12/1/70 - Curtis Hixon Hall, Tampa, FL

Photo Courtesy ABB Archives

Slowhand Remembers Skydog–

Eric Clapton Comments on Duane Allman

–By Sam Hare

We all occasionally take chances on things without any real hope of succeeding–you play the lottery, right? You know the odds of winning are about zero, but you play anyway, because somebody has to hit the jackpot. Well, a young Englishman by the name of Sam Hare defied all the odds, and came away with one of the greatest prizes there is in music. Sam is a college student in London whose dissertation is on the influences of the Allman Brothers Band on rock and roll, and he came to find out that he lived on the same street as one Eric Clapton. Sam rolled the dice, and placed a letter in Eric's mailbox, asking him if he would be willing to talk about Duane Allman and his contributions to the Layla *album. He had no real expectations, so imagine his surprise when his phone rang and it was Eric Clapton! What follows is the amazing conversation Sam and Eric had about Duane, the Brothers, and one of the greatest guitar collaborations of all time. I know you'll enjoy this one. Congrats Sam–you are indeed the big winner.*

HTN: Can you remember the first time you heard the Allman Brothers Band, and what your reaction was?

EC: Let me think–it was in Coconut Grove in–God, let me get this right–in 1970. I was just putting together Derek and the Dominos, and we were starting to make an album in Miami, at Criteria Studios–the *Layla* album. It was the first couple of weeks, and we were dragging our heels. One day Tom Dowd asked, "The Allman Brothers are playing–do you want to go and see them?" Now, I'd already known Duane from "Hey Jude"–the Wilson Pickett record. I had called someone at Atlantic Records and said, "Who is that guitar player?," so I knew who he was and couldn't wait to see him. We had the night off, so Bobby Whitlock and Jim Gordon and all of us went off to see the Allman Brothers play. In this open air setting–it was unbelievable. We were shown a place to sit

on the grass right in front of the stage and, apparently he spotted me...

Yeah–I've heard the story that he saw you and froze...

That's what I've heard, yeah. I didn't know any of this, and it was just really magical, you know. There was like the perfect kind of weather–it was dark, it was balmy and hot and there was a strong breeze. They all had really, really long hair–right down to their waists almost–it was blowing back in the wind, and it was so picturesque. The music was unbelievable, because they were doing all that harmony playing, you know–Duane and Dickey Betts–and everything seemed to be...even if they played solos, they were all in harmony. It was fantastically worked out, and very strong.

In the Rolling Stone review of At Fillmore East, the Allman Brothers were called "The best band America has produced in the past five years..."

Yeah.

You were alive at that time, and I wasn't. Do you consider that to be an overstatement?

Not at all, no. The impression that I got was how much hard work they'd put into their presentation, and the fact that it wasn't really blasted all over the airwaves, you know? They had just quietly gone about doing a fantastic job of making really, really good music that was really well thought out–and not left too much to chance, you know. Of course, Gregg was doing...you know, he had this young kind of soul singer thing. He was quite shy and not sort of ego-driven–with this voice like Steve Winwood–it was fantastically strong potential...

Someone said to me the other day that they'd heard Gregg Allman's voice for the first time, when I played it to them, and it reminded them of Steve Winwood.

Yeah–I thought that they were very similar in a lot of other ways, too. They had a lot of similar characteristics, you know–apart from the fact that that he was the younger brother–like Steve was to Muff. There was a protégé thing about both of them.

To what extent do you think they altered the course of rock music–if they did–and have they influenced your music?

Well, they influenced my music at the time, and I think they influenced all the concepts of a live band. I mean, even what we hear Aerosmith doing today–it's almost directly taken from them, because it was a touring concept. They made it OK for a band to be live all the time–their thing was really more about live than I think, studio...

Someone's first reaction to me the other day when I played them their first album was they thought it was, possibly, where Cream left off.

Right.

Have you ever thought about that?

Well, it was an extension of that. I mean, my problem with Cream, for instance, was that we were really limited on stage. We could go into the studio and make great records by overdubbing–I would play a rhythm part, and then play a lead part with a harmony to it, so you're really talking about three guitar players. When you saw the Allman Brothers doing that live...

And a lot of the time it was improvised...

Yeah.

How much of an effect has Duane had on your slide playing?

Well, a little bit, but not a lot, because I just couldn't get it. I mean–because he, for a start–he would play in straight tuning a lot of the time.

Yeah–I can't do that either.

I mean, I couldn't understand it. He would do–I really don't know how to describe it–but he would hit this seventh thing all the time, which I actually didn't approve of...coming from...it was like a weird...I mean, every now and then we would argue about stuff like this because...I only believe that you should really play what had gone down before–which jived in a way with why I liked him, because I loved the fact that he was an improviser. He threw away tradition a lot of the time, but for me, that was really quite...sort of...inappropriate! [Laughing.] You know, he was fantastically gifted.

Did you consider him to be the driving force behind the band, or was it purely a magical combination?

