

TOP TOPHAM

THE COMPLETE BLUE HORIZON SESSIONS

BOOKET NOTES

Between 1967 and 1970 the Blue Horizon label created an industry niche for itself that may never be surpassed. The odds of a British *blues* label surviving, let alone thriving, as a commercially run operation back then, would have been strongly stacked against such an event. That such a label might have had *any* major chart success would have been seen as extremely doubtful – bordering on delusional. But Top Ten entries and even a No.1 chart topper? *No way!* Fortunately, we were in the right place at the right time and had our eyes – and ears – open to what was happening at ground roots level. Nevertheless, had CBS not shown the vision to support us as they did, then there can be no way to know now, whether Blue Horizon would have been as successful as it was. With Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac and The Chicken Shack – the label would hit the charts on a regular basis. But it would be the other, sometimes unsung artists on the roster, that would boost and sustain interest in the label; a label that championed, not only the well known, but also the 'underdogs' of the blues world on *both* sides of the Atlantic. Blue Horizon could boast a vast array of contracted and licensed performers that ran close to the fifty 'marker'. Amongst them, was one Top Topham – of whom it was said: *"Thousands of guitarists have walked in the footsteps of Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page – but only Top Topham can claim that they walked in his."*

An only child, **Anthony Topham** was born in Southall, West London, on 3rd July 1947 to John and Daphne. Ten years later, the family moved to Norbiton, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey. Top recalls that the family acquired a record player during 1959 and that jazz music was the predominant feature of the household's record collection – Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers, Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and the like. The advent of the Skiffle craze found Top wanting to be a drummer but there was no money for a full kit – Top had to 'make do' with learning to play the most basic of percussion instruments – spoons and bones. Top's father, a talented, but struggling artist, also made a tea chest bass – another option for his enthusiastic son. The family record collection expanded taking in a number of blues records – Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy in particular.

Top told journalist Roger St. Pierre, many years later, that *"it was very hip at the time to be into country blues and I was quickly hooked."*

Top began to dig deeper. He started bidding for obscure U.S. blues records that would appear in auction lists and also attended a number of Paul Oliver's influential "Blues Lectures". He showed the desire to soak up more of the history and tradition of the music. Then, one day, Top was taken to the Ealing Jazz Club to see Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies, and that was the day he became determined to become a blues musician himself. *"I wanted to play guitar and finally I was given one by my grandmother."*

Top had already started at Hollyfield School that same year and there he *"joined an elite art group that also included two other guitarists – Chris Dreja and Eric Clapton. Our mutual love of the blues brought us together and they, as well as others, were to be regular visitors at our house, all keen to check out the latest blues records we had acquired."* Another guiding light at that time was Dave Holt, who, like Eric, lived in the village of Ripley, but essentially, Top's life changed when he heard a French album featuring recordings by Billy Boy Arnold, Snooky Pryor and Eddie Taylor. Howlin' Wolf also had a great impact in those early days and Top recalls that *"the [sound] of those guitars made me want to play so much! They became the foundation sounds of The Yardbirds under my auspices."*

The local Norbiton Hotel was to be where Top and Chris were to meet up with Keith Relf and Paul Samwell-Smith and lay the groundwork for forming the 'most blues wailing' Yardbirds. Drummer Jim McCarty completed the line-up and The Yardbirds played their debut set as support to Cyril Davies' Blues All Stars at the Eel Pie Island Club, Twickenham. Cyril then offered the band a residency at one of his regular gigs, The Woolsden Hotel in Harrow, North London. But when The

Stones' then manager, Giorgio Gomelsky, offered The Yardbirds yet another residency at The Crawdaddy in Richmond, it was time for Top's parents to step in.

Top recalled that the band started out in May of 1963 and that he left during October of that same year. *"I was only 15 then – three or four years younger than the rest – and there was no way my parents would let me go out five or six nights a week to play music. I was going on to Epsom Art School and they wanted me to take that seriously. Eric was the obvious person to replace me."*

The young teenager was already showing exceptional artistic abilities and in hindsight, I don't believe that Top would now take issue with his parent's strong commitment to see their son make use of those talents.

