Blaster from the Past

Roots-rocker Dave Alvin returns with Blue Blvd

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

SPRINGFIELD, MO. — IT'S ONLY THE FIRST DAY OF rehearsals for Dave Alvin, who's about to embark on an extensive tour in support of his newest album, *Blue Blvd*, but already things are coming together with amazing speed. Alvin will be backed on the tour by the Skeletons (who will also open the shows), and the band members are proving themselves to be quick studies indeed. They rip through "So Long Baby Goodbye," one of Alvin's finest tunes from his years as lead guitarist and songwriter for LA roots-rockers the Blasters, and then it's off to more recent material, like "New Tattoo" and "Romeo's Escape," the latter of which is the title track from Alvin's 1987 debut solo release.

The Skeletons' playing is tentative at first, and they stick close to the arrangements they worked out before Alvin's arrival earlier in the day. Occasionally, Alvin, whose microphone is set up facing the band in Column One Studio's cramped quarters, will stop them and work slowly through some of his songs' more complicated changes. "Now, don't spread that chord around," he says at one point to guitarist D. Clinton Thompson. "That's only for the good guitar players."

After a break to check out the latest inanities from the Clarence Thomas hearings, the band files back in and kicks off a country-flavored version of Alvin's song "Fourth of July," with Thompson admirably reproducing the steel-guitar licks from the record on his Fender Telecaster. Alvin cuts them off immediately. "Let's get rid of that preconceived notion right away," he says. "I know it was a country song on the record, but it's a rock & roll song now." They try it again, and this time they play it straight ahead. All at once it seems as if the Skeletons have managed to set aside their initial shyness and are finally playing with the confidence and authority for which they're known. Although at this point Alvin and the band are only beginning to feel each other out musically, one thing is already clear: By the time they hit the road, these guys are going to be one hell of a rock & roll outfit.

ALVIN WEARS ON HIS SLEEVE HIS DEVOTION TO ROOTS music — the various strains of country, blues and R&B he dubbed "American Music" in a song written and performed with the Blasters. On the way to dinner after rehearsals, conversation in the back of the van turns to the recent Alan Parker film *The Commitments*. The general consensus is that it was a good movie — that it's nice for a change to see a decent flick about soul music. Alvin turns around slowly. "Are you talking about *The Commitments*?" he asks sourly. "Don't get me started. I mean, why can't they make a movie about Curtis Mayfield or Big Joe Turner? They make a movie about black music and it has to star a bunch of white kids. I just don't understand it."

After a large Mexican meal, the musicians find it hard to get back to work. But they're more familiar with one another now, and they ease into things by trying a Webb Pierce tune, after which someone sarcastically suggests that they're ready to open a place in Branson, Mo., where country legends like Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson plan to build theaters, and where also-rans like Jim Stafford and Roy Clark already have. Alvin, who's never heard of the place, is intrigued. "Why did Branson attract these guys instead of, say, Albuquerque?" he asks. "It's because of Silver Dollar City," explains bassist Lou Whitney. "Kind of a hillbilly Disneyland. They did some pretty awful *Beverly Hillbillies* episodes down there in their last year of production — you know, after Jethro left and it was all Ellie Mae and her critters."

Alvin, amused by the notion, waves his hand in the air. "Oh-oh. What's happening? I'm gettin' Gilley-ized!" he hollers, and charges into a hard-rocking version of Mickey Gilley's "The Girls All Get Prettier at Closing Time." The Skeletons, hardly missing a beat, fall into step behind him. Getting even further into the spirit of things the next day, Alvin adorns a shelf behind him in the studio with Branson brochures he picked up in a local Shoney's. "This is for inspiration," he tells the group.

LATE IN THE SECOND DAY OF REHEARSALS, ALVIN finally has time to sit for an interview. Chain-smoking in the studio's control room, he is forthcoming in talking about his Blaster past, about his new album, and about the roots-music explosion he and the Blasters — along with groups like X and Los Lobos — helped engender.

"Part of my Branson fascination today," he says, "is trying to define what it means to be American and what it means to grow up here. In the days when I wrote 'American Music,' there was nobody that was really into being American, and the sort of white-trash chic that's happening now wasn't happening then. You know, where it's groovy to say you're white trash or say you like white trash — maybe these people read too many Sam Shepard plays or something. I mean, there were these bands out in LA, and I'm sure there were some in St. Louis, too, that grew up in some tract home around there, and somehow they suddenly got these British accents. Now that's 'cause so many of the great bands were British and they were just aping that. But what I wanted to know is, how do I define myself? And what is it about this country that makes us different?

