



Welcome to our new readers.

We have had some very complimentary comments about Russ's new website. [www.russballardmusic.com](http://www.russballardmusic.com) Comments are always welcome...send them here and I will forward them to Sven. If you have any good gig photos you would like to see on the website, please let us have them here, with permission to use them, and they will get to Sven for inclusion. A big thank you to Sven for producing our Christmas card banner, above.

This month, Dave has reviewed At The Third Stroke and thank you to our Readers' Lives contributor, Billy Montella Jr. for a very interesting

read! Thank you for your responses to Dave's articles. It seems they are extremely popular. And thank you to Dave for all the work he puts into them.

We had a fantastic response to our get together idea. As soon as the email went out, the replies came flooding in. We now have a better idea of what sort of venue we need. At first we thought maybe a corner in a pub. No! We need somewhere much bigger than that. I know many of you need the date so you can plan around it. We will send further details to those who are interested as soon as we can. Apologies to our many overseas readers and thank you for your responses saying you would come if you could. I have discovered that we have a lot more readers in the US than I thought, as well as other parts of the world.

Have a fabulous Christmas, wherever you are! 🧑🏻‍🎅 🎄

Sue

## THIS MONTH

*Russ: "I suppose like some of you, I've been suffering with the dreaded virus....coughing, aches and stuff for the first two weeks of November. Anyway, I'm on form now and back in the studio.*

*As I mentioned in a previous newsletter, I worked in my studio with my friend, drummer Alan [Stickie] Wicket and American Singer/ Blues Guitar player, Beki Brindle....I've known Stickie since 1976 when he played drums for me on my one and only U.S. tour after leaving Argent. He also played in Steve Marriot's band when Humble Pie called it a day. I met Beki when she came to an Argent reunion show a few years ago. Strangely enough, Alan came to that show and they both became acquainted and were soon doing shows together. They played me some of a live CD they made in London and it sounded brilliant. They asked if I had a song that would be*

*good for them - I suggested one, now we've recorded it and it sounds great....with some luck you'll be hearing it in February.*

*What else have I been doing? I had a meeting with a book Publisher who is interested in a book I've nearly completed...[mind you, I started it in 2007]. Graham Bonnet phoned, said he was recording a new album...You must remember Graham, he was lead singer with Rainbow and sang on two songs I wrote in the seventies....'Since You Been Gone' and 'I Surrender'.... I wrote a song for him the next day, which I believe he's recorded....I haven't heard it yet!*

*Well, it'll soon be Chrissy and I hope all goes well for you...To everyone, Happy, Healthy and Peaceful New Year....Be happy and Lots of Love to you and yours....Speak Soon X"*

**QUESTION**



Russ, you gave me this pin in NYC in the 70s. Do you remember the pin? Do you know what it was for? Maybe a record release party? I would also be interested to know, from others, if anyone else has a similar pin from those days. Also, I have been wondering, why do guitarists use a pick instead of their fingers? How do you decide....to pick or not to pick?"

Russ: *"I remember the pin, it was given to me by someone from CBS Records in America...It's pretty, isn't it....I don't think there will be another....who knows? Guitar players use a pick to 'pluck' the strings. - There are various weights and thicknesses which give varying sounds...With the finger the player has more contact with the instrument. I actually prefer playing with the finger but I can play faster with a pick."*

## **RUSS'S MUSIC HISTORY**

**By Dave Williams**

**At The Third Stroke**

**A stroke of genius?**

Two solo albums already released, followed by a first, and successful, foray into the world of production with **Roger Daltrey**, the Summer of 1978 saw the release of his third solo album, aptly titled ***At the Third Stroke***. On his first album Russ played most of the instruments himself as well as co-producing. On ***Winning*** he opted for more of a band sound, using quality British session musicians and backing vocalists. He brought in **Muff Winwood**, brother of Steve, as producer. For this latest project, Russ took a different approach entirely, opting to record in the United States.