Aah–that's a difficult question–I would hate to be pinned down. I think he was, because of–apart from everything else–his character. Duane was a very, very strong, driven, and aggressive man. I mean, he was very thin and wiry and everything, and not much to shout about in terms of being a tough guy or nothin', but he was very strong, and I think he did drive the band.

How do you think their sound changed after he died?

Well, they lost it, I think. You see, he also had the musical direction–he was directly acquainted with, you know, that genre–with the blues, with Southern music. I think he was responsible–along with his brother–for the direction the band took, a lot of the time.

I'm of the opinion that Dickey Betts would have been given a lot more credit as a guitar player in his own right, if it wasn't for being in the same band with Duane Allman.

Yeah–oh yeah.

Why don't you think they haven't had as much success in England as maybe they should have, bearing in mind the worldwide success of the* Layla *album. That's how I discovered them–I wanted to hear more Duane.

[Laughing.] Yeah–did you know I tried to get him in the band? He toured with Derek and the Dominos...

I was going to ask you that–did he play any dates with you?

Yeah, yeah–quite a lot, and I actually nailed him. I mean, I tried to steal him, and he said, you know, he had to make...he made a quick decision one night after a gig. I said, "You know, we really need you in the band now–I don't really want to go on as a quartet–would you join us?" He said, "I don't think I can do that," and at that point, he went straight back to the Allman Brothers.

That couldn't have been an easy decision to make.

Well, I don't know–I think he was, you know...Well yeah, it may have been–for a little while.

Idlewild South *and* Layla *were being produced at the same time, weren't they?*

Yeah.

...and by the same person–Tom Dowd.

Absolutely. That's right–that's right.

So, I suppose he kept having to fly back and forth between Macon and Miami...

Yeah.I mean, there was a great deal of joy in our kind of dueling with one another because we came from almost a separate place. I mean, I was much more into Chicago stuff at the time, and he was much more into,

"We were just kind of having this musical affair in front of everybody."

Photo Courtesy ABB Archives

you know, the kind of Southern, Georgian kind of country blues, but...I think the reason he didn't connect here is that England has never been deeply ensconced in that kind of music tradition, and it never will be.

But you'd think that people would listen...I mean, you're big here...would listen to* Layla*, as I did, and...

Yeah.

Think, "God, who is this guy? And then I thought, "Well, I had better get some more of him..."

Well, you see, honestly man, not very many people do think like that here. It's like when we look at the modern bands–they go as far back as the Beatles and the Kinks and they stop there. They don't–it doesn't occur to them to think, "I wonder what the Beatles were listening to?"

Although I think a lot of people are probably being made more aware by, for instance–your 1993 show was kind of a history of the blues.

Yeah, but I think people have got to be able to do that for themselves–I'm always disappointed to find out that that doesn't go on a great deal around here.

You see, I'm always wanting to know where it all comes from.

Well, you're one of the few! [Laughing.]

Do you mind talking about the* Layla *album a bit?

Not at all–no.

What was it like playing with Duane Allman, and feeding off of him–and him feeding off of you?

Oh, it was great! I mean, it almost started from the night of the concert, because they all came back to the studio after the show.

Yeah–a lot of the dates listed in the Derek and the Dominos box set are from that night, aren't they?

Yeah, yeah.

All those jams and everything...

Yeah. So we started right then and there, and it was just...I think the best way to describe it is that up until the point that we connected with them, we were really firing blanks. We'd been in the studio for a couple of weeks and we were really getting nothing done, because really, it was just about me trying to, kind of, stimulate myself with the guitar. We only had the quartet, and we were trying to write songs, but when we came to play them, it just wasn't exciting. Then, when these guys came in–especially just me and Duane–we'd just keep thinking of things to do, songs to do from the past, that would make it possible for us to duet. We'd come up with "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out," "Key to the Highway," and "Why Does Love Got to Be So Sad?" All these things were just really vehicles so we could jam, and that ended up making up quite a deal of the bulk of the album–just excuses to jam with one another.

Gregg Allman has said that he watched most of the sessions. Do you remember that?

He was around a lot–yeah.

Were you tempted to ask him to play or sing?

Well, I wasn't that interested. I don't mean that to sound so harsh, but I was just so taken with...I'd kind of fallen in love with Duane. I mean I was even ignoring my own band, you know. We were just kind of having this musical affair in front of everybody, and I think he was probably as fascinated to watch it go down, but to be honest, I didn't even notice.

What was Duane like as a person?

Duane was...[laughing], like your archetypal Johnny Reb. I mean, he was really out there, and for–like I said earlier–for a thin guy, he had this very strong and very charismatic persona. You know, a lot of drinking was involved, and we were just getting into a lot of heavy drug taking, too, so that to see him getting into that with me was...well, it's sad now to look back on it, but Duane was very tough.

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However, that album may not be what it was without all of that.

Well, we caught it at just the right time. I don't...I think the album would have been actually what it was, and I think the drugs, when they took their toll–which was a little while later–kind of incapacitated us. I mean, the Dominos broke up because of that–because we just couldn't function–but at the time of *Layla*, we were just dabbling–they really hadn't gotten a grip. I think that was probably why Duane may have been killed too, because we all were just starting to get into it at the same time, and it had disastrous effects–really.

