SJB SELECTION

REVIEW · BLUES

Old Love | Eric Clapton

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Layla was the love he couldn't have.
Wonderful Tonight was the love he had beside him.
Old Love is the one that left but keeps knocking at the door.

And the woman, in all three cases, was Pattie Boyd.

When Eric Clapton recorded *Old Love* for *Journeyman*, his marriage to Pattie Boyd had come to an end. They had married in 1979 and divorced in 1989, the same year as the album. The song was born among that wreckage, but it doesn't sound like someone trying to destroy the past. It sounds more like an attempt to break free of it.

Except that some loves have the bad habit of not knowing when it's time to leave.

And here comes one of the most striking details of the whole story.

Years later, Pattie Boyd said that hearing something so personal turned into a song hurt her. There was also a very simple reason: Clapton had been able to tell his side of the story publicly through music, while she felt she couldn't "answer" the song.

And suddenly *Old Love* becomes something more complicated than an ordinary love song.

Because what we're listening to is a confession.
But on the other side of that confession is someone who lived it.

Then Robert Cray Walks In

And this is where the track becomes even more interesting.

Old Love isn't credited to Clapton alone. It was co-written with Robert Cray, who also plays guitar on the track and appeared on four songs on *Journeyman*.

Two blues guitarists in the same room could easily turn six minutes of music into a contest.

Fortunately, that doesn't happen.

The beauty of *Old Love* lies in the opposite: there seems to be no hurry to prove anything.

The guitar doesn't force its way into the song. It waits.

A phrase.
A pause.
An answer.

The phrasing becomes almost a conversation. The blues here doesn't need to shout to be heard: it can afford to speak softly.

And when the guitar takes the spotlight, it doesn't seem to want to explain the pain. It circles around it.

There's Also a Small Paradox

Old Love runs about 6 minutes and 25 seconds on *Journeyman* and was never released as a single. And yet it became one of Clapton's most loved compositions in his live shows.

In short... no single, no rush toward the chorus, no need to get anywhere quickly.

And maybe that's exactly why it works.

Old Love doesn't run toward the ending. It walks around a wound.

And Then There's *Journeyman*

The album that holds the song also arrives at a particular moment.

Some critics had seen the Clapton of the 1980s as suspended between his blues roots and a much more polished, radio-friendly rock. *Journeyman* still carries that typically Eighties production sheen, but inside it the blues guitarist starts to come through strongly again.

The title itself works almost like a statement.

Journeyman.

Not the genius.
Not the legend.
Not "Clapton is God".

A musician who keeps doing his job.

And after years also marked by his problems with alcohol and the sobriety that followed, the album was welcomed as a return to form. Clapton himself has named it among his favourite albums.

But the Most Incredible Detail Is Another One

On the same album that contains a song tied to the end of his marriage to Pattie Boyd, there's also...

George Harrison.

Yes, him.

Pattie Boyd's previous husband.

Harrison wrote *Run So Far* and plays on the record.

At this point a critic might reach for a sophisticated metaphor.

No need.

The private lives of British rock had already written a complicated enough script.

And it's remarkable to think about what binds these people. Clapton had played on *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* at Harrison's invitation; their friendship lasted over the years and, after Harrison's death, Clapton organised the Concert for George.

And Back to the Guitar

Because in the end, that's where *Old Love* lives.

In the way a note is left hanging.

In the bend that rises slowly but doesn't seem to want to arrive anywhere.

In the pauses.

In the dialogue with Robert Cray.

A recent review of the *Journeyman* Deluxe Edition considers *Old Love* the album's finest moment, hearing in the collaboration between Clapton and Cray the meeting point between polished melody and pulsing blues.

And that's a good definition.

Because the sound isn't dirty in the traditional blues sense. It's controlled, polished, grown-up.

But beneath that calm surface, something keeps moving.

Like a door that doesn't quite close when the wind is blowing outside.

Every now and then it opens a few inches...

and the past comes back in.

Maybe that's the real difference between *Old Love* and Clapton's other great love songs.

Layla wanted to win something.

Wonderful Tonight looked at what was in front of it.

Old Love tries to convince itself that something is really over.

And the blues, of course, knows perfectly well that it isn't.

The guitar keeps coming back.

A phrase. A pause. Another phrase.

> ***Like someone walking away from the door...***
> ***then turning back to see if it's still open.***

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