "Reba Russell has polished her powerful voice with a maturity that relies as much on brawn as it does on control, authority, and emotional nuances. She can still belt it out down and dirty, but she can also produce the most soulful vibrato a human voice can deliver. Vocally, she can vent in one breath, roar in the next, then whisper "mmm" or "ooh" and have any man on his knees...In a make-the-story-believable fashion, Russell's aching honest, torrid delivery captivates from the outset."

On the Memphis scene for over 25 years, Russel has won three Premiere Vocalist Awards from the Memphis chapter of the National Recording Arts and Sciences and has released five independent CDs in the past seven years. The **Reba Russell Band** is Blues, R&B, and Memphis-bred Rock 'n' Roll at its rootsy best.

Reba also works regularly in Memphis studios as a vocalist and background vocalist. Among her proudest recordings are those for **B.B. King**, **Johnny Cash**, **Jerry Lee Lewis**, **The Judds**, **Ricky Nelson**, **John Fogerty**, Jimmy Thackery, Tracy Nelson, and on **U2's** *Rattle and Hum* - to name a very few.

In 2003-2005, Russell's touring schedule wasn't as widespread as her fans would have liked, but she is now working regularly in many venues across America and hoping to add more venues plus tour dates. To catch the Reba Russell Band, check her touring schedule at [www.rebarussell.com](http://www.rebarussell.com). Check her out on *Bluesville* on XM Satellite Radio or, better yet, order a CD and see what the great reviews are all about!

D'Arcy Ballinger and I recently talked to Reba about *Broke Down But Not Out* and other topics:

**D'Arcy Ballinger for *BluesWax*: I'll never forget - and I am sure you won't either - your September appearance near Kankakee, Illinois, after the September 11 attacks, five years ago.**

Editor's Note: Reba Russell lives daily with heartfelt humanitarianism. She was distraught and was seeking the strength to go on with the performance that night. For the opening song, she drew that strength from a religious number she first heard as an African-American Gospel song and then later in a white Baptist church. Singing "Farther Along" a cappella, she left a lasting impression on those who witnessed it.

**Reba Russell:** It was very difficult; that whole week was extremely hard. Somehow, we all got through it.

**James Walker for *BluesWax*: At an autumn performance in 2003, you had announced that you and husband Wayne (bassist and writes songs) were being selective and cutting way back on the touring dates. What is your current approach?**

**RR:** [In her engaging Tennessee accent] Well, back then, I took a couple years off because my mother became ill. I decided not to do too many road gigs at all so that I could stay here and be with her. Well, she passed away this January [2006].

So this year, I really have been traveling quite a bit more, getting out to venues that I've never been before and areas of the country. I am still being selective. [laughs] I enjoy my home life - in my little shack I have out here in Fayette County [Tennessee]. I like to do some songwriting and you need quiet time to be down to do that. Since I'm not signed to anybody or have a record label, I'm free to pick and choose whatever I want to do, whenever I want to do it. [laughing] I'm too much my own boss.



### Reba Russell's *Broke Down But Not Out*

**BW:** Describe your band, and you've got a couple of new members, right?

**Russell:** We are a melting-pot style. In general, it's all Roots. Whether it has the flavor of Rock 'n' Roll or R&B, it's gonna be things that were early music for us. Those [Roots sub-genres] are our influences, no question about it!

**Josh Roberts** [on guitar] is playing with us. People are absolutely going to love Josh! This band I have right now is probably one of the best configurations I've had in years. Josh just turned 18 and he is a young man who is an absolutely fantastic player - very tasteful. He plays the hell out of a slide guitar - unbelievable. He's been with us for about a year now. **Brad Webb** [*Editor's Note: Reba's friend and former guitarist*] is Josh's teacher. So, a lot of that great technique Josh has, Brad helped him acquire. Josh is a very fresh voice for me Blues-wise, yet very traditional. He truthfully gets better every day. He is just so young that you can hear him get better and better and he is already fantastic - it just real exciting to watch him.

**Doug McMinn** is on drums. He's an absolutely fantastic guy and great drummer. We're really pleased with and looking forward to working with him as long as I can. He's just a great, great drummer. His dad is **Papa Don McMinn**. Don is a long-time, great Blues player from these parts. He tours in Europe and gigs in the Memphis area. Both of his sons, **Rome** a bassist and Doug, are very accomplished musicians. The apples don't fall far from the tree!

