



Neal Vaughan is a journalist and writer based in Sydney, Australia. Over the years he is been rewarded multiple times for his writing in the media.



A story by Neal Vaughan - Photography Marianne Schouten

A hardcore Maori motorcycle gang thunders down a dusty deserted back road in New Zealand's sparsely populated North Island. Leather, chrome, tattoos and blood in their eyes. Over the ridge they've targeted a single hitchhiking back packer. To borrow from Springsteen 'He's All Alone' he's on his own...

# JURA The lowland road to blues redemption

It's a down under middle of buttfuck nowhere freeze out. Easy meat. The riders pull up just a few metres ahead of our guy. We know how it plays out from here. Except it doesn't. Our backpacker is Dutch blues singer Jan Blaauw, then just 22, and he strides up to the third biker in line. The gang leader's spot and Jan instinctively knows how to give and earn respect. Instead of running for the hills and sealing his fate, he slaps a slab of Holland's finest Drum tobacco down on the leader's dirt black fuel tank and says 'This is yours... but only if you get me to my cousins house in axe by Pam'.

Drum is the spliff tobacco of choice in Maori country and Jan is a solid six foot three but his kind of solid cool is born not made and it's an essential ingredient in Jura, Holland's hot new Blues Americana duo. Teamed with legendary and many times rewarded guitarist Ruben Hoeke, son of famed Dutch Boogie Woogie pianist Rob Hoeke, Jura stirs up a world weary authenticity so sadly lacking in much of the pretty boy folk blues around today. Their gravely unpolished music style and gritty lyricism gets deep into life's darker moments. The

perfect counter point to the steaming yet supremely accomplished guitar presence of Ruben.

Together they create a sound that uncannily melds the light and the dark, the tough and the mellow churning it all into a sinewed stream of contemporary Americana tinged blues. Take the accapella and flamenco acoustic intro of Times Ain't Right and journey with it into a blistering heart wrenching self penned blues standard exploring the classic man out of time narrative in a fresh deceptively 'of the now' manner. It's nine minutes seventeen seconds and it's the centrepiece of Jura's latest album River Songs. At that length it won't be getting too many outings on your smooth fm stations but it should find its way into the soul of anyone who admits that life don't always go to plan. That sometimes you're just out of synch with the zeitgeist and you have to manage it anyway you can.

The acoustic intro and the guest vocals of Ralph de Jongh, who provides the smooth polished backdrop to Jan's chainsaw lead make it tempting to label

Time's Ain't Right as a dark simmering blues. But it's a track that can't be folded up and filed neatly in a category. Like Jura themselves the entire collection titled River Songs is hard to nail down. Created at the RiverStudio in unpretentious Alkmaar just north of Amsterdam, River Songs is not a genre buster, it's not greatest album ever but with Jan's distinctively rough voice even the lighter numbers have a raw blistering feel that make it essential listening for those seeking the musical road less travelled.

Something intensified by a dark positivist lyrical bent that resolves downers into a hope filled uppers. Much like Jan's meeting on that deserted New Zealand road 25 years ago. He laughs about the moment when the Maori gang rolled into his cousin's home town fulfilling their side of the bargain, explaining that his cousin John Blaauw who had never seen him before was hiding behind the front door and greeted him with shotgun in hand believing he was part of the gang.

This is the cue for a deceptively subdued Ruben to offer a trademark grin and point out that while Jan has the stories they create all the songs together. It's Ruben who has that elusive gift of transforming words into music, and given his family pedigree and prodigious talent on the guitar, outspoken Jan will often defer to his song writing partners musicianship. A deft guitar style that has the lucidly fluid quality of the naturally accomplished. The licks burn through with an organic sparcity of a truly masterful player. There is no unnecessary adornment, unless a miniature solo is what is called for. The sound is exactly what the lyrics require, nothing more, nothing less.

Take the track Rosie. Jan's inspiration for this came from a trip to the Jura, the rugged sub alpine area of Eastern France that also gave the group their name. He describes the moment his partner hung on to his legs so he could safely lean over the 900 metre ledge of the Mont D'or. He looks down and spots a metal plaque bolted to the rock wall. It marks

the memory of a betrayed 15 year old girl, member of the French resistance, who suicided over that same ledge 60 years earlier to avoid capture by the Nazis. But in true Jura style, Rosie is not a literal rendition of her heroic tale but a poetic imagining of how Jan sees her in his mind with Ruben's simple acoustic guitar underscoring the tragic yet uplifting whimsy of his writing.

Freedom Road is another track with hidden menace – a classic road song. Yes you can delve deep into River Songs, or simply kick back and enjoy it as an unusually deft modern folk blues cocktail that takes a dash of Americana, a good serving of traditional high intensity Chicago blues licks, a big measure of that uniquely grungy Dutch vocal



style a la Q65, garnished with the lyrical intensity of dark neo folk. It's a heady mix that's a slammer and a sipper at the same time and for any number of reasons Jura should find their way onto your player if only because it's a stinging rebuke to all the smooth pretenders who treat the time honoured genres as a made to measure route to musical acceptance.

Every track on River Songs is an unexpected and original journey with only one cover - Sting's Hung My Head - as if to underscore this Jura's commitment to lyrical experimentation. Also Watch out for the Time's Aint Right video - a short film will animate Jura's uniquely intense revealing take on life. These guys deserve wider recognition and in Europe it's already happening Jura have gone from playing a 13th century medieval Church in the back blocks of Friesland to getting a major distribution deal from one of Holland's leading music distributors, maybe we'll experience them down under sometime soon, otherwise there's always iTunes, YouTube, Facebook and juramusic.nl ■