



# You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet

WITH A NEW RECORD AND A NEW RECORD LABEL, HAMILTON'S STEVE STRONGMAN LOOKS SET TO TAKE HIS CAREER TO THE NEXT LEVEL. **BY JAMIE TENNANT**

In art — especially in music — authenticity matters. The word authenticity is bandied about — battered, really — by fans and critics alike.

People like the blues, but many will claim they like “authentic” blues. What does it mean to be an authentic blues musician? You're an African-American male, wearing sunglasses and a Fedora, holding an acoustic guitar on the porch of a shack in Mississippi? You channel Lightnin' Hopkins as accurately as possible?

Tall and lanky, with his trademark soul patch and flat cap, Hamilton-based bluesman Steve Strongman pretty much looks like Steve Strongman. He doesn't sound like Lightnin' Hopkins. He speaks through the blues, but he sounds like himself.

Kitchener-born Strongman has been playing guitar since the age of 16 and, like most teenagers at the time, he was enthralled by rock'n'roll. So enthralled, in fact, that he was pulled into the wormhole of modern music, so to speak — he moved backwards through rock'n'roll until he landed knee-deep in the blues.

Since those days, he has gone on to release several albums, starting with *Honey* in 2007, win countless awards (see sidebar) and gain a nationwide fanbase. Friendly, gracious and sincere in person, Strongman comes across as one of those authentic people, and that's apparent in what he strives for in his music — to express himself

honestly, to be authentic to himself and his listeners. This has led to an ever-evolving musical output. From the electric boogie and swing blues of *Blues in Colour*, he cut sideways with an all-acoustic blues masterpiece, *A Natural Fact*. With the following release, he packed up the acoustic and went back to an electric sound.

When fans hear his upcoming album, *No Time Like Now*, they won't expect it to sound like the last one. That's good, because it doesn't — even though it still sounds like the work of Steve Strongman.

“For me, as a blues artist, the parameters are very wide,” he says. “I fell in love with blues via rock bands. There's definitely a big rock element to the record — but I still think it's totally deeply rooted in blues.”

The rock'n'roll on *No Time Like Now* is evident from the first listen. Strongman and producer Rob Szabo often hearken

to guitarists such as ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons with their guitar tones. The songs are often riff-driven, propelled by a rhythm section that also borrows a rock'n'roll approach; elsewhere, experimentation abounds, as Strongman blends other genre elements, such as country and gospel, into the mix. None of these choices were arbitrary or intended to “rock up” the joint; they were made, at every turn, to serve the songs themselves.

“I always try and stay out of the way of the song,” Strongman says. “I've been playing guitar for such a long period of time, I don't think about it; to me the emotion of the song and the way that you put it across is the core thing.”

For many, musical virtuosity and technique are synonymous with the blues, and there's no doubt that guitar enthusiasts often gravitate to the style for the guitar playing. Strongman, who has won awards for that very ability, does not particularly concern himself with his performance. It comes naturally by now, after all, but more intentionally, he would rather focus on another skill — songwriting itself.

“I don't really think of the musicianship element of it at all,” he says. “In fact, a lot of the time we're stripping away — there's too many chords man, more simple, direct, to the point. You don't wanna be like ‘oh here's another guitar solo, great, he'll play guitar for three minutes now and then he's going to sing another verse.’ That distracts from the song.”

Ultimately, anyone who has heard Strongman play knows he has nothing to prove. When he does let his fingers loose on the new album, it's some of the best playing you're going to hear in Canada this year.

Another highlight of *No Time Like Now* is Strongman's choice of cover songs. In keeping with the album's sensibility, he does not reach back into blues cannon for his choice of material. Instead, he looks to blues-influenced classic rock — specifically, that of his long-time friend and collaborator, Randy Bachman.

“I love Randy's stuff, and ‘You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet’ leapt out at me,” Strongman explains. “But I thought if we did that I didn't want it to be the exact same version, so Rob and I worked up our version of it. We sent it to Randy and he emailed me back and he loved it. I'm thinking, ‘Oh my god, I just sent this to the guy that wrote the song and he loves our version!’”



Bachman loved this new version of the old Bachman-Turner Overdrive smash so much that he invited Strongman to debut the song at the CNE this past summer, an invitation Strongman naturally accepted. He played the song to 12,000 fans, along with Randy Bachman himself. Bachman also appears on the album version (that second guitar solo is his).

Apart from the BTO classic, the rest of the songs on *No Time Like Now* are Strongman originals. Together they are his most diverse collection of tracks. From the memorable riffs of the title track and "Bring The Hammer Down," to the smokey atmosphere of "Sometimes" to the stirringly emotional confessional of "The Day They Carry Me Away," these tracks dive deep into a variety of sounds and ideas, emerging as the most memorable tunes he has ever written.