**Russ Ballard – At the Third Stroke (1978) Epic Records S EPC 82529**

Interviewed by Eamonn Percival at the time, it was stated that eight cover versions of songs from ***Winning*** were recorded, selling over three and a half million units. Forty years on those figures have undoubtedly multiplied, but it was clear that, having set the bar so high, the third album would need to be very special. No doubt considerable discussions and thought went into the planning. Should the new album continue along the lines of the last one for example? Being their artist I expect that Epic Records (CBS) had a big say in the matter and referring again to the Eamonn Percival interview, it appears that Lenny Peatsey, the head of A&R in America, visited the UK and asked Russ if he'd like to record in the States. Lenny had played some of Russ's songs to Keith Olsen, who'd produced **Fleetwood Mac's *Terrapin Station*** album, and he liked what he heard. He wanted to produce him.



Agreeing to the suggestion, Russ collected the latest songs he'd written, flew across the Atlantic to the west coast and found himself working with the cream of LA session men. The legendary **Jeff Porcaro** on drums, brother Mike on bass, both sadly no longer with us, plus fellow Toto members **David Paich** on keyboards and **David Hungate** also on bass. A third bass player, **Lee Sklar**, also featured. Over the years he has contributed to over 2000 albums and is most recognisable by his amazingly long beard.



*left to right; Jeff Porcaro, David Paich, Leland "Lee" Sklar, Mike Porcaro*

Bear in mind that shortly afterwards a handful of these same musicians would go on to produce one of the best rock albums of all time, the triple platinum **Toto IV**, which included the classic singles **Africa** and **Rosanna**.

The team of session men also included Tom Scott and Steve Frediani on horns, David Foster and Craig Doerge on piano, Mike Baird on drums, Bobbye Hall on congas, future Little Feat member Fred Tackett on guitar and, two backing vocalists Tom Kelly and Denny Henson, both former members of Dan Fogelberg's backing band Fools's Gold. Kelly co-wrote Pat Benatar's hit single **Fire and Ice**. Finally, there was a fourth bass player in former Rufus member Dennis Belfield. Most of these session men had worked with each other in various combinations over the years and the band **Toto** had risen from studio musicians rather than being a band that turned towards doing session work. In fact, Toto members had already played on albums by **Boz Scaggs**, **Steely Dan**, **Sonny and Cher** and countless others. Make no mistake, every single person listed as a session musician on the sleeve of the forthcoming **Russ Ballard** album represented the cream of California's music industry at that time.

Scheduled for a July release, the title of the third solo album **At the Third Stroke** is presumably borrowed from the telephone speaking clock service. Good

thinking. As for the record sleeve, nothing much to tell. The front picture has three strokes along with the title and artist name. Enough to encourage you to turn it over where you can see a photo of the artist and a list of songs and credits. How I long for the old days when you could spend hours browsing through record sleeves. You can't do with CDs. No wonder teenagers are getting excited now that vinyl is appearing in the stores once again. The sleeve was designed by Nancy Donald who co-designed the sleeve for **Bozz Scaggs' *Silk degrees*** LP, which was nominated for a Grammy Award for **Best Recording Package** in 1977, although the eventual recipient of the award was John Berg for his ***Chicago X*** album sleeve design. It seems at the time that Russ was probably being targeted towards the same audience as **Bozz Scaggs**, which made a lot of sense. CBS in the UK took out space in the usual music papers to plug the new release. The promotion ran with the headline "**A Master Touch from Russ Ballard**" adding in smaller print "You've probably heard more of **Russ Ballard** than you realise - he's written hits for **Hot Chocolate, Colin Blunstone, Roger Daltrey, Three Dog Night** and his old band **Argent**". Personally, I'd have used the word "former" instead of "old", and I'd certainly have made the effort to check the correct spelling of **Roger Daltrey's** surname before going to print, particularly after the last press release for ***Winning***, which described it as a milestone musical instead of a musical milestone. Maybe I'm picking hairs. The advert goes on to mention the songs, a mixture of ballads and rockers containing the unforgettable guitar hooks that have become his trademark. The final line advises readers to "Go and listen to ***At the Third Stroke***, a stroke of pure genius from **Russ Ballard**". No arguments there!