But the blues can get you anywhere and at anytime. Sure enough, before the decade was out, Top was back. During 1965 and whilst at Guildford Art College, Top put together a ten-piece band; they rehearsed and finally did one gig. The members immediately went their own way and that was that. In an interview with Melody Maker's Jerry Gilbert, some years later, Top remarked that that performance was *"the most satisfying thing I'd ever done and as it turned out, a total waste of everyone's energy."*

He then dabbled with psychedelic rock, as guitarist, with Winston G and The Wicked – Top played his final gig with that outfit at London's Roundhouse, supporting The Who. It was then, that Top decided to revive and further cement his long friendship with Tony 'Duster' Bennett. The two had met as early as 1958 and during the ensuing years had often 'hung out' together.

Their mutual musical interests became a passion – they formed a number of jug bands with other like-minded friends and spent most of their spare time at each other's homes, playing records, talking and developing their own blues ideas. When Duster recorded his "Bright Lights" album for Blue Horizon at The Gin Mill Club, Godalming, Surrey on 15th April 1969, Top was there, along with his trusty Gibson 335.

According to various letters and other documents I managed to lay my hands on whilst researching for this release, it would appear that Top signed an artist agreement with Blue Horizon sometime in the early part of 1969. Up until Duster's Godalming recording however, Top had not actually committed anything to tape for the label. He was to get his first taste of working at the CBS Studio soon thereafter, when Duster, as producer rather than performer, oversaw a session for Blue Horizon with a new discovery, vocalist/guitarist **Lloyd Watson**. It was whilst working at a blues club in Peterborough, Lincolnshire that Duster met up with the twenty-year old – at that time working with local band Ma Grinder's Blues Mission.

It was decided, on Duster's recommendation, to sign Lloyd to Blue Horizon. For the session, Duster called in Top and pianist Derek Hall, along with the drummer and bass player from Blue Rivers & The Maroons – their names now long forgotten, regrettably. Four titles were cut that day in May '69 and they get their first 'official' airing in this collection. Born to a Jamaican father and English mother in 1949, Lloyd Edwin showed musical talent at a very early age – he took piano lessons for five years – and then changed to acoustic guitar. The purchase of the Robert Johnson album, released by Columbia Records, pointed to the road that he still travels today.

"All I want to do is play the blues – music comes first and money second" was his comment to a local newspaper back in '69 – and nothing much has changed; Lloyd Watson is still playing blues to this day. Unfortunately for him though, the Blue Horizon session did not offer up an obvious single release, as was the plan at the time. We hoped to record further new, original material later that year – maybe as part of an album – but that never happened. The master tapes were put into storage. Three of the titles cut that day feature Lloyd's own guitar work, whilst Top takes a back seat, holding down the rhythm parts. Topham steps out though 'big time' on the slow blues "Long And Lonely Year" – gutsy solo work!

Within a matter of months, Top would find himself working with Christine Perfect, following her unscheduled departure from The Chicken Shack. The two had actually first met back in 1965, when they were both employed as skivvies at The Grosvenor Hotel in Swanage, Dorset. Along with Rick Hayward, Martin Dunsford and Chris Harding, Top was to record as featured guitarist on Christine's eponymous album for Blue Horizon. Not the most rewarding of times, Top recalls, feeling frustrated

that his own musical plans were grinding to a standstill. Christine's sessions took place in August and December of 1969, with Top's own album sessions sandwiched in between. Once the decision had been made to produce an entirely instrumental album – an idea that had been muted some time earlier – the pressure was on Top, to come up with the material. He was very keen to have as many original tunes included as possible, but smart enough to realise that a handful of 'standards' would not go amiss. Once the basics were in place, Top made some rough 'home' demos that were, in turn, followed by pucker demos, made at CBS Head Office, Theobalds Road in Holborn, London. Those were cut with the help of Rick Hayward and took place on 10th September. Terry Noonan then visited Top's home to work on the arrangements: *"I sang the parts I had in my head to Terry and he then scored them, after the orchestration formats had been agreed with Mike. I had absolutely no knowledge of musical notation at that time, other than keys, sadly."* There can be no doubt, that Top was thrilled to be given the opportunity of recording with some of his favourite British blues and jazz musicians – not least of whom were to be Duster Bennett and Pete Wingfield. He also found himself in a position to perhaps, re-create, the 'big band' sound that he had failed with four years earlier.

