



The Sweet Tones of Toni Brown

by Dean Budnick

This is this month's installment in an ongoing series that you may have noticed I am putting together. One of the missions of the site is not only to introduce you to the bands, review the shows and give you tour dates but we're really trying to let you see what goes on in all phases of the scene, from booking shows (read my Andrew Stahl article) to helping publicize them (yet to come) to playing jam bands on the radio (again just wait...). This month, I continue the series with a Toni Brown interview.

Toni, as I am sure you well know, is the publisher of Relix magazine. She's been involved with Relix for more than eighteen years now and she has a fine perspective on what's happening with this music.

However Toni also brings a bit more to the table as she is currently gigging with her Toni Brown Band and is currently recording a follow-up to her debut disc (in which she enlisted the very fine David Nelson Band to join her in the studio). Here are Toni's thoughts on her own music, the jam band scene and a bit on running Relix...

D- Let's start with the newest phase of your career. When did you start performing with your current band? What inspired you to come out from behind the desk and allow people to start writing about you?

T- It seems like I've been doing Relix forever. It's been eighteen years. When I was sixteen I was in band, and thank god for Grace Slick, she gave girls a chance to be in bands. Of course when they started doing Grand Funk Railroad I sort of stepped out and put it aside. But over the years I always wrote. I composed poetry and put it to music.

Then a short while before Jerry Garcia's death I decided to bring my music to the studio. I was working with the David Nelson Band on that project and we had all the same influences: New Riders, Grateful Dead, Commander Cody and the Flying Burrito Brothers. We started on this and then I stepped back for a little while. But after Jerry Garcia died there was such a gap in my life that I felt I needed to go out and play. I brought a new band together, some people I knew for a while, some of whom I had played with informally, and we started doing shows.

Our first gig was at the Bottom Line in New York which was a very prestigious club in New York to premiere in. After that we had a number of Wetlands gigs. That club has been very good to us.

I have to say that at first in some ways I used my notoriety from Relix, but ultimately it didn't get me very far. It really took a lot of work. You just can't go out and play music and

have everyone respect you. I was very fortunate in that being around music intimately for all these years, it was like I had been paying my dues all along.

D- How has your approach to music evolved over the intervening three years?

T- My album was really my introduction back into playing music and I very much went into that country rock thing. There was a lot of jamming within that country rock, folky realm. The David Nelson Band helped me stay in that format because that's what they do. But when I started playing music on my own with my guys, well we're all New Yorkers so an edge crept into my music. So now while my songs may begin as country rock when I bring something to the band it quickly evolves out of that, it's almost untraceable at that point. We're a groove/jam band. All of the musicians I am working with are all able to improvise and we really can go with that. We all grew up with experimental music.

I am working on a new album now, which instead of an psychedelic exploration is more of jazz exploration which I really didn't even see coming. I feel that we are evolving in the same direction that this music is evolving and I believe that a lot of that has to do with the fact that I listen to so much of the music that comes through Relix magazine for review. I guess in some way that touches me. Also the musicians around me keep in touch with what's happening as well. It's not just country rock anymore.

D- Tell me a little more about how you see the scene's music evolving.

T- I really think that the basis for the improvisatory music that's out there now is jazz. People bring blues, country and rock and everything else into it but I think jazz is the beginning. Historically that was the point where people started to play with feeling. Anyhow, I find the music out there now to be much more jazz-based. I still consider Phish and others to be playing psychedelic music, but as it is evolving the role of jazz is even more pronounced. I also find things to be more frenetic now than they were a few years ago.

D- How have all of these developments altered the direction or mission of Relix?

T- The magazine really has changed recently in that we are providing our readers with more in depth cover of the newer bands. Recently we've done quite a bit on Jiggle The Handle, Widespread Panic and many more. There are so many bands out there who run the gamut of styles. But we've always written about that stuff. We were the first magazine to write about Phish, Blues Traveler, Widespread Panic... We've really always done that. It's just that since there's a bit less to say about the Grateful Dead people are noticing that other stuff. Phish is on our current cover and we're getting a great response. Well Phish was on our cover twice before and people didn't have the same reaction. I don't understand it. The Phish phenomenon isn't that much bigger than it was when we did the other two covers but people are suddenly noticing it. So either people are looking for new resources to learn about music and turn to Relix, or they liked the fancy cover on this issue (laughs).