Wayne [her husband] is the bass player. He's doing great - [laughing] he's perfect in every way.

**Robert "Nighthawk" Tooms** is still with us. When I decided to go full-time Blues, Robert is the first guy I wanted to get in my band. In the eleven years or so he has been with me he has taught me so much about the spirit of Blues. He helped me understand it wasn't about pitch, structure, or thought - it was more about feel and emotion. After eleven years I think I am finally catching on! Robert can blow harp, play piano and organ, write, and sings his fanny off. He doesn't need me, but I sure do need him.

The core of the band [Reba, Wayne, Robert] is always the same, but we really are hoping Josh and Doug are going to be happy in our band and stay with us for a while.

**BW:** Is there anything you want to talk about that we might not ask? Ever thought to yourself, "Just once I wish an interviewer would ask about...fill in the blank"?

**Russell:** Hmm, well I think it would be nice for once to acknowledge Wayne. I would not be a bandleader or maybe even a professional vocalist musician without Wayne. He put together my first real band and gave me the support and encouragement to keep it up through the hard early years. We were just friends in the beginning - no love interest. He was just a very kind and talented man who took an interest in my singing and held my hand until I learned the business. Thanks, Wayne.

**BW:** Tell us about your earliest experiences with music, both playing instruments and singing.

**Russell:** I was born in 1958. I may be getting old, but I am still quite young for a Blues woman. [laughs] My earliest interest in music came from my family. My daddy, who died when I was seven, bought a piano; he tried to play trumpet and other things. He loved music and my mother loved to dance so we had music around in the house when I was little. My older sisters and brother had an extensive

record collection so I had access to lots of varied music that way, too. However, I had only sung in the little middle school choir before moving to Memphis in 1973.

When we moved it was like a big light bulb went off in my head. There was live music everywhere. I had never been exposed to music close up so I was awed by the talent and excitement of all the musical influences. I received a guitar for my sixteenth birthday and proceeded to teach myself how to play by listening to records. By the time I graduated from high school I could play pretty good and started playing at friends' parties and for my family.

Soon afterward I met Wayne, and he came up and told me that he thought I was a really great singer. He told me if I wanted he would put a band together for me. Wayne was nine years older than me and had been a musician in Memphis his whole life and played in numerous bands. I took him up on the offer, and I have never stopped since then.

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## Sittin' In With Reba Russell / Part Two

**James Walker for *BluesWax*: Next, the old standard question: Who were your influences?**

**Reba Russell:** My earliest influences were big band, **Glenn Miller**, **Billie Holiday**, and more from my parents. But soon I discovered **Elvis**, **The Beatles**, **Jimi Hendrix**, **Led Zeppelin**, **James Brown**, **Ray Charles**, and those kind of folks through my siblings' record collections. I loved to sing along.

However, my real influences when I started to play were Memphis people like **Jimmy Jamison**, **Joyce Cobb**, **Rufus Thomas**, **Rick Christian**, and the people who were out in public locally on a regular basis. I also loved **Tracy Nelson**, **Irma Thomas**, **Bonnie Raitt**, **Janis Joplin**, and **Koko Taylor**, but I didn't get to see them perform very much. I still love Rock and Pop music as well as old school Country, but none of it could compare to hearing **Mose Vinson** or **Albert King** or **Furry Lewis** live on Beale Street out in Handy Park

**BW:** Wayne [husband and bassist] said you two only got more into the Blues when you met Robert Nighthawk Tooms. Describe your music through your career.

**RR:** When we put my first band together we did everything from **Jackson Browne** to Jimi Hendrix to **Patsy Cline**. I sort of eventually went Top Forty because we could work so much more, but we always kept some Blues and R&B influences, too, stuff like **Muddy [Waters]** and **Aretha [Franklin]**. Right before I decided to go strictly Blues we were heavy into **Pink Floyd**, **Led Zeppelin** and stuff like that. Somehow, it just stopped getting me off. We had friends who played with Robert Nighthawk Tooms. Every time I would go hear them, the **Wampus Cats**, I would tell Wayne, "Man, I love that stuff! I want to play with that guy." Before I even met Robert, I loved to go see him play. He was a true Bluesman down to the soles of his feet.

The Blues just kept speaking to me. My band at the time was voted the best band in Memphis and about two months later I fired everybody and just went in the other direction. That was about 1992. That is when I began to write more and decided to someday try to make my own CD.

