

Kenny Wayne Shepherd puts rock back into his blues mix



Kenny Wayne Shepherd performs with Robert Cray Band Sept. 20 at the Musikfest Cafe in a benefit concert for Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks. (PHOTO BY MARK SELIGER / September 9, 2012)

By Alan Sculley, Special to The Morning Call

7:46 P.M. EDT, SEPTEMBER 13, 2012

For the first time in his career, bluesman [Kenny Wayne Shepherd](#) took a "finish-no-record-before-its-time" approach as he made his latest studio CD, "How I Go."

That's one reason the gap between his studio albums grew to seven years.

Shepherd hadn't spent those years loafing. In 2006, he released "10 Days Out," a combination CD/DVD that involved Shepherd (with drummer Chris Layton and bassist Tommy Shannon, from [Stevie Ray Vaughan](#)'s old band, Double Trouble) traveling around the United States to record and film collaborations with veteran [blues](#) artists that included Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Etta Baker, Pinetop Perkins ([Muddy Waters](#)' pianist) and [Hubert Sumlin](#) ([Howlin' Wolf](#)'s guitarist).

Then in 2010, he released his first concert CD, "Live In Chicago," that primarily featured material not on his five studio CDs.

Considering the gap since 2004's "The Place You're In," one might have expected Shepherd to feel a sense of urgency to finish and release "How I Go."

Instead, Shepherd took his time. Some of it was a necessity. In the time between studio albums, he has accumulated roughly 300-400 guitar riffs, rhythm tracks and song ideas.

Shepherd couldn't just stop and instantly turn those ideas into songs. He has always favored co-writing, and decided to work with several of his favorite collaborators — Mark Selby, Tia Sellers and Zac Maloy — which meant multiple trips to Nashville for writing sessions.

"That was over the course of a year and a half probably in between concerts and other projects and stuff, and trying to get all of our schedules to match up at the right time because everybody's pretty busy," Shepherd says.

He also decided not to rush the recording process.

"We went in the studio over the course of the past year and made this record. So we would record for two weeks and then we'd go home and we'd be out of the studio for a couple of months. It enabled me to live with the material for long periods of time and really analyze it and listen to it. And that way I was very sure when I went back in the studio what needed to be done to make it better."

This made for a whole different experience for Shepherd.

"In the past, we've done records, we've written an album in a matter of a couple of months, gone in and recorded in a matter of a couple of months, then hit the road for a year and a half and then jumped right back into the studio and did it all over again," Shepherd says. "So this is a little bit of a new approach to making this record, and I really enjoyed it."

A native of Shreveport, La., Shepherd started playing guitar at age 7. As he moved into his teens, it became apparent that his playing was far more advanced than his years.

In 1995, when Shepherd was just 17, he hit the national scene with the CD "Ledbetter Heights," which included the hit "Blue On Black." The album became a hit, and Shepherd's guitar skills and blues-rooted sound drew comparisons to Stevie Ray Vaughan.

The praise for Shepherd continued as he quickly cranked out two more CDs (between a heavy schedule of tour dates) — the Grammy-nominated "Trouble Is ..." in 1997 and "Live On" two years later.

Since then Shepherd's recorded output has slowed.

Before making "The Place You're In," he dealt with a drinking and drug habit that, as he said in a 2004 interview with this writer, had become a "routine for me, like a daily affair."

The "10 Days Out" project took considerable time to complete, and "Live In Chicago" recorded in one night, took a couple of months to mix and master.

Shepherd also added other priorities in his life. In 2006, he married Hannah Gibson, daughter of actor/director [Mel Gibson](#), and they had three children in four years.

This, of course, has changed Shepherd's life immensely — and he has made family time a priority.

"I kind of knew from the moment I met her, I had a very strong feeling that I was going to be spending the rest of my life with her," Shepherd says of Hannah. "I'm kind of an old-fashioned guy."

"I feel like if you get married, yes, you get married because you love somebody and you want to be with her, but it's also so that you can have a family and share the love and the joy and the experience of life. So we didn't have a plan. We just wanted to see, well basically what God had in store for us. And that's been our approach to it. So far, it's brought us tons of happiness and very wonderful kids that I'm very grateful for, and that have changed my entire life. I mean, having kids has probably been the single most profound experience of my entire life."

But Shepherd also says he feels a strong obligation to his music and his fans, so he's excited to have "How I Go" and to be on tour.

With "How I Go," Shepherd was eager to re-assert the rock facet of his sound. "10 Days Out" and "Live In Chicago" were strong blues outings.

"I wanted there to be a nice mix between blues and blues-based rock, or contemporary blues or whatever you want to call it, just getting back to that middle road between the rock and the blues, which I think is what people have come to expect from me and my band," he says.

The rock side emerges right away with "Never Lookin' Back," a driving track that is arguably the CD's best song.

"Come On Over" and "The Wire" are among the other muscular songs that showcase the rock side of Shepherd's music. Blues fans, meanwhile, get "Dark Side Of Love" and covers of [Albert King](#)'s "Oh, Pretty Woman" (not the [Roy Orbison](#) hit) and the Beatles' "Yer Blues," both of which feature some standout solos from Shepherd.

Shepherd has been gradually adding more of the new material on tour this year.

"We've worked up just about every song that was on the record for the live show," Shepherd says. "So it's just a matter of time before most of it is in the set list."

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KENNY WAYNE SHEPHERD AND ROBERT CRAY BAND

•**What:** Concert of blues music to benefit free summer shows at Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks.

•**When:** 7 p.m. Sept. 20

•**Where:** [Musikfest](#) Cafe, ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks, First Street and Founders Way, Bethlehem

•**How much:** \$50, \$75, \$150 (includes pre-concert cocktail and dining reception at new Visitor Center), \$200 (includes pre-cocktail and dining reception at Visitor Center and Levitt thank-you package)

•**Info:** <http://www.levittsteelstacks.org>, 610-332-3378