"What it is, I think, is that the whole concept of America is embodied in the music. That whole idealism of Thomas Jefferson and all that is just living inside the music. It's like saying, well, we may have race riots and we have the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, but *we got this music*. And that's what tells us who we are."

Alvin's split with the Blasters was acrimonious, and for a time he and his brother Phil, who still carries on as the group's lead singer, were not on speaking terms. They've recently made amends, but Alvin hasn't toured with the band since 1987. "When we started the Blasters," he says, "we all saw things exactly the same way, just the way a band should see things. And by the time I left, my brother and I were not that far apart. But we saw things — little tiny, but very important things — completely different. Also, when I was writing songs for the Blasters, I was writing ones that he and I could say, 'Yeah, you know what I'm talking about.' But when I wrote 'Fourth of July,' which at that point was the most personal song I'd ever written, that was 100 percent Dave Alvin, and it was like, well, that's not really a Blasters' song.

"My writing was just going to a place where he didn't want it to go. If I was in the band now and wrote 'Fourth of July' or 'Every Night About This Time,' Phil would have sung it, and sung the shit out of it. But he just wasn't comfortable, and that made everybody uncomfortable."

ALVIN PUT IN STINTS WITH THE COUNTRY-PUNK OUTfit the Knitters, which included X members Exene Cervenka and John Doe, and later joined X as a full-fledged member. Their version of "Fourth of July" proved to be their greatest commercial success.

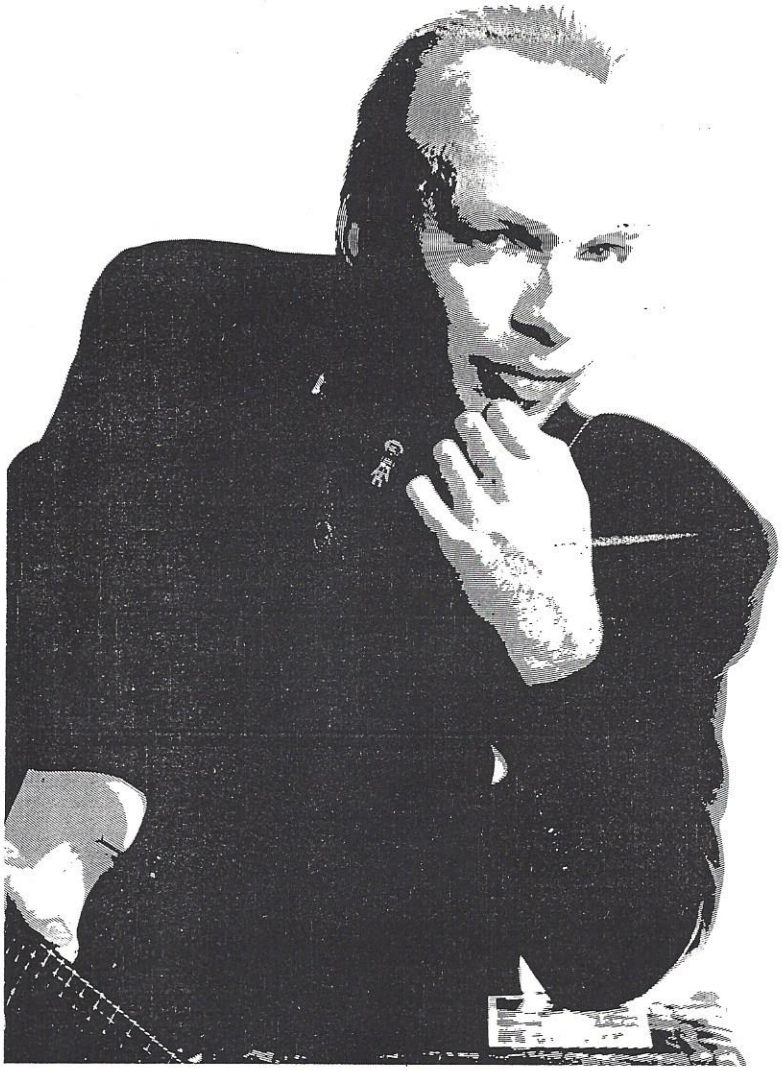
"I'd actually demoed the song with the Blasters," Alvin says. "Nick Lowe was producing and he was the one who talked me into singing it. He said, 'That's not really your brother's style. You should do it.' Meanwhile, Demon Records in England asked if I wanted to do a solo record, so I did the song on my album and John Doe heard it and asked if they could do it in X. And I was like, yeah, God yes, certainly. And so I joined the band for about a year-and-a-half, and I quit right after we finished making *See How We Are*, right about when *Romeo* came out over here."