I had got signed to the great producer **Chips Moman** around 1986 who had returned to Memphis in the late 1980s. After not getting a deal and working so hard with Chips I let that go, too. We had been known as this great Top Forty dance band so when I changed horses I wasn't so popular in Memphis anymore.

I did a long stint on Beale Street - about eight years - so that is when I discovered I was really a Blues singer. I loved it, I got off on it, and it never mattered how I felt, the Blues could get me in the mood to perform.

It was so great to meet **Dawn [Hopkins]** in 1994 or 1995 because she was so cool and I wanted to work with a female engineer. She was the house engineer for BB King's club for ten years. She and I hooked up and five albums later we are still a team. Like Wayne, Dawn has been instrumental in creating the **Reba Russell Band** sound as well as being my dear friend. She has introduced me to so many people in the Blues World and without her help I am not sure I could have come as far as I have.

**BW: Isn't Hopkins your producer, too?**

**RR:** Yes. Generally I do the music and tracking sessions to help the band get through that and Dawn produces me. She does all the recording and engineering; she's really the brains of the whole thing, quite honestly. She is my equal business partner and we are the Blue Eyed Bitches Productions. She has known **Jimmy Thackery** for years and years and that was how I got introduced to Jimmy was through Dawn. [Editor's Note: Reba has recorded with Thackery and appeared live with him in Canada this summer, including at the Edmonton Labatt's Blues Festival.]

**BW: How can you succeed being independent of a record label?**

**RR:** I have made five records now with no [record company] help and each of them have paid for themselves and paid for the next record as well as giving the band a little something on top of that. I try to tell young artists, you sell a thousand records for fifteen dollars apiece - that's fifteen thousand dollars! Now if you can't make a record for fifteen thousand dollars these days, what with Pro Tools and such...now granted it's cheap; it's not like a major artist gets...but you can do it. You get to own your masters and if you want to sell it to a record company later you absolutely can. You have more leverage because you own everything.

Years ago I got told by a record company that wanted to sign me and I had already sold about a thousand copies by then. He said, "We'll just send 3,000 or 4,000 CDs out and we'll just blanket for promotions and radio stations and stuff." I told him, "OK, but I can sell 4,000 and if I do I'll make \$60,000!" It was complete silence on the other end because I don't think any record company had ever conceived of an artist receiving a hundred percent of the profit! Selling 2,000 or 3,000 CDs in a year, if you want to get your fanny out there and play is not a hard thing to do. And that's not even counting website sales or digital distribution you might have.

I'm not against record companies; I think they're great - for big artists. But if you are just looking to make a little money and do some CDs and get your art out there in the world it's not as hard as people think. I just encourage young people that are writing to think on those terms and not to be so excited about giving fifty percent of what you have to somebody else. Have a professional manufacturer do it; the rates are very reasonable these days. You got to be a serious musician. It's worked for me and I know other musicians, too.

**BW: How well has *Broke Down But Not Out* been received?**

**RR:** It's done very, very well. Sales have been good. You can get it from my website or bandvillage.com. I'm not out there a lot, but at these festivals we do pretty well on CD sales. I am getting some great airplay on XM Satellite's *Bluesville*. You can't [overestimate] that - if somebody likes your record and plays it, you know, worldwide on satellite radio. I am fortunate enough that several [of my songs] get played. Off the latest CD is "Without Your Love," which is a ballad as well as a couple of **EG Kight** songs. From my old material, from the *City of the Blues* CD, "Heaven Came to Helena" gets played quite a bit.

**BW: Can you give an example of the importance of radio play?**

**RR:** When I get out in the world and play that's where you see the effects of that. I played in Wyoming and people came up and asked, "Are you going to play such and such, like 'Move To Mississippi' [from *City of the Blues*] today?" So it really kind of takes you back because you don't expect anybody to know who you are or what's up. So, if you get some good airplay it makes all the difference in the world.

**D'Arcy Ballinger for *BluesWax*: I don't know what happens, but when you come to the Kankakee area, you have a legion of fans that just absolutely go crazy. Everywhere I go it's "When is Reba Russell coming back?"**

**RR:** Awww, that's great to hear; that's wonderful!

**BW:** I just wondered if that happens everywhere you go?

**RR:** Well, I am lucky enough to make a lot of return trips to some clubs and festivals. It's always amazing to see people who've come back and come back year after year to hear you and support you. That's one of the reasons it's worth it to go out on the road - is to see those people you made friends with while you were there. Yeah, [laughing] it always freaks me out that people come back again and again. And it's great to play for brand new crowds, which I did a lot of this year, too. It's interesting - their reactions.