With the impending album launch, the reviews started to appear in the press. Given the changing musical climate, what would be the reaction? Graham Lock took the rather unconventional approach of trying to evaluate four albums by four "singer-songwriters" in one combined review. The four artists included **Russ**, his friend and fellow Epic Records recording artist **Colin Blunstone**, plus **Dan Hill** and **Roy Hill** who both released albums under their own name and are unrelated. Mr Lock chose to focus on the lyrical content and sleeve designs, totally ignoring the music. Russ got pulled up for using the word "oh" 27 times though Dan Hill was also found guilty. He then proceeded to compare and ridicule the lyrics, even piecing together lines from all four artists for his own apparent amusement. Moving on to the sleeve designs, he points out that **Dan Hill, Roy Hill** and **Colin Blunstone** all go for the classic pose – casual stance, open neck shirt, face slightly in shadow, eyes fixed outwards on the hapless punter, but "**Russ Ballard** blows it. In what can only be a misguided attempt to be witty or avant-garde (qualities more appropriate to persons with receding hairlines

than singer songwriters), he has an abstract design on the front of his album and only puts in a personal appearance on the back”. Not one single mention of any song by any of the artists in this two column lengthy review. It begs the question as to whether he went beyond looking at the outer sleeves and the lyrics. Looking back, it’s easy to see why I stopped buying music papers. Another review mentions the album has “nine original songs from Keith Olsen” (what???), with a strong team of backing musicians. He/she adds “these are numbers in which words and music have equally much to say – and the former are provided on the inner sleeve”. This was typical of the rubbish that was being printed at the time. It’s worth noting that alongside one of these reviews there were equally worthless comments targeting other artists; **Rick Derringer** is described as “loud, chauvinistic and so hollow that he rattles”, **Tammy Wynette** is described as “Maudlin as they come” and finally **Bryan Ferry** is described as ‘a helpless parody of what we once loved him for”, going on to admit in the next line “Having said that, his album has already zoomed chart high, so either I’m cloth-eared or an awful lot of other people are, so listen very carefully if you’re thinking of buying it”. I often wonder if these writers ever look back at their work with embarrassment?

A more measured review came from that man Eamonn Percival who had taken the time out to listen to the album properly before commenting. Describing the music as excellent and the playing superb throughout, he pulled out three numbers for mention. ***I’m a Scorpio*** was his favourite, and he went on to give a breakdown of the song arrangement. He struggled to pick out a favourite as he liked all the tracks but he felt ***Dancer*** was particularly strong, especially the flamenco handclaps on the chorus. Interestingly he felt that ***Expressway to your Heart*** might suit Diana Ross. An interesting opinion and food for thought, not unlike someone’s suggestion a few years ago that **Argent’s** ***I am the Dance of Ages*** would have suited **Shirley Bassey**! I think both suggestions might have had potential.

<https://youtu.be/Bs7o2InuBxQ>

	<a href="https://youtu.be/Bs7o2InuBxQ">Russ Ballard - Dancer</a> <a href="https://youtu.be/Bs7o2InuBxQ">youtu.be</a> From Russ's At The Third Stroke album
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On a more promising note, the reception from radio stations was more enthusiastic. The lead single was a slowy called ***Treat Her Right***, and the radio stations were straight onto it. North of the border In Glasgow, Radio Clyde's Dave Marshall nominated it as his "hot pick", whilst yet again BBC Radio One put it on their "featured 40" main playlist where it stayed for sufficient time to make itself familiar to listeners. Similarly, the second single, ***I'm a Scorpio***, found favour with Radio Luxembourg and Radio Orwell who both placed it on their playlist. Sadly, the outcome was all too familiar. Plenty of airplay but no chart action. Yet again Russ had won over the DJs but failed to persuade enough listeners to part with their cash. I believe it's all about luck and timing, and had Russ achieved that lucky break then further success might have quickly followed. It's a fine line as they say.

