



BY OSCAR
JORDAN

GARY CLARK, JR.

IMAGES AND WORDS

Gary Clark, Jr. refuses to stay in his lane. More than a blues man, he's an artist whose latest album, *JPEG RAW*, explores the sweet convergence of black music from a multitude of eras. In Clark's world, '60s R&B falsettos collide with the fury of Freddie King, Grant Green's sultry post-bop extrapolations, and hypnotic bars that echo Kendrick Lamar. It's a galaxy of Octavia-drenched guitar solos finding kinship with samples from Sonny Boy Williamson, The Jackson 5, and Thelonious Monk. *And*, Stevie Wonder makes an appearance. Can you dig it?

Is *JPEG RAW* a concept album?

I don't know what it is. I was *trying* to do it up with a concept, so in ways, it is. I went from being in the studio to flipping around in the car going on tour, so I'm still trying to figure it out. I'm like, "Yeah, it could be if you really want to take it there." But to simplify it, I think the concept is about images. Most of where I'm getting my information was from my social media, which was images, videos, news stories, and things people were sharing. It was all on a small scale as far as tapping into each kind of emotion. There was humor, war, mu

ation, loss of a child, and protests. I
ding off all this information. JPEG
s about images and information.
press release describes the title
acronym for "Jealousy, Pride, Ego
d/Rules, Alter Ego & Words."
, I'm still objectively trying
e it all make sense. It's kind
to explain. It's just a thing
mind that makes

sense. Hope-
fully, it makes sense
to others.

ange between a swamp blues
on't Start" and George Clinton
k Witch U" is quite a journey.

olutely. I grew up in the iPod
age. There was all kinds of
ing on, and I appreciated it all.
ody told me when I was a kid,
otta keep the blues alive." A lot
ple told me, "Stay true to the
At a certain point, when am I
start staying true

I'm doing
ght now.
e people
ne before
stuck to
at. What
happen
dy Waters
ob Dylan
go electric?
n't go back-
m in my ele-
reating things
ve me.

ke Introducing
of music to

each other, "Hello, how are
you? Nice to meet you."

Yeah (laughs). "Hi, this is
your second cousin."

**Stevie Wonder sounds so
fresh on "What About The Chil-
dren." How does one collaborate
with Stevie Wonder?**

I played on "Where Is Our Love
Song," which was released in 2020. There
was a lot of stuff going on at that time
with George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and
Breonna Taylor. It was a strange period.
People were locked in the house. I got
on the Internet to express my frustra-
tion, and then Stevie called me and said,
"Gary! I hear you! Let's do a song about
it!" I was like, "Okay, sure." So, he sent
me a voice memo called "What About
The Children," with him singing a riff.
I was like, "Man, this is on!" It was like
funky, blues, but it's Stevie Wonder, so
it's all my favorite s**t from the source
(laughs).

I built the track with my guys and in-
terpreted the vibe and communication.
Then we ended up in the studio with
him. He worked so hard in the studio.

Asher Guitars offers its Custom S90
configured exactly like Clark's personal
instrument. A sneak peek at Clark's
signature ES-355, set for release in '25.

I thought I was working hard, but
seeing him do it was so fresh – so
much energy. He sang his ass off
for four hours to get it right. He
took a break, came back, and did
more. The next day, he came back
and played harmonica. Then he
played clavinet. It was the most
badass, professional, coolest thing I
have ever seen.

**This started with singing a cellphone
voice memo?**

Yeah. It was just him singing and
mumbling the words, playing a har-
monium. We had a good chunk of it
and worked out what we thought he
was saying, lyrically, and put a story
together.

**Stevie's harp playing goes back to
1963's "Finger Tips."**

Stevie's harmonica playing is so
genius. You hear it, but you have to
pay attention to comprehend it. That's
time, passion, and soul for something
otherworldly. It was a pleasure and an
honor to play with him. It was so cool.

Is that an Octavia on "Maktub?"

I'll be honest; every time I hang out
with (producer) Mike Elizondo, I bring
a pedalboard and three or four guitars.
My board ends up disappearing and
there's a mess of pedals in front of me.
Mike starts turning knobs while I play,

and he's like, "Let's
try that." That's
what happened
on "Maktub." I
would come in
with my inter-
pretation of the
sounds with an
Octavia dialed
back so it sounds
like a fuzzy sitar.
Then he'd say,
"Let's go with that."
I'm not sure
what the

chain was, but it was powerful (laughs). I can't remember the name of the pedal.

That sound is usually pretty over the top. You found the right level.

I honestly thought it was too much. I was going to have Mike pull it back, but if it translates in the booth, I'll trust it.

Which guitar is on that track?

I used my Gibson 355 on that, and my signature Epiphone Blak and Blu Casino, my three-pickup P-90 SG, and a '61 SG reissue that Pat Smear gave me. I also used it on "This Is Who We Are" and "Triumph." I also used a Wide Sky P125 with P-90s. I had four or five guitars sitting next to me.

You also explore your clean Curtis Mayfield/Joe Pass side.