I'd say that we have younger readers who are trying to learn about what's new out there. Meanwhile we also have older readers who are into the Grateful Dead and aren't moving on and are not going out looking for new music because they have families and jobs and they can't go to clubs and wait for bands to go on at eleven at night. This group of people are the ones who are buying records. So Relix has this interesting cross-capability of reaching an older crowd that has money and reaching a younger audience that will go to shows and not

necessarily buy albums.

D- How do you strike that balance in any given issue?

T- Relix to me has always been organic. I don't necessarily think far ahead so it all just happens around me. It's a giant jigsaw puzzle and fortunately for me, it all comes together. I will sift through things and Mick Skidmore, whose opinion I respect, will sift through it again, and then we'll decide who it is we're going to do features on. Of course we can't do features on every band we review. Meanwhile as for the older fans who are sitting back and can't go to as many shows, they are definitely music enthusiasts. There aren't many new developments in that scene although the Other Ones CD is out and it's beautiful. It's going to feed the Heads a lot. It should get them out to this summer's Furthur Festival, even more than last year which was highly successful. And Phil Lesh is doing well after his liver transplant. So there will be that continuation of Grateful Dead music.

I also know that Phish has gotten to a bunch of Deadheads who swore they never would dip into it. But some of them went to a few shows and said 'I get it.'

D- I would imagine that you approach all of these issues and concerns from a unique perspective because you have had such a long association with this music. How long have you been with Relix?

T- Over eighteen years. Les Kippel started Relix magazine. Let the record show that I started dating him and I ended up in his apartment which was also his office. He had a day job and I had one too but our hours were a bit different. So it turned out that his phone was actually ringing quite a bit more than he realized by not being there all day. So I wound up working on Relix full time. The editor then was Jeff Dermarken, who did a great job, he was the editor for Goldmine for many years. He left and I was there and Les said it's yours. I had never edited a magazine but I love this music, I was a writer and I could spell well (laughs). And it all started there.

D- I know there is much more to it. I'm curious, what lessons did you learn that might be applicable to us here at jambands.com?

T- I think the biggest lesson I've learned is always listen to your critics, don't push them off. Every time Blair Jackson or David Gans who are both terrific writers, criticized Relix, I took it personally but I grew from it and I worked harder. Every bit of criticism I ever got taught me more. I take every single letter that comes in here very seriously. and every suggestion is part of what makes Relix what it is

I'll tell you this too, I've found from experience that some of the worst writers come out of journalism school. There they are taught to do things in the way that a particular teacher tells them. I love new writers who just send me stories and say "would you consider this?" Sometimes those are the best things I've ever received, from people who just had that one story in them they had to get out. But again, a lot of people turn away from criticism, and I try to use it productively and not let it get to me. It's very easy to make mistakes especially when we don't have a team of thirty people in place just to check mistakes, especially with setlists.

By the way, in terms of setlists, there's an example of how cyberspace changed what we

were doing. We don't run those anymore in part because they are so readily available to people on line that I don't feel that we need to be a resource for that. There are other ways that we can focus our energies to be helpful to those in the scene.

D- It's obvious that you personally are involved in most every phase of Relix. I would be interested to know to what extent sexism has impacted on your role as publisher?

TB- When I started with Relix I was the only woman I came across in the industry who wasn't a publicist. It was very difficult to get the respect in terms of selling advertising or other concerns. But fortunately I grew up a hippie and remain a hippie so I never really let it get to me. I felt that as long as I was true to myself and respected myself I was doing okay. There was a lot of sexism at the beginning and speaking as a performer there were very few women musicians as well who were receiving the measure of respect they deserved. I think that recently the Lilith Fair has helped out a bit.

When I started out with my band, we'd do a number of Grateful Dead covers, and women would come up to me and tell me that they thought it was great. But occasionally a man would come up and say "you know, I didn't like that arrangement, it's too much of a departure." Of course there are some Grateful Dead songs that I find to be so sexist, like "Sugaree," that I would not necessarily sing them. But I will sing 'I'm A Hog or You,' which is a really great tune which is usually sung by the male of the species.

D- Back to your band, are there any moments that really stand out in your memory?

