

# G. Love & Special Sauce

Philly's G. Love & Special Sauce Venture Onward by Returning to Roots

By Dan Marek



In 1992, a nappy-haired kid billing himself as the "Foot-stomping Street-Side Blues of Gerrett Dutton" sat on the streets of Philadelphia, with only a guitar and a harmonica. This street performer, playing his heart and soul out to passers-by for a dime here and there, has since become one of the music world's most creative innovators of blues and hip-hop. He calls himself G. Love.

"I lived right there in the neighborhood on South Street, Philadelphia. That area was like, all street musicians. So I was just imitating them at first," Love said. "Then I got really into it. In the summer of '92 I was going to college, and decided that I would take a year off. I never went back; I decided to play out on the streets, try to get some gigs, really dive into music and give it a shot. Out on the street I was playing for many hours at a time. It gave me strength as a performer, the confidence to go out in front of any crowd and really just believe in myself."

Diving into music on the streets, Love began to develop his own style by watching other performers and absorbing the atmosphere around him. At 19 he decided to record a full-length cassette titled *Oh Yeah*, which included original versions of "Sauce", "Rhyme for the Summertime" and "Shooting Hoops" and started his groundbreaking career.

"Music has always been a little more serious than fun for me," he said. "It's been a part of my emotional release and it's part of the essence of me... I wrote my first song at about 15. I started feeling music really deeply when I was about 13, and I'm 28 now. Music is about inspiration to me."

Inspiration from artists such as bluesman John Hammond Jr. and hip-hop originators RUN-DMC eventually lead to Love's signature sound of b-ball rhymes and summertime hits, adding a new dimension to the Philly Sound.

"The Philly Sound is more of a 70's sound. Our sound is called the Philadelphonic Sound; it's like a hip-hop blues thing. Hip-hop has all kinds of different music in it, and that's like our music," Love added. "It's rooted in the blues and rock n' roll, and it borrows from reggae, jazz and straight country."

In 1993, Love formed Special Sauce with bassist Jimmy "Jazz" Prescott and drummer Jeffrey "Thunderhouse" Clemens after meeting them in local bars, when he himself was not even old enough to buy alcohol. The band signed with Okeh records a year later and released their debut *G. Love and Special Sauce* which featured funky grooves that began making heads bob immediately. In a market flooded with gangsta records, the innovative hip-hop sound was met with critical acclaim from music industry magazines across the country.

In 1995, the band signed onto a tour in support of the Violent Femmes and sold out shows in excess of 1,600 fans each night. Five months later, G. Love and Special Sauce landed a spot on the main stage of the H.O.R.D.E. tour alongside the Black Crowes and Blues Traveler, playing to audiences of nearly 18,000.

Later that year, Love and company went back into the studio to record *Coast to Coast Motel*. Their efforts received far less promotion than their previous effort, which eventually led to Love axing bassist Prescott.

"After the second record, we had a long tour that wasn't as successful as we wanted. We all had our frustrations, and G. decided he wanted to try some different things," Prescott said. "When he wanted to release the third record (*Live at the Haunt*), he was looking for sort of the same vibe, so he called me up and I came right back. I love playing with these guys. It's hard travelin' a lot, but I really dig playing with these guys."

Now that the band is back to its original members, spirits have risen, and Love says he thinks they are producing their best material to date. "Everything is really great," he said. "I think that we have the best vibe right now. It's almost like we've been holding back since we got a record deal, like, 'Oh my God, are we worthy of this?' I think we're still humble, but I think we all have more confidence in ourselves and in our music. I think that the things we have achieved as a trio has given us that confidence. Now we realize that when we look out and see all these people come to our shows, the

people want us to be here. If there is ever any doubt, you just look out in the audience and know these people are here for a reason—they want this thing to happen."

When the band signed on with Sony 550 in 1999, they expected the major label backing to push their unique blend of music to another level. "The biggest opposition we have with our label is not on the creative side, it's trying to get Sony to push us or give us a video," Love said. "We walk such a fine line because we've been around awhile, and they never really knew how to break us from the get-go. We've always been an anomaly at our record company; it's like they like us too much to let us go, but we drive them crazy because we're not pop, we're not hard-core hip-hop—we're just kind of doing our own thing that there's no specific scene for. There's no cut-and-dried way for them to work us. We've had some commercial success on radio, but most of the success we've had is just from us doing what we do—playing music. The strongest part of my career is our touring—that's our bread and butter, and that's how we maintain everything from our fan base to our record deal."

With *Electric Mile*, their second album on Sony 550, Love said the band put their mainstream success on the back burner and recorded music for themselves. "This record is just a culmination of material that we've been working on the road for the past year," Love said. "We started playing two sets instead of just one, and we started jamming more. I think our expression was a little darker—we kind of ventured into different emotional realms of our music than we had done in the past. It's a little darker and a little more funky."

The album kicks off with the dancehall-like "Unified", chanting "It could be so nice, but the world is not ready" in-between verses of utopian dreams without "politricks, government, money fixes or brainwashing." To spice the sound up a little, Love brought in John Medeski (organ player for Martin, Medeski and Wood), Billy Conway (drummer for Morphine), and rapper Jasper to round the sound out on half the songs. "It was great, all three of those guys just added so much to the music they were on," Love said. "It actually comes together strongest on 'Parasite' where Jasper just totally lights it up on the vocals, Medeski's organ is just killer, and Billy Conway is in there just kind of rounding the rhythm section. 'Parasite' and 'Free at Last' were exciting because they were just two jams in the studio that we made into songs," Love added. "We'd just come up with a groove, jam on it, then throw some lyrics on it. That's always really exciting when you can start to see something in the studio, as opposed to something that's been preconceived."

"Sara's Song," a track Love has held on to since high school, is a slow, finger-picked, country-like ballad painting a picturesque scene of two lovers living out life in purple valleys covered in four leaf clovers. Although the song was written over 12 years ago, the theme seems to parallel Love's life today. "My girl is pregnant, we're havin' a baby this summer," he said about his expected fatherhood this July. "When I finished my record, me and my girl took a little vacation to Costa Rica and I was able to really open up and write a lot of songs about her and the baby down there."

When he has the time off, Love still breaks out the old acoustic and heads out to the parks in Philly to rehash his early years on the streets. "I still do it all the time at the park, but I just don't have my case open for money anymore," he said laughing. "If I take my dog out to the park, and it's nice out, I'll bring my guitar down and practice. My girl will do some Yoga, I'll sit and play, and my dog will just go around and sniff stuff out."

Things seem to have panned out for Love over the years. Although mainstream success may still be further away than he likes, life is good. He's still playing the Philly Sound like no one else, he's expecting to become a father, and he still has the chance to disappear into the purple fields of Philadelphonic with his girl, his dog, his harmonica, and of course his guitar. "God gave me a path," Love said. "I'm out here because that's my calling. If there are trials and tribulations in my past, I just have to meet them and challenge them. This is what I do. Some people are doctors, lawyers, tailors, some people hike mountains...this is my path, I just have to walk it." **ZZ**