As with previous albums, there were some potential hit singles in there and inevitably other artists would see them as a source of potential covers. One song that I felt was really strong was the closing track ***My Judgement Day***. Another slowy, I've encountered two cover versions, one by German band **SOB** who based the song around the piano just like the original. The second is an acoustic guitar rendition by a Norwegian singer called **John Hallgeir "jojo" Johansen**. I particularly like this version because it offers a different sound to the original. ***Look at her Dance*** was covered by **Wild Cherry**, the band that became famous for ***Play that Funky Music***. Meanwhile, early 70s hit makers **America** recorded a cover of ***Cast the Spirit***. Russ became closely associated with this band, writing, recording and producing them, the rewards being chart action in a big way, but that's another story for another day. Similarly, another veteran American band, and one of my personal favourites of all time, **Rare Earth**, recorded a cover version of ***Dancer***. Sadly, line-up changes over the years have taken their toll but nevertheless, they produced a very good version and this can be found on their ***Brand New World*** CD.



left to right; The sleeve and label for *Cast the Spirit* by America and Rare Earth's *Brand New World* which features *Dancer*.

So, there we have it. An album made up of strong songs, arranged and played brilliantly, launched at a time when the British charts were being populated by

the likes of **The Jam**, **The Sex Pistols** and **The Buzzcocks** with plenty more similar acts to follow. There was still room for more conventional pop, as the chart toppers continued to include the likes of **Abba**, **Kate Bush**, **Bee Gees**, **Boney M**, **10cc** and even **Brotherhood of Man**. Most of these acts would find it increasingly harder to maintain success in future months, **Kate Bush** being an exception. Times were changing and, just maybe, Epic Records were completely on the ball in recognising that America might present a more suitable market for Russ Ballard as a recording artist.

## READERS' LIVES

### Billy Montella Jr

**MYSELF:** I was brought up in the Italian ghetto in Providence, Rhode Island, U S of A. A place where you minded your manners and elder ladies could walk the street in safety or else the 'family' members would take care of the situation. My dad was an outstanding high school athlete and a most sought after baseball pitcher by several pro teams as his father, my grandfather (Philip Montella Sr.) also was a pitcher in the Yankee system. The 5 Montella brothers and grandfather averaged about 6' 5", the tallest was uncle Philip at a towering 6' 7"; and they were movie star handsome and were referred to as the 'babe magnets' of Providence (which was small in those days). Now, my mom was the Emma Igliozi Montella, 100% Italian but people thought she was Chinese, her hair was blue-black and had the epicanthic eye lid which I have. My dad also studied at the Rhode Island School of Design which is maybe the best design school in the country and maybe the world. His work is now considered innovative in his time and is now on museum collections; also 3 of the Montella uncles studied there as well as 3 grandchildren (including me). The other Montellas went to Brown University in Providence, one being my older sister who broke many academic records with her scholarship.

In my studies I have an MFA and a BFA in painting and sculpture, 4 years of classical guitar studies at the RI Conservatory, also studied at 2 schools of architecture, the Lyme Academy of Art, The Recording Institute of America etc... I have work hanging in the United States Senate, the US Coast Guard Academy, Arti Museum in Amsterdam and have won national and regional awards.

**EARLIEST MEMORIES OF MUSIC:** under all that was the bed of music! When my dad would go drive golf balls, I was about 10 at the time, I would go with him. While he hit the golf balls I would stay in the car and tune the radio to stations in

Providence and listen to rhythm and blues; also I would tune to the New York stations like WINS with the infamous "King of the Moon Dogs" Allan Freed that got caught in the 'payola' scandals and other stations from NYC all that early r n r music. [New York is 2 and 1/2 hours west and Boston is 30 minutes north]. The first 45 I bought was "I Put a Spell on You" by Screamin' Jay Hawkins, my dad asked me to take it back, I was about 10 at the time.

As time went on and I got to middle school, folk music started to become the music dejour! A friend and myself organized a folk group, which varied in number from 5 to 4 to 3. The 3 member group called "The Frontiersmen" in our senior year was very good and we started playing out and quickly melted into the folk scene in Providence which was 10 miles north, which brought us into the folk movement in Boston, Cape Cod (summer gigs), Greenwich Village, NYC, concerts, clubs, tv festivals; the early Village scene we associated with early Dylan, David Blue, Tom Ghent, Eric Anderson, The Youngbloods, Orpheus etc... Folk music was becoming electrified, some moved into it some fell by the wayside. A very short time later Peter, Paul and Mary released "I Dig Rock and Roll Music" which I thought was a cop out and a bid to remain relevant. I was backstage at The Newport Folk Festival when Dylan came out electric and got booed from the stage but came back acoustical and the crowd love it! I still have my back stage passes from that nite.