**BW:** Let's talk about a couple of songs from the latest CD. My wife gets a chuckle from the tenth track, "It Takes A Mighty Good Man" (to be better than no man at all) written by EG Kight.

**RR:** Amen! But, look, Wayne and I just had our twentieth wedding anniversary - we're both very secure. But I'm singing that for all the women out there, because I know I'm lucky to get one, you know. I know what I'm talking about.

**BW: What thinking went into putting "Got A One Track Mind" first on the album?**

Editor's Note: the opening track by **Delta Joe Sanders** is not the full band found on the other numbers. It's just acoustic guitar, harmonica, and Reba singing some outrageously humorous and sexy lyrics about making love.

**RR:** Well, [laughing] remember you're talking about the B.E.B. [Blue Eyed Bitches] Production company here! When Delta Joe sang that song I just knew I had to do it - because, first of all, I never heard another song with "*D.N.A.*" as a part of the song ("*I want another taste of your DNA*"). It was so sassy it tickled me and I just loved it and decided I wanted to cut it. I just had Delta Joe and Robert

Nighthawk Tooms there in the studio and we just laid it down acoustic - on the floor - just having fun. Delta Joe is one of the best writers ever. I have one of his songs on every one of my CDs.

So, when it came time to sequence the record, that song didn't fit anywhere! And I didn't want to put it at the very end of the record because I figured half the people will never hear it. If it's at the tail-end and they don't like my CD they're not going to listen to the whole thing. So, Dawn and I just decided what the heck - it's only two minutes and something long, let's just stick it on the front of the record. [laughs] That is really honestly the logic to that whole thing.

That's the good thing about being the record executives, owning my masters and me and Dawn having control over everything - we can do whatever we want. We don't have to listen to somebody telling us, "Now, that is the wrong thing to do!" or "That song shouldn't even be on this record!" or whatever. We don't deal with any of that.

### **BluesWax Sittin' In With / Reba Russell / Part Three**

**James Walker for *BluesWax*:**

**Explain the line "*What we do to each other, we do to ourselves*" from the final track.**

**Reba Russell:** That is off the song "Hard To Live." I hate to say that I'm a bleeding-heart liberal or anything, but I am a child of the Sixties. I have a hard time dealing with weapons and things like that. I want every American to have [the right to own] a gun; I just don't like war, you know. I know there is nothing I can do about it, so I just write things. That song is really about people discovering how to make weapons. I know that is a deep subject.

What we do to each other is what we do to ourselves - everybody I admire has said that: Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, a lot of people, and I just believe that. War produces terrible things - like torture. None of it makes any sense to me. I love them [the enemy] as much as anybody and I pray for our enemies just as hard as I pray for our troops. I want everybody to get along and love each other!

But, I know I'm living in a different world now. I live in a hard, hard city [Memphis]. The gang activity, along with lack of education and poverty, has turned [parts of] Memphis into a killing field the past few years. Unbelievable crime - children die here everyday from stray gunshots and things like that. It is very, very sad.

I'm an old person. I remember what it was like to have peace even though we had the Cold War going on and Vietnam. Things were just not as hateful even then as they are now. It seems there is less and less showing of affection for each other. I know I have troops to thank for keeping me safe, and it's just a confusing world to live in. So, the only thing I know to do is just to make my music and say what I can say trying not hurt anybody - at all. I'm just trying to make a few people feel better or understand me or be happier, you know. That's all I can do!

We can all do things in our everyday lives in just little, teeny tiny ways to try to make people feel better about themselves and each other. Stop road rage, don't jump the line at the grocery store [laughs], just little things. I think we should all be for each other and take a stand on things.

"Hard To Live" is probably the least-liked song, but that really is my particular favorite. The vocal is off the floor; that's the scratch vocal I sang when we laid the track down. It has several meanings to me. Every bit of that song is coming from a very emotional place inside of me from being with my mother while she was dying.

When people first start hearing it, [the music] is up-tempo and you can dance to it. And the next thing you know they realize that [the lyrics] are very depressing [laughs]. If I had done it as a slow Blues it might have made more sense to some people, but to me it makes perfect sense. Thank goodness I don't have anybody telling me what to do.