You must feel proud when you think of Duane and that album.

Very–oh yeah, very...very proud.

I've read where that was a very unhappy time...

For me, you mean, personally?

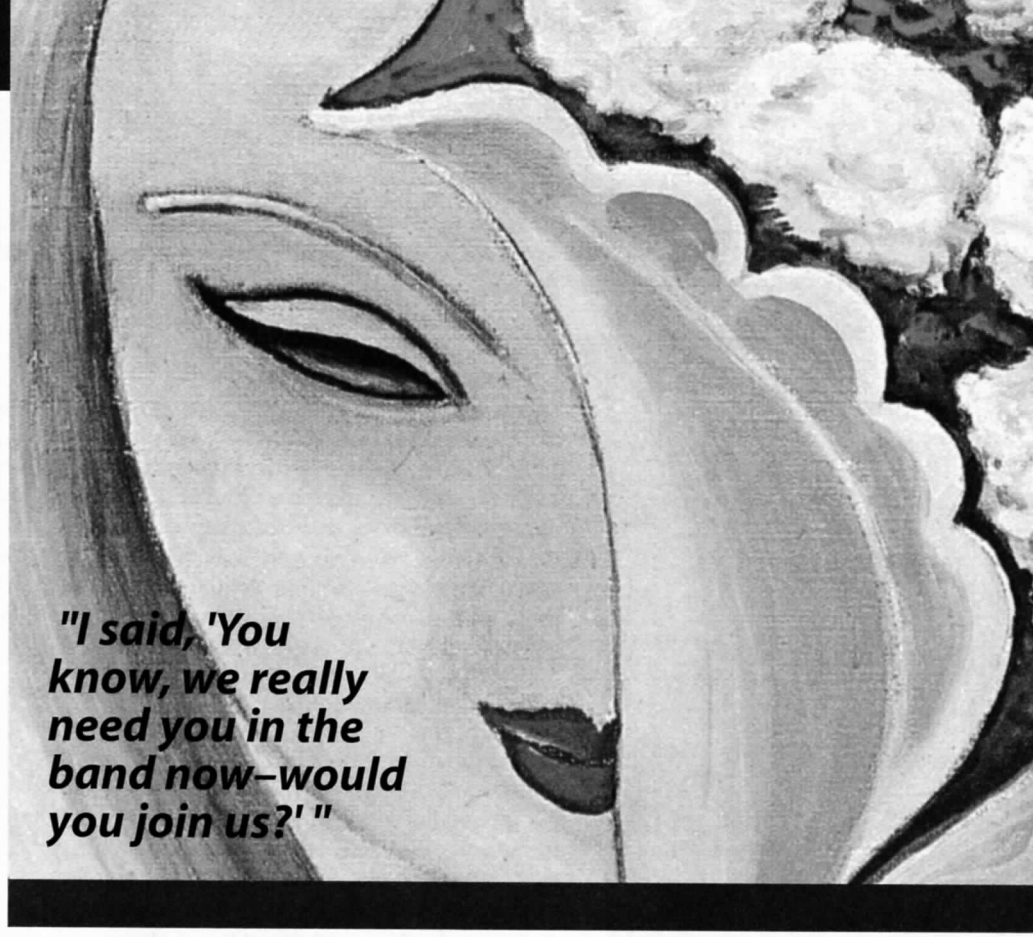
Yeah.

No...well, there were a lot of complications in my life–I'd fallen in love with somebody else's wife, and all of this coming–that's what I was writing all my songs about. But there was also a tremendous bonding going on–the likes of which I've never known since. I mean, the Dominos–we lived together for almost a year and a half before we went to play this album, so that kind of fellowship I haven't experienced since with other musicians. Also, when I met Duane, it was on the same level. So, in actual fact they were very, very happy times.

***Has it ever occurred to you that a member of the Allman Brothers Band has been an important ingredient to two of your most successful albums? You've got Duane on* Layla*, and later, Chuck Leavell on* Unplugged.**

Yeah.

Was that a coincidence, or were you consciously trying to add a little "Allman flavor" to your band at those times?



I think it might have been that–I think, yes, maybe subconsciously. I knew Chuck had been there...I think I knew that he would bring some of that element into it–even in an indirect way, but...

Yeah, because I listened to Gregg Allman's* Laid Back *and your* Unplugged *album back to back the other day...

Yeah.

...and there is a very similar piano feel to them...

Yeah...yeah.

...Obviously, because they're both the same man.

Oh yeah.

Have you heard* Laid Back*?

I'm not sure that I have, you know.

I was wondering if you've gotten into Gregg's solo work at all?

No, I don't think I have.

I think since the deaths of Duane and Berry Oakley, I find Gregg as a solo artist far more interesting, musically, than the Allman Brothers Band.

Yeah, then I should go out and get it, shouldn't I?

Oh yeah–*Laid Back*, 1973.

OK.

Going back to the original Allman Brothers–is there one of their albums that you particularly like?

I like them all, really.

OK–thanks very much for talking to me, Eric.

That's alright–good luck with your project.