The tale of the *actual* day of recording is, perhaps, best told by the man himself: *"I distinctly remember getting up at about 6.30 a.m. – very unusual for me at that time – and going on the train, via Waterloo, to Bond Street. My knees were knocking (literally) and all the musicians were in there. Herbie Flowers turned up first and I remember the swiftness with which he was able to play the score for "Ascension Heights" – he didn't bother to look at the music again! As everything was scored, the album was done in almost one day. The sax solo on "Hot Ginger" wasn't too good and so we overdubbed Skidmore's original solo with Steve Gregory [at a later date] and at around 10.30 p.m., on the same night as the main session, we knocked out "Christmas Cracker". I also vividly recall Herbie playing us a demo of something he'd just recorded – "Melting Pot" – featuring Madeline Bell."* Many of Top's lead guitar parts were actually played at the time of recording, but inevitably, others were added later. Again, Top recalled that *"we played around a lot with guitar sounds. Mike placed a microphone in a cardboard tube in front of the speakers, and got a killer sound. I was playing a Gibson 335 with 1960 humbucker, alnico pick ups. The single and some of the other album tracks have that guitar sound and we also dubbed secondary effects. I also got hold of two coconut shells to use as horse hoof effects on "Globetrottin'" – I played them too. That Gibson guitar got broken some short time later, when I was rehearsing with Christine at The Nag's Head in Battersea. I had to go downstairs to take a 'phone call and so, I placed the guitar on top of the amp stack. When I got back, it was on the floor – in twelve pieces!"*

On 28th November 1968, as an hors d'oeuvre to the album, Blue Horizon released a Christmas single – "Christmas Cracker" (57-3167) – a funky instrumental in the vein of Lowell Fulson's "Tramp", featuring snippets from well-known Yuletide melodies. We actually sent copies out to DJs and Radio Stations in the form of a Christmas Card package – but our efforts made little impact. Some two months later came the main course in the shape of "Ascension Heights" (Blue Horizon 7-63857). Initial reviews were very enthusiastic, although we could all have wished for more of them! In his 1970 review of the album for Melody Maker, Jerry Gilbert commented that he *"liked Topham's phrasing, which is down to earth melody over a funky beat – far away from the progressive trait [of the day]. I hope his name remains at the fore, as this album is easy to get into and nice to live with."* When talking with Gilbert some little time later, again for Melody Maker, Top had this to say: *"The object was to try and do a British Stax 'thing'. I think that "Funks Elegy" is heading in the direction I want to go – although [for me] the most satisfying track is our arrangement of "Tuxedo Junction". I wanted to keep to simple riffs sliding in and out – none of the whining lead guitar – simply because I wanted to be part of the band rather than have them playing along behind me."* In 1992, journalist Mike Oldfield was to describe the album as *"an ambitious and breathtakingly original project that 'married' blues, rock and jazz"* – observations, that to some degree, reflected our collective thoughts at the time of its release. We had hoped that Top's involvement with Christine Perfect's Band would throw the spotlight on his guitar talents and enable us to achieve some measure of success sales-wise with his solo instrumental extravaganza – it was destined not to be so. It was most certainly deserving of greater attention but with the waning of interest in the British blues boom, travelling the blues 'road' would be a tough journey for all but the stout of heart. Perhaps, in hindsight, we should have released a single from the album – but encouragement from CBS to do so was not forthcoming. There can be no doubt that the title track, "Ascension Heights", might well have given us a shot at radio exposure. With the lush and yet powerful string and brass arrangements along with a strong guitar melody line, that tune could have easily found its way onto many a radio play list. An opportunity missed.

