

A Stony Plain artist's biography



## **RORY BLOCK: A fresh and inspired look at the gentle, hidden music of Mississippi John Hurt**

**Stony Plain releases *Avalon*, the fourth in the American guitarist's recreations of the work of the classic blues artists of the past**

Guitarist and singer Rory Block's latest album for Stony Plain is the fourth in a series of recreations of the classic music of America's great country blues singers.

And tackling the work of Mississippi John Hurt was a special challenge for her. In her own words: "We think of (his music) as mellow and sweet... but this gentle man sang about sex, murder, mystery, violence, and steamy sensuality. It gets ever deeper, the more you listen."

And so *Avalon: A Tribute to Mississippi John Hurt* gets deep inside the master's music, giving it devotion, respect, reverence and energy — extra "oomph" as she puts it.

The new CD follows ground-breaking releases that have recreated the music of Son House, Fred McDowell and the Rev. Gary Davis; she calls the CDs her "Mentor Series" and they will eventually form a boxed set. (A 2006 release, for the Rykodisc label, put the spotlight on Robert Johnson).

Rory Block met Mississippi John Hurt — and many other legendary blues figures who had been caught up in the early '60s folk revival — when she was a teenager. She fell in love with their music: "When in the presence of the great blues masters I always felt a sense of joy and purpose," she explains in the sleeve notes for her new album. "This was where I wanted to be."

And now, nearly 50 years later, the teenager is one of the most thoughtful, accomplished country blues guitarists on the planet. The men whose music she reinterprets have all passed now, but she keeps their songs, style and spirit brilliantly alive.

*Avalon: A Tribute to Mississippi John Hurt* is her fourth album for Stony Plain in her "Mentor Series," and it's a joyful, emotional companion for *Blues Walkin' Like a Man: A Tribute to Son House*, *Shake 'Em On Down: A Tribute to Mississippi Fred McDowell*, and *I Belong to the Band: A Tribute to Rev. Gary Davis*.

Mississippi John Hurt was born in the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; he died in 1966. He made his first recordings in 1928 for the Okeh label; Columbia Records later released many

of these early tracks on a Legacy CD. As part of the folk music revival, he recorded prolifically and performed at most of the major North American festivals, including Newport and, in Canada, the Mariposa Folk Festival; he recorded major albums for the Vanguard label after his rediscovery

### **Growing up with the blues: Rory Block background**

As a young teenager Rory Block – her full name is Aurora – grew up in New York’s Greenwich Village at the height of the “folk revival.” At 14, already an accomplished guitarist, she discovered the Delta blues – then part of the wide world of folk music. She vividly remembers hearing Mississippi John Hurt in 1963, and spending time with Son House, Fred McDowell and the Reverend Gary Davis.

Her first recordings (under the pseudonym Sunshine Kate) were made for Elektra Records, but she didn’t return to the studio until 1975, when she recorded for RCA Victor and Chrysalis before signing to Rounder Records, for whom she cut more than a dozen albums. She has also recorded for a number of other labels, in between endless tour schedules.

Along the way, she has won five W.C. Handy Awards (now known simply as Blues Awards) from the Blues Foundation, two for “Traditional Blues Female Artist,” and three for “Acoustic Blues Album of the Year.” She’s earned a gold record in Holland, and toured from one end of the United States to the other end of Canada, not to mention Poland and Norway and Italy and a half a dozen more European countries.

Everywhere she plays, audiences are touched by the depth of her commitment to the music. Critical plaudits always follow the applause: *The New York Times* put it plainly enough: “Her playing is perfect, her singing otherworldly as she wrestles with ghosts, shadows and legends.” And *Guitar Extra* added: “Rory Block has become one of the world's most important preservers of the roots of American music. She has become a national treasure in the form of an uncompromising mature blues artist.”

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