Alvin says that "Fourth of July" is still one of his proudest achievements: "It's a good mixture of a lot of styles, I think. One of my favorite songwriters is Curtis Mayfield, and even though it's not a Curtis Mayfield-like song at all, I was thinking of him when I wrote it. It's got that country kind of thing, and it's also a rock & roll song. It's got that mixture."

Disaffection with his record label, Epic, led Alvin to take a sabbatical from recording for several years, and he still sounds somewhat bitter about the experience. "I signed with Epic out of Nashville because I couldn't get a pop deal," he says. "The rule was to take the pedal steel off the record. And I thought, why? So then the Nashville guys wanted me to go all country, but that's not what I am. And country audiences aren't stupid. Not that they wouldn't like me, but I can't go out there and say, 'Howdy folks, how ya doin', welcome to Branson.' It's not what I do."

Things were no better when he eventually did move over to Epic's pop division. "If I'd written 'Marie Marie' (one of the Blasters' pile-driving rockabilly numbers) for them, they would have said, 'That's a little too country. We need rock & roll.' One of the guys over there actually gave me a Eurythmics album and said, 'This is the direction you oughta go in.' In the Blasters, there were seven guys to take the blows when someone said something stupid like that, but when you're a solo act, it's just you and this guy sayin' (he does a dumb-guy voice), 'Y'ever thought of dance/pop? You could really do something like that.' So after that, I didn't want to make a record for a while."

Before landing his deal with Hightone, a blues-and-country-oriented independent label, Alvin toured as musical director for Syd Straw and played with Mojo Nixon and Country Dick Montana in the Pleasure Barons. He also contributed music to a number of films, including *Border Radio*, *Wall Street*, *Bull Durham* and *Cry Baby*. Director David Lynch tapped Alvin to contribute some guitar work to the second season of *Twin Peaks*, and Alvin even appeared in one episode, playing in the band behind roadhouse singer Julee Cruise. His most recent film project is work on Andrew Bergman's *Honeymoon in Vegas*, which Alvin describes as "on the one hand a love story about a guy and his gal, and on the other hand a send-up of Elvis imitators." Alvin was hired to produce the music for the men who would be the King. "I hired girl singers, horn sections, and just threw in every whoring Vegas trick I could think of. I did it just 'cause it sounded like fun. That's what it's all



about. The stuff with David Lynch was fun, 'cause you never know what he wants and he makes you go in directions you wouldn't normally go in. And the John Waters thing (*Cry Baby*) was so great because he's such a cool guy."

THOUGH HE'S GROWING MORE ACCOMPLISHED ALL the time as a singer and frontman — and his guitar skills have never been in question — Alvin still defines himself as a songwriter first. "That's it," he says. "That's what I'm good at. I mean, anybody can play guitar. Every city is crawling with a million guitar players. But when you get down to it, there's only a couple hundred good songwriters altogether.

Many of Alvin's songs are about sadness, loneliness or people in extreme situations. A new song, "Guilty Man," for instance, is about an armed robber on the lam, and "Plastic Rose" is about the final hour of a couple's wait to see an abortionist. Hardly Top 40 fare, but Alvin says that's by design.

"I write shitty happy songs," he explains. "I think I've only written one or two happy songs. I get more meat out of going the other way." One trick he's learned, he says, is to write a fast song with sad lyrics, as he did with the original version of "Border Radio." "We did that song fast with the Blasters, but I always heard it as a Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn tune. Conway'd be the chorus and Loretta the verses.