T- The Poconos Gathering at the Mountain was inspired by Relix and so that was a very special highlight for me. For a festival to say that we were an inspiration and then to be able to go out and perform my music, that really means a lot. It's a great ski resort and a beautiful event and it falls around the day that Jerry died so that's always been a special event for me. This past year I also enjoyed the Sunshine Daydream Festival and then the Magnolia Fest down in Florida which also had Old and In The Way and some other people who I know but have never had the chance to see me play.

The festivals seem to be the most fun because we get a chance to see these other bands that we know or have heard of it but haven't yet had the chance to see. It's also nice to be out in the crowd where I can get feedback for the magazine.

Other highlights? Opening for Hot Tuna or Jorma and not getting booed, those are big accomplishments as far as I'm concerned. (laughs).

D- Why don't you introduce your band to our readers

T- Gary Kroman who has been an artist for Relix, doing magazine covers and album covers is a great blues player. He's played with Jorma a bunch. He's our noise guitarist. Rob Wolfson is our other guitarist. He's in Illuminati and Tiberius which is my bass player's band. Rob plays a contrasting sweet guitar and together they really gel and bring such different worlds to the sound. Marty Bostoff on bass has his own band Tiberius named after James Tiberius Kirk. He adds a lot of notes in there, he doesn't just hold the bottom, he holds the bottom and the top and middle. He also has the best memory in the band which is important because every band needs a memory. Mike Nicita is our drummer. He's very serious and he solidifies our bottom. I can tell you that I focus on him quite a bit. And Jeff

Pearlman is our keyboard player. He's the newest member of the band. He has added some creative elements, tasty ideas. Then there's me. I write the originals, and come up with the basic musical ideas for the songs, and then the band chimes in.

D- When you're up front what goes through your head?

T- I also play acoustic guitar so sometimes I'm playing and get caught up in that. But at other times I'll just step back and it's funny, I'm a fan. I'm a fan of my own band, so I just dance and listen to the music. I could be on the stage or off the stage and appreciate what they doing just as much. Sometimes I'll almost forget to come back and sing because I'm just so caught up in what's going on around me. When I'm up there I'm as into it much as anybody in front of me.



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MEDIA REVIEWS

TONI BROWN BAND

HERE'S WHAT THE CRITICS HAVE BEEN SAYING!

"Rock & Blues News"

by Lee Cotten

Toni Brown, Dare To Dream (Relix)

The term "modern blues" has come to include a vast array of styles. At one end are such nontraditional traditionalists as Eddy "The Chief" Clearwater and Duke Robillard; in the middle are thousands of up-and-coming blues bar bands; and the other end is Toni Brown. Opening her second release with the title cut sung over a swirling pastiche of guitars, tambourines and congas, Brown sounds every bit the female psuedo-folkie-type that has invaded the current music scene. By cut number three, "New Speedway Boogie," Brown and her band are thumping along on a groove from the Grateful Dead. Follow this with Blind Faith's "Can't Find My Way Home," as tragic a ballad as has been written in the past 30 years, sung here in a shimmering, gossamer style that haunts the listener long after the last note fades. Brown, who is the publisher and editorial director of Relix magazine, deserves credit for trying some very difficult hat tricks. Take an 8-minute version of Gershwin's "Summertime," for instance, immediately followed by the Coasters' "I'm A Hog For You," in which she trades vocals with bass guitarist Marty Bostoff. The band also includes John Beland of the Flying Burrito Brothers and fiddle master Vassar Clements. This one's a roller coaster ride. (Cotten)

"Note For Note"

By Steve Roeser

Warren Zevon-Life'll Kill Ya (Artemis Records) and Toni Brown-Dare To Dream (Relix Records)

Which brings us to Toni Brown's Grateful Dead inspired album (her second), Dare To Dream. Brown also covers a Winwood song, but goes a lot further back in his history than Warren (Zevon), all the way back to 1969 and the Blind Faith album, the classic tune "Can't Find My Way Home" (which Eric Clapton has been known to perform in concert). Other covers include a mellow "Summertime" (no echoes of Janis), the old Coasters record, "I'm A Hog For You" and a Grateful Dead nugget, "New Speedway Boogie." Brown also does a nice version of Brent Mydland's "We Can Run," Mydland being one of the departed Dead members she dedicates this album to, along with Keith Godchaux, Pigpen and Garcia. Brown has a good ensemble of musicians backing her, including producer John Beland. Her original songs (the title song probably being best) are more personal, and there's a couple of "burned by love" numbers-"No Friend Of Mine" and "Bad News." Brown comes off well as one dedicated to her music.