Top found his way back into the CBS studio during the summer of 1970, once again working alongside Duster Bennett on the latter's "12 DB's" project. Blue Horizon had plans to bring New York vocalist Garfield Love over to the UK for a short tour and some studio work and Top had been 'earmarked' to pull a band together. The guitarist also had plans for making a funky 'swamp' record, complete with sound effects – but time ran out for both of those ideas to reach fruition. Top's association with Blue Horizon came to an end when the label moved to Polydor early the following year. Not good news; but there was far worse to come when, within a matter of months, Top contracted a very nasty blood disorder that actually had him too close to 'death's door' for comfort. *"I had been in the process of forming a new band with Duster, who had been in the States [touring] with John Mayall – but that had to go by the board. I was ill for two years."* Top took the decision to leave the music business and return to his other love – painting. Following his recovery, he started a fine arts business based in Chelsea and to complete the total 'turn-around', Top also converted to the Islamic faith and re-invented himself as Sanderson Rasjid Topham. He has been extremely successful in the 'fine arts' world and became very popular with many wealthy Arab clients. His murals and other works grace many a luxurious home and his impressive Curriculum Vitae lists some famous clients – Sheiks Sulaman and Mouffalik Al Midani, Jonathan Aitken M.P., Adam Ant and Richard Branson amongst them.

By the mid-1980s Top had relocated to the rural tranquillity of Mid-Wales, where he and his wife raised a family of eight. Given, that in such a setting, the opportunities to get back into music, might well have been few and far between, it took a chance meeting, in 1988, with ex-Yardbirds drummer, Jim McCarty, to lead Topham back into the blues world he had so dearly loved. That renewed friendship led to the formation of The Top Topham – Jim McCarty Band, a quartet that would, variously, also feature John Idan, Andy Cleveland and Rod Demick. A 2CD package on Spiral (SCD952) is an excellent showcase of the combined talents of that unit – a unit that disbanded in 1990 as a result of Top's renewed interest in acoustic-styled blues. He teamed up with Dave Peabody for 'occasional' gigs and also recorded an album for Frank Ratti's Appaloosa label, based in Milan, Italy. It was whilst touring Italy, that Top had the opportunity to 'jam' with Jesse 'Guitar' Taylor, Butch Hancock, Jimmy Dale Gilmore and Bill Morrissey. As a direct result, Top would soon find himself touring the blues/folk club circuit in the Boston-Cambridge area of New England. He also recorded for Rounder Records with Morrissey and Johnny Cunningham and in more recent times, worked with Pete Brown, alongside Jim McCarty, on Brown's double album release "Rattlesnake Shake" – a 'tribute' release to help Fleetwood Mac's founder, Peter Green. In more recent times, Top reunited with two of the other founder members of The Yardbirds, Jim McCarty and Chris Dreja, to form The Yardbirds – *Mark II*. He also worked, albeit sporadically, with other British blues musicians – amongst whom were, most notably, Big Joe Louis and perhaps, one of the *true* unsung heroes of the British blues scene, Southampton's Bob Pearce.

Today, Top Topham lives in Brighton. He remarried. He is still in demand as an artist and of course, he can still be heard playing the occasional blues gig, often with guitarist/vocalist John Idan or pianist, Bob Hall. He has certainly lived a life of twists and turns – but like so many, he hung on and made it through to the other side. That he is not a more familiar name might be, perhaps, something of a disappointment to the man himself. But when you consider what he *has* achieved in his three lifelong careers – that of a parent; a highly regarded and sought after painter *and* a great blues guitarist – Top's record is not too shabby, is it? I have no doubt that the release of these, his complete Blue Horizon recordings, will only enhance the latter of those achievements. And always remember if you will, that "Ascension Heights" is still, to be best of *my* knowledge, the *only* album to have ever been released by a British blues guitarist that features nothing other than instrumentals. Top that!

Mike Vernon *May 2008*