"When I started writing songs," he continues, "I was setting out to be a white blues songwriter in the Doc Pomus and Lieber and Stoller tradition, or even the Bob Dylan tradition. And so what does a white guy write about? By accepting the fact that you consider yourself a blues guy, but you're white, all of a sudden you start writing songs that are kind of country-ish. So I think it's just the blues in me that leads me to sadder topics. But if somebody can write great happy songs — Lieber and Stoller could do it — that's great. If you can't, though, you're gonna sound really stupid."

"Andersonville," perhaps the most striking cut on the new album, is a gritty tale about a Union soldier starving to death in a Confederate prison camp. "My great-granduncle is who the song is about. When I was a little kid, we got handed down this little box, and inside was a couple of photographs of him, one in his uniform when he enlisted and one from Andersonville. There were a couple of letters and then all these things that he carved. He had a tiny little corkscrew that he used, and why he just didn't go (Alvin makes a wrist-slashing motion) — or maybe he did, 'cause he died there. But he carved little rings and mumblety-peg games and shit, all these little curlicues on any type of wood, and they're all in this little box.

"When I wrote it, I played it for someone and said, God, I'm really an idiot if this is the kind of song I'm going to be writing. But then the PBS special about the Civil War came out, and I was, like, instantly a cliche. I went from being an out-of-it jerk to being a cliche real fast."

"We may have race riots and we have the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, but we got this music. And that's what tells us who we are."

Though fame on a large scale has eluded Alvin up to this point, he seems fascinated by the subject and keeps returning to it in his work. While with the Blasters, he wrote "Long White Cadillac,"which, at least on the surface, is about Hank Williams dying in the back seat of a chauffered car, en route to a concert. On *Blue Blvd*, the song "Haley's Comet" recounts the downfall of Bill Haley, who died all but forgotten in Harlingen, Texas.

"When I wrote 'Cadillac,'" Alvin recalls, "I had gone from being a fry cook to all the shit we went through getting the Blasters started — playing for free in biker bars and all that — to finally, two years later, when we started having this success. Granted, it wasn't anything like Motley Crue or Guns N' Roses, but for us it was like — when we started, we didn't even *own* our guitars. We were borrowin' stuff. And all of a sudden it's like, I got guitars, I got a girlfriend *who lives in Hollywood*. We thought we were up there with Michael Jackson 'cause we had $5,000 in the bank. So anyway, that song was about getting what you want but not being happy about it. That lack of spiritual center. I think everybody throws their Hank Williams things onto Hank, but that's what I got out of his music. It's not really about him.

"'Haley's Comet,' though, *is* about Bill Haley. I'm reading a lot into him, but the stories about him in the song are true. Some people say he had Alzheimer's, some people say a tumor, but he was walking into restaurants and saying, 'Do you know who I am?' And it was the same restaurant every other day. So the thrust of the song is, what happens when someone defines themself entirely through their celebrity and/or how other people view them? I always dug Bill Haley, but he wasn't really a hero of mine. My heroes were Big Joe Turner and Lazy Lester and Skip James. I wouldn't write a song about them, though. That'd be a double-album set."

BACK IN THE STUDIO, THE BAND SETS UP TO PERFORM "Jubilee Train." "Anything in particular you want me to do on this?" Thompson asks. "Just be your groovy self," Alvin answers, and counts off the song. "Jubilee Train" segues nicely into Woody Guthrie's "Do Re Mi" and then Chuck Berry's "Promised Land," making for an incisive and insightful medley surveying hard times in America and the hope for better things ahead.

When they finish, Alvin says, "Do you think Roy Acuff ever thought of calling Chuck Berry out on 'Promised Land' having the same melody line as 'Wabash Cannonball'? I mean, it's not exact, and I'll take Chuck Berry over Roy Acuff any day, but I wonder just the same."

As if to prove that rock & roll is one long continuum, they try Alvin's "Wanda and Duane," which itself bears a strong Berry-flavored stamp, sounding like a close cousin of "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man."

No matter. Alvin and the Skeletons will hit the road the following evening, after just a few more hours of rehearsal. Aside from Alvin's voice, which is ragged from too much singing and talking and too many cigarettes, these guys are ready. And the bright lights of Branson, though only a few miles down the road, might as well be a million miles away.

Dave Alvin and the Skeletons perform at 8 p.m. Oct. 31 at the St. Louis Ballroom. ■