BW: I really like "House of Love" [written by Russell].

**RR:** That's a funny thing - "House of Love" almost didn't cut; I didn't really like it. **Dawn [Hopkins]** liked it and the band thought it was good and so we cut it. I should have put some background vocals on it and didn't because I wasn't really taking the song seriously. [laughing] And people love that song! I was like... 'Is this too cheesy?' I am so glad it turned out people like it. And that's one reason why Dawn is the producer! She's really the last word on a number of issues.

BW: You sound angry in "Paint It Red" about Memphis.

**RR:** Well, I'm getting old I guess. You know, old people don't like things to change. That song is my rebellion against the "big city" in general, wherever it is. I'm not saying I hate metropolitan areas, but in ours in particular [Memphis] - you see certain things happening [tearing down the original Stax studios] and it gets under your skin.

**BW: What is your take on the "new" Beale Street?**

Note: the original Beale Street buildings were mostly torn down and replaced with glitzy, neon lit clubs catering to tourists and twenty-somethings.

**RR:** You can still hear Blues there, but you gotta come during the peak Blues times. Even during the International Blues Challenge and the Blues Music Awards you still don't get the same type of Roots music available that there used to be. It's a function of the times. I understand that they're trying to draw everybody there, and that Blues is kind of a thing of the past. Most of the older gentlemen and women that played Blues here have passed away. So they're looking for a younger crowd down there, I think. But at the same time, I think [Beale Street] should be iconic of the Blues. That's where my disagreement lies with the folks that run things.

There is still Blues on Beale Street, but it's usually in the tinier clubs. I have to say that Rum Boogie [Cafe] really has kept a better Blues slate than probably many of the other clubs on the street. I have to give them some props. Generally, you'll hear Blues in there during the week. At the same time I don't think it's promoted properly, and I don't think Blues musicians in general across the board get enough props.

**BW:** Please speak to the state of the Blues and keeping Blues alive.

**RR:** Well, you know, writers like me - you couldn't categorize my music as Blues thirty years ago; whereas today it is. I think that, in the Deep South, some of us who still do relate to a lot of this music and try to keep it alive, are playing our version of what it is for us now. I think all the independent and small Blues labels that are out there with their artists are doing the best job they possibly can. Blues is still alive and out there, and Blues societies are very strong across America. You got to keep your fingers crossed, but it's one of those genres where you just have to tough it out.

All Roots music has a core, not a mass following. There're fans that follow just Bluegrass and Reggae and some of those genres that come from the heart of the people just like Blues and Jazz do in our part of the country. It always lingers and somebody is always interested in looking at it including some young people, but just not in the masses like Top Forty or Country music right now.

**BW:** One final thing, please explain your ability to remain so sincere and unaffected in the music world.

**RR:** Well, that's just me. I mean that's me, that's who I am, that's who I've always been. I don't want to be different or special from everybody else. I'm just like everybody else; I just can sing. Some people can cook and some people can...you know. I love being appreciated for my art. That is what it's all about - people clapping, and smiling, and buying my CD, and telling me it meant something to them. That's the whole reason you go out in public, and do it, and make your money from it. It's a joyous thing to be able to play an instrument and sing. I love musicians and I think we are important to the world, but I think teachers are important to the world, too, [laughs] you know? Fathers and mothers and all those things.

I can keep my feet on the ground, first of all because I have a great husband, you know. I had a great mother, and a good upbringing, and a good, solid foundation. I got Jesus in my heart, too, so I got a lot of things going for me.

But at the same time it's wonderful to be recognized and it's wonderful to be able to almost make a living doing what I love to do! That's the payoff.

Because I don't owe money, I don't owe a record company money, I don't have to push myself into not liking what I do. If you stay on the road 8, 10, 12, 14, 16 weeks at a time - I understand why people are on drugs, and alcoholics, and mad. I think the road absolutely beats people down; it does! It's hard, it is *hard!* Listen, I've tried to do that [laughs] - it's hard! Just leave everything behind, just don't think about the problems at home, you don't worry about - you know, it's impossible! I mean it's just a very difficult thing. The people who do it do deserve respect. Because, I'm telling you, it is extremely difficult!

If you've spent 10 years on the road, how do you think you can build some kind of roof somewhere? A lot of musicians are being pushed and hounded by the people who own them.

That's the sad part about it, but it is the Blues. [laughing] What can I say?

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