"The Beat"

After years of writing about those who make music, *Relix Magazine* publisher, Toni Brown, has finally tried her hand at it.

Brown captures the sweet, pure country rock sound of early seventies California on her debut release **Blue Morning**. On this collection of ten songs, Toni surrounds herself with some great musicians, including Jorma Kaukonen and Michael Falzarano of Hot Tuna, David Nelson of New Riders of the Purple Sage and Jerry Acoustic Band fame, and a great New York duo called the Nudes.

Produced by Falzarano, the project's cover art, a skeleton sitting next to a palm tree looking over a very blue

ocean at sunrise, was created by Gary Kroman.

Brown's warm and friendly vocals are both ear-appealing and kind. Her tracks are festive and pure. The psychedelic blend of country rock that permeates this album, bring to mind the music of the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Byrds, Gram Parson's Fallen Angel Band, and of course, New Riders. **Blue Morning** also seems inspired in many ways by the Grateful Dead classics **American Beauty** and **Workingman's Dead**.

Brown has recorded six original compositions, reworked a Burrito classic, and covered three dead favorites.

Her originals are genuine stand outs. The song-writing is honest, romantic, and versatile. The title cut is a straight up country rocker, while the delightful "*Double Shot of Tequila*" has a trippy new age thing goin' on. I love the bongos! "*Stars*" is a jazzy little groove that features some great improv by the band, and "*I Remember*" features Toni along with the Nudes - Stephanie Winters and Walter Parks - on some great three part vocal harmonies.

I was especially fired up by Brown's rendition of "The Wheel." The steel guitar intro by Barry Sless was totally sweet and Toni's vocals wrapped around me and took me to a warm, safe place. The up tempo version of "*Morning Dew*" was very fat, highlighted by a rippin' Jorma solo. "*Box of Rain*" brought back special memories of the last GD show.

All and all, **Blue Morning** is great fun with animated performances by Toni and the band, clean production and cool artwork. The liner notes point out that this CD is dedicated to the memory of Jerry Garcia and inspired by the Grateful Dead and Robert Hunter. Right on!

by... *Eric Lambert*

"Jam Bands"

Although Brooklyn-based Toni Brown may be better known for her publishing ventures than her musical ones, the times just might be a-changin'. Brown's prose skills and her love for improvisational music led her to join Les Kippel's *Relix Magazine* in 1979. A few years later, when Kippel decided to focus his energies on a record label, Brown became the magazine's publisher, and she has nurtured that enterprise ever since. Yet Brown had performed in a band as a teenager, and she now acknowledges, "After being around this music for so long, how could I not play?" So, when Robert Hunter gave her one of his guitars and encouraged her to start making music once again, she happily complied.

Brown's eventual emergence as a performer resulted from her friendship with members of the Dave Nelson Band. Over the years, Brown had used Hunter's gift to compose a number of songs, but still had no steady vehicle with which to express them. Then, in April 1995, she joined the DNB in the studio to work through a number of her tunes. She was pleased with the results, which led her to assemble a band of her own. The group currently includes guitarists Rob Wolfson of Illuminati and Gary Kroman, Tiberius bassist Marty Bostoff and drummer Mike Nicita anchor the Toni Brown Band, and Jeff Pearlman contributes on the keyboards. The sextet performs her compositions in the spirit of the music she savors, replete with improvisation. As a result, her tour docket has become full. She has been booked for a number of club shows and festival performances, including an April 1998 Japan run that reunited her on stage with the Dave Nelson Band.

Discography:

Blue Morning (1996). On Brown's debut release, she is backed by a stellar group of musicians. The Dave Nelson Band appears on many of these cuts. Jorma Kaukonen and Michael Falzarano lend support as well - Falzarano also produced the disc. Due, in part, to the nature of the players on *Blue Morning*, there is a country feel to many of the songs that often evokes the Flying Burrito Brothers or the New Riders of the Purple Sage (the latter is certainly attributable in part to the players on this recording). Brown's warm vocals express her evocative metaphors on tracks such as the reggae-tinged "Walk on Water" and the shuffling "Last Row of the Balcony." Other notable offerings include "Double Shot of Tequila" and the ten-minute exploration "Stars."

