

## **Mike Tells the Jeanie Marie & Sole Travelers Story**

Jeanie Marie and I joined forces in 2014 to become Jeanie Marie & Sole Travelers – a blues-based band delivering power-house performances across the Southeastern USA. While fiery performances of traditional Blues (Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Etta James, ZZ Hill, Sonny Boy Williamson for example) introduced many blues fans to our band – the incorporation of more eclectic and modern blues sensibilities has broadened our fan base far beyond the traditional blues community.

The genesis of our band and its continued maturity is based on engaging and entertaining people the best we can.

There are no short cuts; you must show up prepared to do what you love, hold nothing back, and have absolutely nothing left when the show is over. This philosophy along with decades of performance and dedication to the show and musical craft create the backbone of this band. With a beautiful, highly spirited, highly talented, singer-songwriter up front, we can't lose!

Jeanie and I started seeing each other in 2008 after meeting at one of my shows with King muDDfish. After several months, it became clear to me that Jeanie was a professional singer and I had to call her on it. "There's something going on here that I don't know about; you've done this before..." I said in response to seeing Jeanie approach and properly address an expensive tube mic in a recording session, and then hearing her really sing.

With some prodding, Jeanie admitted that she had released two Christian Music albums. I had to pry the stories from her about doing shows with Prison Ministry groups, the politics of singing with worship teams, and periods when she abandoned that to sing with bar bands and turning down a recording contract with a major label. Ultimately, she told me how she gave up chasing her dream of singing a few years earlier in order to raise her son properly.

I was recording and performing with King muDDfish, playing festivals, and major blues venues; Jeanie would sit in and sing a song or two with us and provide backup vocals on recordings. After King muDDfish released their last CD, Jeanie began testing the waters again, performing on her own with some Florida bands. After relocating back to Georgia, Jeanie tried putting together a band with people she liked. I agreed to play guitar in her band. After going through many players and reconstituting the band a few times, Jeanie grew frustrated.

I took Jeanie to an open mic known for attracting professional musicians. We got up, played with people Jeanie didn't know, I ran the guys through the tunes in 30 seconds or so...key, progression, basic structure. We backed up Jeanie to tear the house down. Jeanie saw the power of performing with seasoned professionals again. Jeanie realized then and there that she needed to disband her group and only play with other pros at this level. I offered to put a band together for Jeanie and be the musical director. We needed to focus on what we do best. Jeanie needed to concentrate on singing and performing, I know how to put together great bands and we will concentrate of being Jeanie's foundation.

Within a few weeks, Dan Newman, my dearest lifelong friend/musical partner and lead guitarist with King muDDfish unexpectedly passed away. After soul searching with the other members of King muDDfish, we decided to shelve the band, not seeing a clear route to moving forward without Dan.

I had for the most part only played two roles in the bands I had performed with – either as creative musical partners with Dan or as a hired gun guitar slinger or blowing harp. I chose to deal with the loss of my friend and partner by fostering a musical partnership with Jeanie...and this is when Jeanie Marie & Sole Travelers came to life.

Jeanie, accompanied by our original bass player, Charles Spann and me, performed three songs at a talent showcase at East of Austin (no drummers allowed that night). It was an original music listening room near our home that was nearly impossible for local musicians to get booked. When the performance was done, we got a standing ovation, people were still applauding as we went back to the green room and we heard the owner praising us to the audience. Then she said those magic words to the audience “We’re going to bring them back to do a full show!”

Within a few months, Jeanie Marie & Sole Travelers were playing major blues venues and festivals from the Carolinas, to South Florida, to the Mississippi River with Larry Aquilino on drums and Charles on bass.

Charles was fortunate to land in a well-paying position touring in another circuit. Vince Haywood stepped in on bass to pick up where Charles left off. Larry and Vince had long been playing with great bands from Georgia and the Carolina’s. We soon became known as a group of virtuoso musicians performing energized, engaging shows mixing very tight, dynamic arrangements with extended improvised sections in the vein of The Tedeschi Trucks Band and The Marcus King Band.

Contending with the ever-changing dynamics of playing to different audiences in different venues (traditional blues venues, original music venues, Americana & Roots venues, festivals), we found ways to win over audiences who may have never heard of us. Typically we play sets of 1/3 to 2/3 originals with the rest being our own takes on well know blues standards, original tunes by local heroes of the area, and well-known Americana & Roots standards. This gives new audiences a chance to hear their favorites and also see the unique sides of Jeanie Marie & Sole Travelers.

It’s actually beyond just this. Often with our original tunes, we can do a 4-minute version, or we can do up to a 30-minute version. It depends on the crowd and how they are feeling it. In any case, we engage the audience and hold their attention with dynamics, different meaningful moments, sheer musical wonder...and then we also use “famous quotes” by other artists. This is what I mean by a “famous quote”, We may just quote an Allman Brothers phrase transitioning between two solos. We may quote famous musical phrases from Johnny Winter or Led Zeppelin or even Jimi Hendrix. Or, we may pick up a Sly & the Family Stone for a few verses, or James Brown, or Aretha Franklin. But the point is, we do it a lot. This way the blues purists and Americana diehards get what they want, and all the uncommitted people there have something to hold on to as well.

We’ve had the entire audience at a listening room in South Carolina known for original acoustic music dancing at the bar and at their tables when a jam turned into Aretha Franklin’s “Rock Steady” back and forth with Jimi Hendrix “If 6 were 9”. Jeanie took her wireless mic out there and danced. The tunes that seem to get the greatest responses are our originals. It’s nice to be complimented on our musical prowess and sonic beauty; but we always hear comments from new fans on how we nailed that 8-bar quote from “Elizabeth Reid” or “Mean Town Blues” or even the Who’s “Shakin’ All Over”. It’s like ear candy to draw people into the deeper story of traditional blues and Americana.

Jeanie and I returned to Orlando, Florida in 2017. At that point there were no “local” gigs as every show demanded travel for either half the band or the entire band. A local market cannot sustain a band like ours but being able to play locally gave us a chance to develop our show and style.

We talked it over with Larry and Vince and ended up recruiting Lynwood Edmund, Tom Crampton and Steve Plotik on bass, keyboards and drums as southern unit of Sole Travelers. We rehearse regularly with Lynwood, Tom and Steve in order to cover shows in Florida and shows where Larry or Vince are unavailable outside of Florida. Tom is called upon to play keys whenever possible.

Lynwood, Tom and Steve have been performing professional musicians their entire adult lives. Taking an approach right out of the Joe Bonamassa play book, rather than us calling on countless people to back up Jeanie, the performance unit is limited to Jeanie, me, Larry, Vince, Tom, Lynwood or Steve. This preserves the ability to utilize consistent tight arrangements, dynamics, and a familiarity to turn on a dime.

So that brings us to the present. We are banging on all cylinders, pedal to the metal, rubber meeting the road.

What does the future hold? EVERYTHING!

In this day and age, producing a CD and releasing it for sale doesn't seem meaningful anymore. We released Jeanie's original “Why” in digital format only. We are in the processes of completing recording and production of a CD's worth of material to be digitally released individually, as they are completed. Upon completion of all these songs, we will release a physical CD for sale. Meanwhile, the individual tunes will be available for download purchase and on all the major streaming services.

We've begun aggressive promotion and booking efforts. Jeanie and I are focusing on what we do best -- the music and the show. We have turned over promotion and booking to people who do that best.