

# *Mose Allison—American Legend: Mose's live music finally leaves the room*

James Brewer  
18 November 2015

Above all, Mose Allison is a performer. Anyone who has seen him live knows they have seen him in his element. This is the experience I described five years ago after my first encounter with Mose in Detroit. While I was disappointed to read on his web site that he had retired from performing in 2012, no one can argue that at the age of 85 (he just celebrated his 88th birthday this month), he hadn't earned the right.

So, the announcement of a new album in September—the first since 2010—was a pleasant surprise. The CD, on IBis Recordings, *Mose Allison: American Legend*, was recorded in late October 2006 at a series of performances at club called 19 Broadway in Fairfax, California (in the Bay Area). Producer Pete Magadini, an accomplished musician and educator, who also was the drummer on this gig, asserts, “This will be Mose's final release.”

Allison generally performed as part of a trio. He used local accompanists whenever he traveled. For this venue, Magadini played drums and Bill Douglass bass. Both artists are also fans and had accompanied Mose many times over the years.

This is Allison's 35th album, according to *allmusic.com*, very few of which are live recordings.

Magadini describes *American Legend* on his web site: “You will hear an audience that is totally immersed in Mose and the trio. This phenomenon would almost always happen when Mose performed with his trio live in clubs—but then the music never left the room!”

Allison's fans will undoubtedly find new Mose gems to enjoy on this CD.

An example is “One of These Days.” This tune first appeared on his 1964 album, *The Word from Mose*. The original, which can be heard on YouTube, is basically a 12-bar blues, but Mose, as is his wont, irregularly tweaks the tempo to pique listener expectation.

Forty-two years (and who knows how many performances of it) later, Mose takes the playfulness and his mastery of music to new levels. The blues form is so ubiquitous that any listener, no matter how musically knowledgeable, will recognize the 12-bar structure and organically has certain aural expectations when hearing it performed. “One of These Days” tells the story of a man who is out of synch with the world and himself. Mose doesn't just use words to tell the story. He takes the anticipated form and distorts it uncomfortably to illustrate his point.

Hearing Mose perform in a small venue is an indelible experience. He has always devoted himself to connecting to his audience and he imparts a strong immediacy to his music. He has something to say. This comes across in this album. Allison, born outside Tippo, Mississippi in 1927, doesn't play to impress, but to express.

I came across a 1993 interview in the *Los Angeles Times* that offers insight into the thinking that informs his choices in the many, many set lists Allison has worked out. At the time, Rhino was re-releasing some of his early Atlantic recordings. He was asked if the reissuing of some of his old records made him nostalgic:

“I've been avoiding nostalgia now for about 30 years. They're probably going to reissue a lot of tunes that I haven't done for 25 years, and won't be doing. I still get requests for ‘Parchman Farm’ and ‘Eyesight of the Blind’ and ‘One Room Country Shack,’ and I haven't been doing any of those in 20 years or so.

“I've been doing the stuff that I thought was relevant. The songs I do now are more universal ... Nostalgia is a waste of time. It's a form of sentimentality. I don't bother with that. I don't feel romantic about the old days, so I've never had that problem.”

I asked him in a 2010 interview about the musical themes of his live performances. As an audience member, I sensed that he chose tunes on the spur of the moment. Mose responded, “I do it that way. I may have a different song count or different key signatures to make it a well-rounded set, but generally, that’s what I do ... I’ve always enjoyed it. It’s always a challenge, just like the first night I played. It’s just the same after sixty years. You never know how it’s going to feel or what’s going to happen.”

Other little-heard Allison tunes come to light on this recording that are worth mentioning. For example, the first cut, “I Don’t Want Much,” is a tongue-in cheek ditty that jokes, “just treat me like his majesty, our big friend the OPEC nation.” Another pithy tune, “Ever Since the World Ended” pokes fun at the most serious issue humanity faces.

A particularly moving ballad to me, “Numbers On Paper,” also appeared on the 1997 CD “Gimcracks and Gewgaws.” Seldom, if ever, are songs written about numbers. But as we hear in the final verses, there is a profound point being made.

*Numbers on paper  
designate your ration  
in or out of fashion  
world beyond compassion*

*Numbers on paper  
soon become your master  
merciless forecaster  
portrait of disaster*

*Giver and taker  
Numbers on paper*

Not every cut on the CD is obscure. Two of Allison’s most well-known tunes are included: “Everybody Cryin’ Mercy” and “Your Mind Is On Vacation.” Perhaps not as well-known is “Middle Class White Boy,” a playful description of himself. Mose also pays tribute to other composers, covering tunes by Duke Ellington, John D. Loudermilk, Percy Mayfield, Big Joe Williams, Bob Nolan and others. But like everything he does, the unmistakable “Mose attitude” comes through.

This project appears to have been lovingly put together. Magadini, the producer, was clearly conscious he was creating the quintessential Mose Allison live performance album. As always, Allison’s capricious wit dominates, but because of that, his prodigious

musical themes can be overshadowed.

The CD’s liner notes feature Magadini’s comments on Allison’s musical depth: “Because Mose, for the most part, is known for his songs and lyrics, sometimes the instrumental side of Mose has been overlooked. Mose’s influences not only draw from his jazz and blues roots but also from the world of 20th century composers including Béla Bartok, Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles. He plays with a rhythmic and harmonic expression, which includes all of the above (& more) plus an inherent knowledge of improvising and playing solos while using polyrhythms, that was not truly understood by many in the jazz world until much later. As the producer of this CD, I want to put an exclamation point on this facet of Mose’s career as well.”

Despite its belated appearance, *Mose Allison: American Legend* presents the veteran blues artist at what was arguably his career best. It is a must-have for jazz fans and all music lovers.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**