If you know, you know (laughs). That style has some of the most-beautiful playing ever. It's what got me into guitar in the first place. I did that on the interlude, "To The Ends Of The Earth." It's a straight influence from that era.

"Don't Start" is a filthy stomp.

Where does that come from?

I already had the music, but the lyrics were inspired by a fight in a parking lot. It didn't involve me; I just heard about it. I knew a guy who knew a guy (laughs). It was a tough time – tense for sure. But I harnessed it into a song and transferred that energy. It's got some of that Son House, Howlin' Wolf, and Lead Belly in there. I found a 1941 National Dobro in this shop in Nashville. It was all busted up, had a broken bridge. I pulled that thing out, miked it up, and played. I used a fuzz and an open wah sound. Mike tweaked it, added EQ, and used an old ribbon mic and a Green Bullet mic on it.

We took a beautiful guitar, messed up the tone, squashed it, and made it sound nasty. I wanted to do something with an old-school blues, stompy, swamp thing, but in the now, using modern sounds – big amps and weird fuzzed out synths and stuff like that – sub-bass with a mix of synthesizer bass and a Fender Jazz bass. There's something cool about that. I used Toronzo Cannon's Cannon Dual Fuzz by Function Fx and a Park Fuzz. I also love the Universal Audio reverb and delay pedals. A lot of times when I'm just playing to get new sounds, I'll go into the Universal Audio Apollo Interface plug-ins console and mess around with that just to trip out and try things I wouldn't normally try.

Are you a Tube Screamer guy?

I like the sound of a Tube Screamer. I



Clark's Fender Vibro King is a 65-watt version he uses live and at rehearsal.

like that boost. Sometimes, during outdoor shows, my clean tone doesn't push or bite as much as I need, and it saves me every time. I can get that little kick I need. I find myself struggling with the midrange with hollow-body guitars. I've also been using the Maestro Ranger Overdrive and the Discoverer Delay for a few things.

The production on JPEG RAW is earthy but clear.

I like a nice dive-bar sound – bark, character, and grit. It has to have character, flaws, and a story. I've had an internal battle with technology. Being able to do multiple takes of a guitar solo, after a certain point I'm beating my head up against the wall, "No! It's not right!" Jacob Sciba, my right-hand man, tells me, "Man, you got it in the third take (laughs)." I'm going, "Yeah, it was alright, but it could be this." Then you go back and hear the energy and the intention of it, and there may be some subtle flaw, flub, or mistake, but the intention and the emotion behind it is much more effective and powerful than a flawless, technically careful take. I battle

with that all the time. Jacob "That's enough already! You (laughs)!" He'll play it back. I'll say, "It's good, but..." (laughs) 78 takes later, we go back for a third take. He's like, "See you, dude!" "Yeah, you're (laughs)."

Do you have a number one

I'm still trying to figure it out, trying to find my sound. Some days I get it, other days I don't. I'm always trying to do different things. I'm like a mad scientist. "It's there! It's in here! It's in the room! It's the temperature of the speaker! It's the microphone! It's the distance!" It's all right. It's about me solving this problem.

I stick to my Vibro-King and an Ampeg that I can switch between 30 and 60 watts, running through a 2x10 Fender cab. I was at Studios, in Austin, where they have this 100-watt Cesa amp. It's a beast of an amp. This was the amp I did most of the guitar solos on. I'm time in that place, that's why it's alright. I'm trying to get the sound to sell it to me. It's my not-so-secret weapon. It's like a Dumble.

Ordinarily, I'm a Vibro-King guy. Through and through, I'm a Fender guy. I like the Princeton and the reissues.

them around the house and on the bus. The sound of the tubes. I was bullied into using them from being in blues clubs (laughs). I had a 60-watt solid-state Crate combo, an Ibanez Blazer, and they were like, "Are you doing, kid!? You can't play like King on that (laughs)!"

Because you play hollowbodies, do you have an issue with feedback on stage?

I've been fighting the battle of tone vs. stage volume, because with hollowbodies you're gonna be fighting feedback even if you're playing quiet. I've been trying quieter stage volume, but I've been disappointed with the lack of midrange and the bottom-end. It really bites me, and I have to deal with it.

It feels out of our control.

I'll tell you a story: I was in London for the Jeff Beck tribute, playing my 35th anniversary "Because We've Ended As Lovers" – my favorite songs. At rehearsal, the band is there – Clapton, Nathan East, Bramhall, II, and Rod Stewart is there. His shirt half unbuttoned, strutting around and just being a badass. Derek Trucks, Susan Tedeschi are there – Ronnie Wood. Everybody's there!

I'm trying to play this song, and my

off (laughs). The
r goes boing, bo-
Everybody stops
ok, and I'm just
"Damn!" So, my
gave me my
up. Thirty sec-
into it, same
happens. Bo-
have no more
rs. I have to take
k. I'm standing
guitar-less. Be-
hat, I was mess-
with my tuning
I'm blaming the
the weather, the
de, and coming
th every excuse
book.