Strongman's process is to write far more material than needed before he begins to whittle it down into a track listing. "Don't do what a lot of people would do," he advises young artists. "Don't say 'I need a couple more songs and then I can put out a record.' Don't do that. Wait until you have tons of material and then go through it all. I still have songs that did not make this record that are done, demoed, paid for, recorded. At the end of the day, they didn't make the final cut for whatever reason. Those are always hard choices, but it's a good position to be in. Sometimes you're surprised — 'really? I kind of like that tune and it's not going to make the record?' — but the songs we chose formed a coherent record and it was what we wanted."

Keep that in mind. If you're a Strongman fan, there's an outstanding "B-sides and rarities" collection just waiting to be compiled from the archives.

*No Time Like Now*, scheduled for release on March 3, will likely become one of those albums that satisfies current fans while inviting new ones into the party. Strongman's popularity will continue to soar, both within and beyond the Canadian blues community. That could have been tough for the man himself, given that his career had reached the point where his days were, at times, 80% business and only 20% music. It was this disproportionate ratio that led him to ink both a record deal and a management deal with his long-time friends at the Sonic Unyon Recording Company. His partnership with the legendary Hamilton label has him primed to take his album title literally. For Steve Strongman, there really is no time like now.

"Now I get to spend all my time and energy on performing, being the best musician I can be, putting on the best shows that I can, getting out there and taking the music to the people," he says. "That's the way it should be."

### What You Need to Know

**Name:** Steve Strongman (guitar, vocals)

**Discography:** *Honey* (2007); *Blues in Colour* (2010); *Live at the Barn* (CD/DVD; 2010); *A Natural Fact* (2012); *Let Me Prove It To You* (2015); *No Time Like Now* (2017)

**Awards:** 2013 JUNO Award, Blues Recording of the Year, *A Natural Fact*; 2012 Maple Blues Award, Recording of the Year, *A Natural Fact*; 2012 Maple Blues Award, Songwriter of the Year; 2012 Maple Blues Award, Guitarist of the Year; 2011 Maple Blues Award, Guitarist of the Year; 2009 Mel Brown Blues Award; 2009 Hamilton Music Award, Blues Album of the Year, *Blues in Colour*

**On his new album:** "I'm proud of the fact that I do think it was me pushing the boundaries," says Strongman. "That's a hard thing to do, as an artist, to step outside your comfort zone. Part of the reason I was able to do that is because [producer] Rob [Szabo] knows me so well and is able to push me, to know when it's going to work and when it's not. All the artists that I really love, that's what they do, they constantly push themselves. Maybe some people are going to prefer one record to another, but you can't just keep making the same record over and over again."

**On his band:** "I've got one of the best touring bands anywhere," Strongman enthuses. "Man, they're fantastic. The guys in my band happen to be my closest friends so it's not like, 'Oh, jeez, what a drag. We've got an eight-hour drive to Quebec ahead of us.' It's, 'Hey, cool! We've got an eight-hour drive to Quebec ahead of us!'"



### INSTANT PLEASURES VOL. 2

## Tactus Tempus



Since the early 2000s, Ryan Smith has supported fellow Dundas native Dan Snaith in the touring version of Caribou, the one-time bedroom beatmaking

project that's become a globe-trotting festival force. But his nightly immersion in Caribou's electronic psychedelia hasn't just encouraged Smith's obsession with vintage synthesizers — it's made him obsessed with books about vintage synthesizers. And it was while perusing *Electronic Music: Systems, Techniques, and Controls* that he found the score for Frank L. McCarty's 1973 electronic composition *Tactus Tempus* — and the gumption to recreate it himself.

You see, McCarty's score isn't your typical chart with musical notes and keys and such. It's a set of instructions for producing pulse and tone patterns, alongside a graph displaying a hill-shaped "density-intensity curve" that players respond to over a set time limit. An exercise in regulated improvisation, if you will.

It's okay if none of that makes any sense to you; Smith can explain.

"The title *Tactus Tempus* refers to the two different kinds of time," he says. "One kind is the time everyone relates to, like on a clock. And the other is your own internal time — your natural pace or rhythm. And the idea of the score is to make those things interact and play off each other. The thing I really like about the score is that, even though the instructions are inscrutable and wacky, you can kind of figure out what they're all about. The score branches off from the academic compositional world, but it's very much a participatory, democratic performance."

To emphasize that point, Smith assembled an all-star cast of peers in London, U.K. last June to reproduce the score — including Snaith, Hot Chip's Joe Goddard, Jas Shaw of Simian Mobile Disco, and Jeremy Greenspan of Hamilton's own Junior Boys. The results — two radically different 15-minute interpretations — will be released in March on Greenspan's Geej label, with McCarty's score printed on the cover. The message: do try this at home.

"People could play this just tapping on a table," Smith says. "It could even be performed without sound — like you could just have a bunch of people manipulating strobe lights. The beauty of the piece is that people contribute their personalities and feelings."

BY STUART BERMAN