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Little Feat: Still Kickin' It

By Nicole Spiridakis, Photos by Marsha Halper

Yeah, that's right, Little Feat are still kickin' it. On Tap music correspondent Nicole Spiridakis reveals what's kept them on their "feat" for so long.

Little Feat keyboardist and vocalist Bill Payne just returned from a hike on his land in Montana, just north of Yellowstone National Park. Fresh from a trip to Nashville, the musician was enjoying a last few days of down time before Little Feat began yet another tour, as they've done on and off for over three decades. The current lineup, composed of Paul Barrere, Sam Clayton, Kenny Gradney, Richie Hayward, Shaun Murphy, Payne and Fred Tackett, makes its way to Sweet Caroline's in Winchester, Virginia, on May 9 and 10.

If Payne sounds reluctant to get back on the road, it could be because Little Feat is rarely, if ever, stationary. "I'm looking forward to these rehearsals [in Los Angeles] so we can work out a few more songs," he said. "We tour all the time...we were just in Jamaica in January" and played a Mardi Gras celebration in Galveston, Texas, later in February.

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The band is promoting its first studio album in three years, *Kickin' it at the Barn*, released on its own Hot Tomato Records label last fall. The record was re-released in April due to the current tour and because, Payne said, it needed more publicity than it initially received. Recorded at the home of guitarist and vocalist Fred Tackett, the album "is a good record now, and it will be a good record 10 years from now," Payne said.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Little Feat first came together in 1969, founded by Payne, drummer Richie Hayward, Roy Estrada, and the late slide guitarist Lowell George. Early albums included *Dixie Chicken*, *Feats Don't Fail Me Now*, *The Last Record Album*, and *Time Loves a Hero*. During the recording of their eighth album, 1979's *Down on the Farm*, George passed away and Little Feat took some much-needed time apart.

"There was a break in the action right before Lowell passed away," Payne said. "We were young, it just wasn't working out and I wasn't very happy with how crazy things were. So I thought, you know, if it's going to be this nuts I don't want to be a part of it."

"Then Lowell went away on tour...and passed away. We were right in the middle of another project—I'd told everybody I'd do one more record. Paul and I were thinking about putting another band together, and the world kind of went upside down after Lowell passed away."

PLAYIN' AROUND

Payne found himself for a time playing with Linda Ronstadt, James Taylor, Stevie Nicks, and Jackson Browne, while percussionist Sam Clayton worked with Jimmy Buffett and Robert Plant. "We were all out doing different things with a lot of very high-profile people in the '80s, and you know, we still work with some of these folks," Payne said. But the urge to reunite was strong, and a new incarnation of Little Feat was born in 1988, soon releasing their "comeback" album, *Hate To Lose Your Lovin'*. About 10 years ago, the group, in Payne's words, "got a girl in the band" when singer Shaun Murphy joined up, and released *Ain't Had Enough Fun Yet* in 1995. Following albums included 1998's *Under the Radar* and *Chinese Work Songs* in 2000.

The musicians not only work on their own solo projects—Payne has recently finished an instrumental album—they also play with various rock n' rollers around the country. Payne has recently worked on a project with Bob Seger and played on a country album

with Jimmy Buffett to be released this spring. Murphy performed with Seger at his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction in March, where fellow inductee Jackson Browne gave the band a public acknowledgment.

Payne said he didn't think Little Feat's sound changed much over the years, calling the band "eclectic" with its own unique characteristics. "So in other words, if Igor Stravinsky plays 'Happy Birthday' it still sounds like Igor Stravinsky; if we play 'Happy Birthday' it sounds like Little Feat," he explained. "We do have a lot of different styles we play, which hasn't exactly made us a household word, but it keeps fans and the band both on our collective toes."

A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

Little Feat's records encompass country, jazz, R&B and, of course, rock and roll. Payne, Barrere, Tackett and Murphy write a majority of the songs, sitting down in "one configuration or another," although they have recorded work by other artists as well; 2000's 'Chinese Work Songs' includes Phish's "Sample in a Jar." On Kickin' It, Payne said he had a song he had written, Barrere and Tackett had a few collaborations, Murphy had a piece she had written with her husband—and the album started to come together. "Corazones Y Sombras," (Hearts and Shadow), on Kickin' It was a product of Payne's past two years of Spanish study—though he admits he had some help writing the lyrics. Other artists on the track include Nacho Hernandez, Gabriel Gonzales, Sergio Alonso, Jesus Guzman and Piero Mariani. "I took a dive into the deep and wrote a song in English and Spanish," Payne said.

Most of the songs were written as the album was being recorded, but "In A Town Like This" is taken from Tackett's album of the same name, and "I'd Be Lyin'" was written by Murphy, her husband Mariani, and friend Laura Creamer. Little Feat founded their label, Hot Tomato Records, about two years ago. The band has also released several live albums on the label, and guitarist Tackett has released a solo album. "Generally speaking, the labels that we'd been with were lacking in terms of promoting, so we thought if you're going to do it, then let's do it ourselves," Payne said. "I'd rather blame myself than somebody else."

Payne, who started playing piano at age five and joined his first band at 15, is still impressed by the band's endurance. "I never dreamed that when we started this thing in 1969 that we would still be continuing...that I would be off playing not only with Little Feat, but with Buffett, with Bob Seger," he said.

"Everything I've been doing forever, I'm still doing it. I'm still able to play."

ONE FAN AT A TIME

While Little Feat is not necessarily a household name, it does have a loyal and supportive fan base. Payne attributed this phenomenon to the group's lack of hit songs, calling the band 'a little left of center.' "We had too many singers, songs were too long.... They just weren't the kind of things you could put a bow on and say 'Here's this nice tidy package'," he explained. "I've played on a lot of hit records, but it's just not been our forte." On the other hand, "people who have come to see us for years upon years upon years really like it, and people who kind of stumbled on us think, 'Hey, this is pretty good. Who are these guys?' You start to check it out," he said.

Little Feat fans are of all ages. Most are "a little older," although Payne believes young people continue to discover the band. All generally "have pretty broad taste in music, they like to be taken on a journey and they don't necessarily want to hear the same thing every night," Payne said. The Feat Fans grassroots movement started online through the band's website, www.littlefeat.net, six or seven years ago. Payne had made a plea to fans to keep the band in the public's radar, and encouraged them to talk up Little Feat and bring new fans to concerts. As a result, more people came to shows; Payne said he thinks attendance has gone up and is still improving.

"A lot of artists close themselves off from their fans, but we've embraced ours and I feel my life is a lot richer because of it in the best sense of the word," Payne said. While album revenue does "fairly well" on the Hot Tomato label, Payne stressed that Little Feat is a working band. "Every time you go out it's a new adventure, so we'll see what happens this go round."

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