



*By Chip Lovitt - GJD Contributor*

March marks a special time of year for the Allman Brothers Band. It was on March 26th back in 1969 that the original members of the band, including session man turned bandleader, Duane Allman, met at drummer Butch Trucks's house outside Jacksonville, Florida, to play together for the first time.

March is also a special time for ABB fans in the New York area, too. Beginning in the early 1990s, the Brothers have taken up a weeks-long residency at New York's Beacon Theater for an annual series of shows. They've become a spring ritual for New York-based fans, and the 40th anniversary shows promised to be the best of all—for a variety of reasons.

One is the fact that the band is tighter than ever. Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks have gelled into perhaps the most powerful one-two guitar punch in rock music. Whether trading blues-rock riffs or exploring the sonic possibilities of slide guitar, the pair are masters of their craft and fully capable of duplicating and building on the trademark twin harmony lead guitar sounds made famous by Duane and Dickey Betts. Gregg Allman is in great voice, and the remarkable rhythm section of drummers Butch Trucks and Jaimoe and bassist Oteil Burbridge is one of rock's most powerful and propulsive.

But what also made the 40th anniversary shows noteworthy were the special guest stars that joined the Brothers on stage each night. In the days before the show I caught, guests such as the Band's Levon Helm, Phish's Trey Anastasio, Robert Randolph, Sheryl Crow, Buddy Guy, Taj Mahal, Los Lobos' David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas, John Hammond, Jr., Boz Scaggs, and Johnny Winter all dropped by to jam with the band.

As Derek Trucks had said weeks earlier, the band had had the idea to "have some of the musicians sit in with us that played with Duane Allman, people that influenced him and people that he influenced. The band is reaching out to artists like Eric Clapton, Aretha Franklin and Boz Scaggs; obviously scheduling will play a part in it but even if half the musicians can share in the

event it should be pretty amazing.”

As March 19th—the date we had tickets for—approached, rumors began to fly about a very special guest who would be sharing the stage with the Allmans that evening. Imagine our delight when it was confirmed that Eric Clapton himself would make a guest appearance the nights of March 19th and 20th.

The Allman-Clapton connection is the stuff of legend. Not only did Duane Allman contribute slide and lead guitar to Clapton's classic *Layla* LP, the pair were musical soulmates and a mutual admiration society that would have undoubtedly produced more great music had Duane not died in a 1971 motorcycle accident.

The show began with giant images of Duane Allman staring down from the screen above the stage, which evoked cheers from the crowd. Moments later, Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks kicked off an electric version of “Little Martha,” the acoustic guitar piece from the *Eat a Peach* album. Haynes played a red Gibson ES335 while Trucks stuck to his usual red Gibson SG. Despite the electric instruments, the version was faithful to the original in both sound and style.

Then Derek Trucks launched into the famous opening slide riff of “Statesboro Blues,” and the band was off and running. Reprising the classic Elmore James tune off the *The Allman Brothers Live at the Fillmore East* collection, the band tore into “Must Have Done Somebody Wrong.” Brandishing twin Les Pauls, Haynes plucked out stinging lead lines, while Trucks added scorching slide guitar. “Revival” was next, and when Greg Allman and Warren Haynes harmonized on the line, “People can you feel it, love is everywhere,” it almost felt like 1969 all over again.

The first set ended with “Don't Keep Me Wonderin'” and a long version of “Whipping Post,” in which the band stretched out with all the considerable improvisational skills they have. Haynes and Trucks again traded harmony lead lines, and then took the song into uncharted jam territory before Jaimoe, Butch Trucks, and Oteil Burbridge brought the song back to its final verse and climax. The crowd loved it, and ecstatically sang along with Gregg the classic line “Good Lord, I feel like I'm dying.”

After a brief intermission, the second set began with a solo piece by Gregg on piano, which led into a bluesy rendition of the Sonny Boy Williamson chestnut, “Good Morning Little School Girl.” When the song ended, Warren Haynes, announced, “Here's a man who needs no introduction.” And out stepped Eric Clapton, clutching a light blue Fender Stratocaster.

Clapton kicked off “Key to the Highway” with chunky blues-rock chords, then took the first of several solos that recalled the classic version off *Layla*. Then Haynes and Trucks took their solos, trading riffs with each other and Clapton. You could tell the three guitarists were having the time of their lives.

Clapton added some tasty jazz flavored riffs to “Dreams,” then engaged in a three-guitar duel with amazing triple lead guitar harmonies with Haynes and Trucks. It was more than three master guitarists trading riffs. It was like a dialogue between three players, each having total

command of the language and a musical vocabulary as detailed and extensive as a dictionary.

Then it was a Layla-based triple treat as Clapton led the band through scorching versions of "Why Does Love Got To Be So Sad," "Little Wing" and "Anyday." "Anyday," was particularly enjoyable, thanks to the vocal harmonies between Clapton, Haynes and guest singer, Susan Tedeschi.

But the best was yet to come. For the encore, the band delivered a tour de force version of "Layla" with Clapton playing the fiery lead lines of the guitar intro high on the neck, while Warren Haynes covered the bass string riffs. The song built to a powerful climax, then Derek Trucks took the song to its end by duplicating Duane Allman's soaring slide lines at the end.

There are those who say that Clapton's recent work has lost its spark, is lackluster, or even boring. However, I've said this before—most recently in my guitarjamdaily.com column on the Clapton-Winwood shows—and I'll say it again. When Clapton gets to put aside his role as bandleader, and just be a lead guitarist, he plays with a fire and passion few can match. He's got this impeccable sense of phrasing and musical vocabulary that lets him build a solo to a soul-stirring climax, or do the bluesy call and response thing better than anyone. He's also blessed with an unmatched ability to channel the sounds and spirits of the three Kings—B.B., Freddie, and Albert, as well as other blues masters like Buddy Guy.

Back when he played in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, London graffiti proclaimed "Clapton is God." That may have been a bit over the top, but it did feel that way that Thursday night. I felt humbled to be—to use the title of a Blind Faith song—in the presence of the lord.

It was a truly historic show. At least, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.