

A *BluesWax* Reprint

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Charlie Musselwhite & Richard Bargel

Live in Cologne, Germany

By Vincent Abbate



You know that old saying about how you don't know what you got till it's gone? Well, if you're a Blues fan in Germany, particularly in the Blues-starved city of Cologne, you can turn that saying on its head. Here, you don't know what you haven't got until it shows up. And one thing we haven't got is an artist like **Charlie Musselwhite**. Proof could be heard in the resounding applause of the more than 250 guests who filled the Altes Pfandhaus on a recent Monday night. And believe me, this wasn't a case of a German crowd being typically polite. Every song Musselwhite sang elicited near-ecstatic bursts of jubilation. With many guests (including this writer) sitting cross-legged on the floor at stageside, the concert even had a certain air of hero worship about it. It was as if, weaned on imitations for so long, we just couldn't get enough of the real thing.

This is to take nothing away from local musician **Richard Bargel**, who helped organize the show and accompanied Musselwhite during the closing set. Bargel comes about as close as any German musician to having an authentic, down-home Southern American feel in his guitar playing and songwriting. He's proven that during a more-than-30-year musical career, which has included tour stints with **Memphis Slim**, **Eddie Boyd**, and **Champion Jack Dupree**. Bargel and Musselwhite did some touring themselves during the Eighties and their enduring friendship is the primary reason Musselwhite stopped off in Cologne recently. One brush-up rehearsal and the duo was ready to roll.



Charlie Musselwhite
Photo by ©Hydra Productions

Introducing the concert to his SRO crowd, the local promoter remarked that he could easily have sold twice as many tickets – this despite the fact that **Bernard Allison** was also playing in Cologne the same evening. Such is Mr. Musselwhite's standing on this side of the Atlantic. Interestingly, Allison also managed to fill his venue to capacity; meaning roughly 500 fans had come out to hear live Blues on a Monday night in Cologne. Many local fans wonder why Germany's fourth largest city has never been able to support a live Blues venue. Apparently it takes name musicians like Allison and Musselwhite to mobilize fans in large numbers.



Richard Bargel
Photo by ©Hydra Productions

Richard Bargel responded well to the big room and fine acoustics. His 30-minute opening set featured songs from his two most recent albums, *Bones* and *Mojo and the Wolf*, performed ably on a Dobro. In the pubs and clubs he most often plays, Bargel's powerful voice can be overwhelming. Here, it blended perfectly with his sensitive playing. Highlights included typically brooding titles like "House of Pain" and "I Would Die for You," as well as his recent poke at our accelerated society, "Got to Hurry."

Bargel then passed the baton to Musselwhite, who sat down casually with an electric guitar on loan from his friend. With complete freedom to pace the set to his own inner rhythm, Musselwhite showed us the meaning of the phrase "laid back." His delivery is as slow as molasses and as warm and rich as freshly ploughed soil on a Mississippi morning. The person who later commented that Musselwhite isn't a guitarist was sorely missing the point. Granted, his more impressive chops are on harmonica. But Musselwhite's set on guitar (he added rack harp on a few songs) was all about the stories and the telling. With "In Your Darkest Hour" and "My Road Lies in Darkness," he delivered haunting Country Blues of the highest order. He used the sly "Stingaree" to share an amusing anecdote about **Furry Lewis**. With that hangdog smile of his, it's impossible not to feel sympathetic toward this 63-year-old Blues vet. He draws from a deep pool of emotion, brings it to life when he plays, and invites us to jump on in.

When Bargel joined Musselwhite onstage after the break, Musselwhite switched exclusively to harp and the evening reached its pinnacle. It is true: Musselwhite has few peers on the instrument. The set opened with a prolonged version of **Sonny Boy Williamson's** "Help Me" with Bargel thumping the beat and Musselwhite growing progressively less mellow in his delivery. With a groove that made you lose track of time, "The Blues Overtook Me" turned up the heat even further. **Eddie Taylor's** "Bad Boy" and a slow Blues burner courtesy of **Little Walter**, "Just a Feeling," followed. Musselwhite flexed some vocal muscle on these cuts and his harp breaks were the stuff of dreams.

He chose "Christo Redemptor" as his encore, a signature instrumental that first appeared on his debut album *Stand Back!* in 1967. By rights it should have taken his transfixed audience even deeper – but for a thick-legged spider big as a silver dollar that appeared a few feet in front of where the musicians were sitting. They stayed focused and played on, even as the errant arachnid wandered straight through Bargel's legs off into a darker corner backstage.



Charlie Musselwhite
Photo by ©Hydra Productions

Chatting briefly with Musselwhite after the show, I remarked that almost all the Blues concerts we get in Cologne feature loud guitar music. With a bemused grin, Musselwhite

replied, "Well, that's not Blues." Whether you agree with him or not, shows like the one he and Bargel had just put on have become a rarity everywhere, really. We get so much of the loud, in-your-face, over-the-top variety that we forget where the Blues came from... and what it can make us feel.

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Real Sounds From the Work Place

The following are the Top Five most often listened-to recordings in the *BluesWax* offices this week, June 7, 2007 (in no particular order):

1. **Laurie Morvan** – *Cures What Ails Ya* (Screaming Lizard) Release: June 12
2. **Boots Randolph** – *A Whole New Ballgame Gone* (Zoho Music) Release: June 12
3. **Many Mercier** – *Run Out Of Darkness* (Wild Cantinas)
4. **Manteca Beat** – *Manteca-lisious!* (TKG Music)
5. **Tracy K & the Right Hand Band** – *Old New, Borrowed & Blues* (self-produced)



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