Clapton is look-
t me, shaking
head. He goes,
er... Can I call
Gezer?" I say,

"He says, 'How many times have you
me touch my tuning pegs in all the years
e known me and seen me play guitar?'"
"Never." He says, "How many times
you seen me fumble with a whammy
I said, 'Never.' He looks at me, looks
nd the room, then looks dead in my eyes
ays, 'Strat!' I was like, 'Ohhhhh!' That
(laughs). After that, I broke a string. It
ot my day.

at being said, I am not converted. I'll
Gibson/Epiphone guy until the day I
this planet!

Can Clapton can't get you to switch?

in't gonna happen. I love them. I own
However, the thing I'm going for is that
P-90, hollowbody, humbucker thing
hair on it. That's the instrument I want
y most of the time.

Should you write a book about guitar trophies.

id "The Tonight Show" with Jimmy
a and The Roots. I was looking at my
... You can't be ashy on television, so I
hair and make-up and ask, "Can I get
moisturizer?" They give me the good
urizer! I'm playing slide and holding
t. We go for the first live take, and I
e my slide is slipping off my finger, and
ck is slipping out of my hand. I was
"Oh, no!" I was struggling for dear life
hole time. Note to guitar players: Don't
moisturize!

Are you're saying it's better to be ashy on TV?

aying I'll be ashy on TV if I can do
need to do with this guitar - absolutely
Funnily enough, I was playing a Bill



Asher Custom S90
(laughs).

**You sound like you,
regardless of the guitar.**

I got a chance to hang
around with folks like Derek O'Brien and
Hubert Sumlin in Austin, and they'd always
say, [old-man voice] "It's about the feel! It's
about your hands!"

Discuss the intent behind "This Is Who We Are," which was co-written by Naala, a singer/ songwriter/producer from London.

The lyrics came down to being saved by
Naala. I was writing lyrics and about to throw
them in the garbage. I loved the music and
was working on the solo but I didn't know
what to do with it. It was the last thing we
recorded and I backed myself into a corner.
It was circulating for about a year with me
trying to figure it out. Naala came in, and I
was telling her, "I've always heard this song
as if it were a dragon flame, medieval times,
knight-through-the-forest thing."

She came up with part of the first verse.
I was like, "Okay, yeah! Fighting a dragon!
Slaying the demons!" We started to get some-
where with a different perspective. She saved
it, and then it started flowing once we were in
the studio. She laid down a vocal demo, and
I was like, "You just gotta sing on this thing!
It's a collaboration now. Thanks for coming
in and helping with the lyrics, but now you're
on the song with me, so let's go (laughs)!"

How about "Alone Together?"

The trumpet player is my guy, Keyon
Harrold, out of St. Louis. He has worked on
a couple of projects with me, so I knew he

Particularly key to Clark's live sound
are his signature Dunlop Cry Baby wah,
Universal Audio Starlight Echo Station,
and Function Parallax phaser/tremolo.

could add the thing needed to take it to the
next level as far as evoking that emotion.
"Alone Together" was another one of those
things where I'm just sitting around with a
beat machine and my guitar, trying to play
like Grant Green and Wes Montgomery. I was
sampling myself trying to play like that. So,
I was like, "What would it be like to have all
these other elements? Like have a backbeat
thing meets swing?" I was experimenting.
How could I do jazz, hip-hop, and blues as one
thing? I turned it into a funky experiment. I
was trying different rhythms. The next thing
I knew, I was in the studio singing, "Why
do we feel so alone together." It just kind of
happened.

Sometimes, the best art comes from trust- ing your instincts.

Absolutely. You have to stay open, be
receptive. Sometimes, I battle with forcing
things. You try so hard, and you get so
close. Then you have to take a step back, go
for a walk, come back, and then... There it
is! Creativity is a subtle, delicate thing. I let
the guitar playing evolve. I realized I was
frustrated with what I was doing as far as my
playing. I was stuck, like, "Well, that's on you,
big dawg! Get into it!" (laughs) So, I started
listening to everything, doing music-theory
research, and understanding modes. It was
a thing that I never paid attention to before.
Different guitars inspired me to play different
things. It went from me getting my Gibson

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175 and playing along to Johnny Hartman or John Coltrane. Any record I put on, I would play along. I'd pick up an Ibanez RG with the Floyd Rose and play along, just trying stuff (laughs)! Trying a different approach, to open my mind; "What would happen if I didn't stomp on a fuzz and stay in this pentatonic thing?"

It's difficult to imagine you onstage with a hot-pink Ibanez superstrat.

I felt nothing when you said that. What is that (laughs)? I think about image a lot, not because I want to, but because it's talked about. As you evolve, your image will change. You see the world differently, so you express yourself differently - whether it's your haircut, the shoes you wear, or type of pants. The size of the brim of your hat will change depending on how you feel. Part of the fun is being able to grow and evolve artistically, mentally, and physically - expressing yourself through clothing, song, or art. It's good to see elements of growth in an artist - or not (laughs).

You're touring North America this summer?

I'm going to be all over. I might be somewhere with a pink Ibanez and a Floyd Rose, so watch out! VG



Clark's JPG RAW explores the convergence of black music from a multitude of eras with help from Octavia-drenched guitar solo

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