My group broke up and I followed one of us down to Kentucky, a year later to play. I kept my ear on what was happening across the pond. I got electric and moved musically forward and organized 2 bands: The Second Best and the other The Purple Gang and we played in that geographical area including "Hazard", Kentucky, yeah, as in the TV show "The Dukes of Hazard" which is a real place. On a quick trip home to Rhode Island a friend, who had just came back from a trip to Liverpool, gave me a copy of "Heartful of Soul" by The Yardbirds. I was very impressed. His name was Danny Higgins and was the bass player in his wife's brother's band called "Sniggin Piggin" which was the name of his and wife'd mod hip clothing company. They did warm up The Stones first tour in the U S.

The late 60s I joined the Air Force because I was going to get drafted anyway. I came out and continued my education as well as music.

I got to know music people from earlier years, musicians, promoters and agents and because of my artistic abilities they called me and asked me to create designs for tours which I did for no money because they were (are) friends although maybe time has made the memories fade. So, I did a lot for Aerosmith when they were starting off and others but wound up, which is my claim to fame, doing the art work for the premiere tour of "Boston", never got paid. (A

note: the Boston music scene is soo close to Rhode Island [35 miles away] that we all knew each other.

**EARLY MEMORIES OF RUSS:** When The Zombies released their lps and the solo of Colin Blunstone "Ennismore", I always read the credits and I picked up the name "Ballard" which I read connected with The Unit 4+2. I surmised that this name, Ballard, was a mover behind the scenes. I still play "Ennismore". When "Argent" came around with the "Hold Your Head High Tour" I was the right hand man for the agent that brought them to Providence in that grand old art deco theatre called The Loew's Estate Theatre which was then called The Palace Concert Theatre. The place was actually going to be thrown down for urban renewal, which was a grave mistake. My friend, Ronnie Dario's dad gave him \$2 million to by it and make it a concert venue. It was great from about 1970 there was 3-4 concerts a week; you name the band, that band played there...too numerous to mention but I have the record. Argent came on and I had an opportunity to meet Rod Argent but THE Russ Ballard. I had a great talk, lengthy, with Russ about his writings and the music scene. All the ushers and stage people had uniform shirts which I created for Ronnie. The design was very catchy and everybody wanted them but the crews had to turn them in so they couldn't be 'lost' so people could not sneak in for a show or two. While sitting with Russ after the Argent set with his sun glasses, he remarked about the design and if he could get one. I said "...you asked the right man...". Give me your address in England and I'll send to you. I got his address and the following week I sent a box containing 1 dozens each of small, medium, large and x-large of the light blue t-shirts with a logo that looked suspiciously like the "Superman" logo only with a "P" to replace the "S".

**FAV RUSS ALBUM:** "Barnet Dogs" hands down.

**RECENT AND FUTURE:** I am rehearsing a 5 piece pop/jazz group called "Art School", not because I went to an art school but to indicate 'art' quality music. I will send photos of my practice space and recording studio, all in my home, and I am still running multi track tape...there's no sound like tape! I'll send pics. [Sue: Billy's photos are in attachments]

What pissed me off: I had the 8th Les Paul Custom Black Beauty (#8-5676). It was stolen in a break in. I found it a year later, called the police. They arrested the guy and held the guitar for the arraignment and said i could pick it up the next morning. I went to the arraignment, the judge called the case and for the evidence. The arresting officer approached the bench and said "...the guitar was stolen from the evidence room...". They had no idea about the value of it!... The same police that arrested Jagger and Richards in my town.

## RECORDED BY OTHERS

I can't find anything about this band but, as mentioned in the review, a cover of My Judgement Day by SOB.

<https://youtu.be/tuvkozxcUsI>

[SOB my judgement  
day cover](https://youtu.be/tuvkozxcUsI)

[youtu.be](https://youtu.be/tuvkozxcUsI)

"My judgement day" fremført  
av Haugesundsbandet SOB i  
1987 :) Anledningen var  
utgivelsen fra det nystartede  
studioet til guttane i "the Trap".  
En "Kassett" v...











