

ROBBEN FORD

YOSHIS

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ON DOWN THE LINE



Robben Ford inspires quite a range of responses, and the responses typically sort out between those who understand something called The Circle of Fifths, triads, and why some people call the capodaster "the cheater," and those who just want to have a nice blues groove with vocals.

In essence, Robben Ford is a musician's musician with crossover appeal. Like JJ Cale, he is one whose work tends to be more admired than listened to, although unlike Cale, few have attempted to cover what Ford does. This may be due to the fact that when Ford performs even an old standard like "Running and Hiding" he so thoroughly owns the piece there is little reason to attempt a copy.

Born in Woodside and raised in Ukiah, he started gigging professionally at age 18, with his first frontman none other than Charlie Musselwhite.

He then worked as part of Joni Mitchell's backup band and after forming his own band, worked with Miles Davis, and toured with George Harrison on the ex-Beatle's only tour. This was all before 1989 when he helped close out the original lineup of the Sunday Night Band with Marcus Miller etc.

Operating at a rather high frequency right from the beginning, Robben Ford has been called by Musician Magazine one of the "100 Greatest Guitarists of the 20th Century", putting him up there with Jimi Hendrix, Duane Allman, Segovia and Django Reinhardt. That is not bad company with which to share some ink

So why don't we hear more of this feller? Well, some of this has to do with early success allowing the man the space to do only what he likes coupled with a general aversion to self-promotion. Plus a particular defect that has cost him

many many points among the "nice groove" crowd, which might be the majority of music buyers. Although a consummate lyricist with words that shame most wannabe writers, the man's vocals seldom reach above the level of "just capable." He has one vocal key, one register, and no real vox chops.

His guitar is stunning. He seldom changes tuning, never works with effects, rarely even changes instruments, and still manages to make 90 minutes sound like ten, but when he insists on singing, the realization comes that one is enough. As someone once famously shouted to Frank Zappa, "Just shut up and play yer guitar!"

That said, Ford approaches the instrument he uses so well with mastery that clearly exceeds all expectations. He employs solid-body electrics made by Baker, lately, although for years he used a custom-made Fender. The appointments on his instrument look workmanlike, and avoid flash and dazzle, as one would expect from someone who sports his hair in "Humboldt County style," sort of retro-hippie. His stage manner is very typical of a practical musician who has worked his way up under folks with significantly large stage presence. As for stage patter, there was none at all. Here I am and I am here to work. Let's do this with no fuss.

His latest CD features a nice peace-oriented song that is hitting top 100 airplay, called "It Don't Make Sense You Can't Make Peace", but this and other radio featured hits he avoided during his stint at Yoshi's on Thursday night.

His string attack is sure and solid. He employs a flatpick to deftly pursue melodic lines and never, not once, does he descend to the triplet runs that pack

lesser talents seeking to punch in some excitement without trying. Instead, he composes long eight and ten bar phrases that are seemingly organically grown from the fretboard between the standard blues four bar repetitions. Because his lyrics avoid the 12 bar expectations, and he devotes himself almost exclusively to single string lines, his changes seem to arise from some mystical place that is both strange and familiar. The nature of this familiarity comes from hitting notes that basically still add up to the chord that should be there in that place as expected, and his habit of repeating licks a diminished third up or down the neck.

The result is an effect that is, and must necessarily be, sharp and precise. With Robben Ford, there is no maundering or empty noodling. When improv occurs, it happens within jazz constructs and expectations. As a result, his "Down the Line" has become a staple to progressive rock stations across the country and guitar aficionados nod when they hear reference to the man's name. That said, he can be quite exciting to hear live as he rips through impossibly complex pieces, occasionally dropping down to simple blues progressions. Thursday night he avoided that one in favor of a homage to BB King called "Indianola".

Thursday night, the Yoshi's crowd, raucous and noisy in the middle of the week, shouted and stomped their approval for a very tight set and a fine time was had by all.