"Holding Together - the Best in West Coast Music"

'Blue Morning' - Toni Brown (Relix RRCD 2074, US)

A really pleasant surprise is this debut record by Relix Magazine publisher-editor Ms. Brown for which she has enrolled the not-inconsiderable services of Jorma, Mike and Harvey from Hot Tuna and the entire Dave Nelson Band. The result is a country-flavoured triumph comprising six originals, three Dead covers, and a Burritos' number.

Her version of "The Wheel" is relaxed and comfortable, with Barry Sless providing some engaging pedal steel; "Morning Dew" is given an up-tempo country treatment - less dramatic than the Dead's various readings, but with three guitarists (Jorma, Nelson and Sless) picking delightfully around each other's runs. "Box of Rain" - a tough song to cover - appears in an impressive, dreamy rendition featuring more top-flight steel from Sless and Toni's most touching vocal performance.

As a songwriter, Ms. Brown proves a more than adequate conjurer of country melodies: "Blue Morning" is a gently rocking opener with a warm feel; "Double Shot of Tequila" is a well-written, if rather melancholy vessel, featuring Sorgen on highly effective bongos; and "Last Row in the Balcony" - which boasts all three Tuna participants, albeit with Jorma in an understated role - is a slice of trad country one could imagine being covered by the likes of Dolly Parton or Patty Loveless.

But the piece de resistance is the ten and a half minute "Stars", a brilliant homage to the good ol' GD. As a song it's beautifully crafted and quite the best of Toni's half dozen - but it's the magical improvised instrumental section with Nelson, Bill Laymon and Arthur Steinhorn giving tremendous impressions of Garcia, Lesh and Kreutzmann, which weaves the magic.

Somewhere in the cosmos, a dark star is assuredly shining.

HERE'S WHAT MUSICAL FRIENDS HAVE BEEN SAYING!

This is the Toni Brown album I've been waiting for, a wonderful collection of songs, tastefully produced, that for the most part, distances her from her Dead-based audience and firmly establishes her as her own artist for new fans.

Key to her new sound is producer Paul Harlyn's arrangements, in collaboration with Brown, that gently place her folkish singing among traditional instruments.

Songwriting is certainly her great strength, and female country singers of the day would do well to mine her catalog for album tracks. Mostly songs of longing and loneliness, the one cover, Donovan's "Catch The Wind," fits the format well and is, ironically, perhaps her best vocal work to date; on a personal note, after so many years and so many versions, hers was the first that made the song matter to me. And that may be the most endearing quality of Toni Brown the performer, that her sincere, heartfelt delivery makes every song so believable.

Jon Butcher, Musicologist/Journalist/DJ

You have a great voice-very pure, rich, and clear. It sounds to me like you probably have perfect pitch too--you're not relying on vibrato to hit the notes. Your songs are very melodic and pleasing, and I've caught myself with some of the tunes running through my head! Your engineer did a great job of recording your voice. The mixing and production are first class too.

Chris Stone, Singer/Songwriter

Rabbit Hole Soul sounds great. The production is far superior to your other discs. Your voice sounds solid and full, the instrumentation is great, really clean and nicely done. Congratulations!

Bryan Miller, Singer/Songwriter, Miller's Farm

...great job. What an endeavor. I am going to listen again and again.

Veronica Piastuch, Former Manager, Eric Andersen

I can feel the very personal nature of the whole album--it brings an intimacy to the music which makes the listener feel very close to you as a person. It has a similar effect to Joni Mitchell's Blue album (which happens to be my favorite). You really put your heart into this album...so how could it be bad? It is authentic and heartfelt. Good work!

Starr Sackstein, Music Journalist

Your latest musical effort sounds really good and the production/accompaniment works nicely to complement and enhance the tunes and performances. One of the things that makes this new CD impressive is the contrast with your two previous releases. This time around, you took the time to rethink your creative approach, and there is a definite sense of maturity and growth.

Steve Ramirez, Bass Player, Bay Area, California

The CD is very, very good. I really like the sound of the acoustic piano and the mandolin. My favorite song on the album is "Sounds So Clear," FANTASTIC! What a song and what an arrangement. Other favorite songs on this CD are "Lights On" and "Blue Morning." But I like all the material. I think this is your best work!!!

Thomas Aubrunner, Musician, Vienna, Austria


