

GREG KOCH

He wowed us with his six-string versatility on *The Grip*, his wildly eclectic 2001 debut on Steve Vai's Favored Nations label. He entertained us with his wry wit and rapid-fire between-songs patter, along with his fiendish fretboard work, on 2003's hilarious *Radio Free Gristle*. He melted our faces with his incendiary licks on 2010's blues-drenched *From the Attic* and 2012's instrumental outing, *Strat's Got Your Tongue*. Now comes *Greg Koch Plays Well With Others*, in which the world-class Strat strangler and Telecaster master joins forces with fellow Milwaukeean and prolific singer-songwriter-guitarist John Sieger (of Brew City superbands R&B Cadets and Semi-Twang) for a program of affecting tunes that run the stylistic gamut from Stax flavored R&B to country honk to nasty funk and searing blues shuffles. "This is quite a different record for me in that it's song-based," says Koch, "but there is plenty of playing on it as well."

Indeed, Koch's signature six-string assault is still very much in evidence here, neatly sandwiched within these little ditties that he co-wrote with lyricist Sieger, who also sings on all but one song. Such potent guitar slingers as Robben Ford, Little Feat's Paul Barrere and Joe Bonamassa make special guest appearances throughout, bringing the chops quotient to a boil on several tracks.

"It's been very interesting for me doing this record," says the six-foot six-inch six-stringer. "I don't have to worry about singing the songs, I don't have to worry about writing all the lyrics and I got somebody else to produce it, so I was able to turn over a lot of the different aspects and not obsess over every last angle of the recording process. And it feels very good to do a record that isn't focused so much on my playing, even though I don't apologize for any of my earlier records. I did them all the way I did for a reason and I stand by them. But it's nice to have something that I didn't have to think of as catering to guitar players first."

When Koch first got together with his Wauwatosa, Wisconsin neighbor Sieger to begin working on tunes for this project, they found that their chemistry was immediate. "I started out sending him MP3 files of tunes I had demoed and then John would turn around the lyrics in a day or so. Over the course of three or four months we had 64 songs that we had written that way. And they were in all kind of different styles...really more Americana than blues, I'd say."

The collection kicks off in funky fashion with "Simone," a little ditty about an alluring checkout girl in her daddy's store, which has Koch going toe-to-toe with fellow chopsmeister Joe Bonamassa in a deluge of audacious speed licks. Another bona fide guitar star, renowned jazz-blues six-stringer and former Miles Davis sideman Robben Ford, makes his first appearance on the earthy, slow grooving "Walk Before You Crawl" alongside organist Theo Merriweather and the rhythm tandem of bassist Roscoe Beck and drummer Brannen Temple. Following Koch's stinging solo on this "Born Under A Bad Sign"-styled number, Ford blows over the bridge with a toe-curling wah-wah solo that is as eloquent as it is nasty.



New Orleans pianist Jon Cleary (a transplanted Englishman who has been a ubiquitous figure in the Crescent City for the past 20 years) makes a guest appearance on the soulful Stax/Volt-flavored number "Spanish Wine," which also features a soul-stirring vocal performance by Sieger. "John's got a thing," says Koch of his songwriting partner. "I describe it as Mark Knopfler meets Dylan on the highway to Leon Russell and Mick Jagger." Koch also turns in some striking slide guitar work on this highly charged track.

Former Little Feat guitarist Paul Barrere offers some expressive slide on the mellow ballad "This Whole Town Has a Broken Heart," another poignant narrative by Sieger, who also delivers his lyrics with heartfelt urgency. Koch dips into his B.B. King bag on his brief but potent solo here.

Ford returns for the jazzy organ-fueled shuffle "Sho Nuff," which has him nonchalantly blowing over the changes in typically flowing fashion. Koch follows Ford's tastefully appointed, decidedly jazzy solo with a take-no-prisoners barrage of stinging notes on his Les Paul, with a just touch of chicken-picking along the way. Koch and Ford reprise their six-string rapport on "What You Got to Lose," a loping country flavored gem that cleverly incorporates a mysterious sounding eastern flavored scale (ala

George Harrison's "Within You, Without You") into the fabric of a catchy hoedown. "That was a fun one to do," says Koch. "When I first sent this tune to John to put lyrics to, I called it 'Bo Raga,' because it reminded me of Bo Diddley meets Indian music." Solo-wise, Ford once again sails smoothly over the changes while Koch resorts to his patented 'angry chicken' on his trusty Telecaster.

"Whiskey Rainstorm" opens with an Al Green-ish "Love and Happiness" vibe before morphing into a raunchy Stones-ish romp that has Barrere ripping on some stellar slide guitar work. "Down the Road" is a perfect example of how Sieger's knowing, world weary lyrics blend organically with Koch's economical, cleanly-picked Strat lines. John sings: "Damned if you do, other way too, but you'll muddle through down the road/Pep talks from friends, they say, 'Don't break, just bend'/You'll know just when down the road/Dust yourself off, this is not the end/ Take that high road and learn to love again." Underscoring it all is Koch's guitar fed through a Leslie speaker to achieve an eerie organ effect. And his string-bending solo, though only 20 seconds, is an overt genuflection at the altar of Albert King.

Barrere handles the vocals on "Night Owl Now," an earthy, organ-fueled number about a sad sack who's on the prowl because, as he explains, "Since I lost my job, my wife, I don't have much of a life." Greg digs in here and wails with abandon over the shuffling groove as Barrere encourages him to "smoke that guitar, boy!" The longtime Little Feat guitarist also contributes a wicked slide solo on this ebullient boogie. Says Koch, "I've known Paul since 1993, when I began sitting in with him and my old pal T Lavitz in their band The Bluesbusters. He's a great player and a really soulful singer."

The collection concludes with the humungous "Hey Godzilla," a throbbing, tongue-in-cheek ode to the radioactive monster that wrecked Tokyo. Powered by Greg's 18-year-son, drummer Dylan Koch, this slamming closer fits somewhere between the James Gang and Tenacious D on the Richter scale. "He's really come along," says proud papa Koch of son Dylan. "I got him a little drum kit very early on and somewhere around fifth grade he started playing all the time. He plays good jazz, he can do the rock thing...when he channels Keith Moon or Jon Bonham it's crazy. He's a beast! He's doing his thing and it was fun to have him on the record." And like he does on all these tracks, Greg engages in all manner of fretboard fracas before going toe-to-toe Barrere's deep-cutting slide. And the sparks fly.

While the acclaimed guitarist initially set out to investigate song forms on this outing, his 12th as a leader, there's still plenty of scorching licks here to satisfy even the staunchest guitar aficionados. Koch strikes that delicate balance while proving he can indeed play very well with others. – **Bill Milkowski**

Bill Milkowski is a contributor to Down Beat and Jazziz magazines. He is also the author of "JACO: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius" and co-author of "Here And Now! The Autobiography of Pat Martino" (both Backbeat Books)

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"I believe Greg Koch is pound for pound the best guitar player in the world today. His, tone, feel and style are unrivaled in today's guitar playing community. He is scary good. It was a true honor to do shows with him."

JOE BONAMASSA

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