Alex Chilton
by:Dave Hoekstra
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The pairing of Alex Chilton and Ben Vaughn is a natural. Each is a terrifically perceptive songwriter, influenced by the wonder of 1960s AM radio, but stimulated by the challenge of reinvention in the 1990s.

Chilton, 42, grew up in Memphis, Tenn., where he played in the Box Tops from 1967-70 and the celebrated Big Star from 1971-74. Chilton's songs have been recorded by the Bangles, R.E.M. and the Replacements, who paid homage with the hit tune "Alex Chilton." Besides working as a songwriter, he has been a cabbie and a dishwasher, and last year, took part in an acclaimed Big Star reunion.

Vaughn, 38, was borm in Camden, N.J. Marshall Crenshaw had a hit with Vaughn's "I'm Sorry (But So Is Brenda Lee)," and the Skeletons dipped into the Vaughn songbag for "I Dig Your Wig" and "Lookin' for a 7-11."

Vaughn is a passionate American musicologist, having compiled and annotated "Johnny Otis: The Capitol Years," and last year, produced the late Arthur Alexander's "Lonely Just Like Me." Besides being a songwriter, he's been a landscaper and a dishwasher. His new record is "Mono U.S.A." (Bar None Records).

Chilton and Vaughn met in the mid-1980s, when they did some Midwestern dates together, and now the Ben Vaughn Combo will open for Chilton Friday at Metro.[Editors note: the cover was only $4!] Chilton and Vaughn plan to collaborate on some new songs.

On a conference call last week, Chilton and Vaughn discussed the craft of songwriting. Chilton, who rarely grants interviews, was glib on a variety of subjects. Vaughn was equally expressive, and a few times responded to Chilton's comments in a pupil-teacher texture. Here are the highlights of the 45-minute conversation:

Q. You each started songwriting at a young age. What's different in how you approach a song now, as opposed to when you were 21?

Chilton: Back then, if I came up with a lick I heard before, I was amazed that I could do anything that actually sounded like music. I was experimenting, so I did everything I could. These days, I'm a lot harder to impress about music. I don't want to do things I've heard a million times before unless it's a total groove.

Vaughn: My problem is I haven't changed. I'm still writing about teenage girls. (Laughter on each end.) I probably have learned a lot more about writing. Similar to what you said, Alex, when I started I'd be thrilled something was actually rhyming or coming together. I'd move quick on it. Now I know more, so I explore how much further it could go before I finish.

Q. Describe the influence of commercial AM radio back then, especially on the importance of brevity and hooks? And what did you hear on tiny blues, soul and gospel stations?

Chilton: Radio was the ultimate inspiration. I read a quote from Picasso the other day where he said something along the lines of how amateurs are influenced by things, where professionals just steal. (Laughs.) I do a lot of stealing. I get a lot of inspiration from black gospel. They do some interesting things that hardly anybody else does. One of the better tunes I've ever written, the whole chorus is lifted right out of a gospel tune - not the lyrics or particularly the melody, but certainly the chord changes.

Vaughn: What song was it?

Chilton: I don't know. I only heard it once. I walked in my house, heard it and immediately tried to figure out what was going on. It might be called "He's Able." It was just a screaming, nuts kind of thing.

Q. And what song did you use it in?

Chilton: A song called "(I've Got a) Thing for You."

Vaughn: I love that song.

Chilton: It's maybe my favorite one of all I've written. (It appears on Chilton's 1987 "High Priest" release.)

Vaughn: I'm totally influenced by what I remember of radio as a kid and what I imagine remembering as a kid. The romance of it has reached mythical proportions in my mind. Radio was so amazing in the Philadelphia area because there were so many fast-talking, hustler disc jockeys on the air playing crazy doo-wop and soul records that never made it outside of Philadelphia. I also learned when you were done saying what you wanted to say, get out. Leave.

Chilton: It seems there is a theatrical ethic to entertainment. It's an art of getting someone's attention, holding it and building them to some sort of climactic place. So, of course, every second of time in a song is important. You're either building something up or making the climactic thing happen, falling off from it - or just wasting time.

Vaughn: Or you're bridging between two things.

Chilton: Yeah, pacing is everything. In a way, it's like telling a joke. You have to arrange the lyric in a way that it's either funny or good, depending on the intention you're looking for. Timing is very important in that. I haven't had any really strong musical ideas in a long time.

But - and this a good explanation of the way I write these days - I generally will be walking around and a line will come in my head. I'll think, `Well, that's kind of catchy' and I start to write something around it.

I'll put some music with it. If the music and lyrics are in place, I'll think that maybe it needs an extra section here, and then perhaps I'll add a bridge. Then I look at what I've got.

In the recent past, I've thrown out the whole idea I started with and just used the filler I was trying to add on. It's a hit-or-miss kind of thing. Sometimes it's a matter of doing something and getting enough perspective on it to see what it is.

Q. Curtis Mayfield once said he wrote "It's All Right" in between sets of an Impressions concert in Nashville in 1963. How important is environment to you?

Vaughn: It matters to me. I never write anything while I'm sitting around with my guitar. It comes to me when I'm driving or walking. I'm never successful when I sit down and try to write. I've never had any success writing before I go onstage like Curtis Mayfield. I'm jealous.

Chilton: For me, too, generally if I'm on the road I don't get much done, although I'm looking forward to spending time with Ben on this trip. We have some basic ideas to work from, and I've already come up with a few things. I imagine we'll pitch things back and forth and see if anything develops. But ideas almost always come at home - in the bathtub, while I'm shaving. Things like that.

Q. Can you each pick a focal point where you made a dramatic evolution as a songwriter and/or musician?

Chilton: I did a lot of tours with the Beach Boys in the late 1960s. I learned a lot of guitar playing from Carl Wilson. I got to spend some time hanging around (American Studios) where the Box Tops recorded. There were some pretty hot musicians there - Bobby Womack was pretty interesting to me, as was a guitar player named Reggie Young.

My dad (Howard Sidney Chilton Jr., a Memphis tenor saxophonist and pianist) would talk to me about theory. Before I knew anything about anything, he would play piano and be really into something and start talking about what he liked about tonal relationships. I really didn't understand, but a lot of the phrases he used, such as fifths and major sevenths, the words just stuck with me.

Q. Alex, what about (Memphis producer and Sun session player) Jim Dickinson? Before you worked with him in the late '70s, you were into a careful layering of guitars and harmonies and stuff.

Chilton: Yeah, the only way I had learned to do things in the studio was very meticulously. If I hit a bad note somewhere, or somebody did something a little off, I'd stop and do it again. Dickinson showed me how you could get a group of people playing together where no one knew the song, and one, two, three, four, wham! It turned out great. It sounded like total chaos, which was quite a good thing for me to learn.

Vaughn: Your "Like Flies on Sherbert" (released in 1980 and produced by Dickinson) is one of the most amazing records for that reason.

Chilton: That's an ultimate manifestation of that method.

Vaughn: Dickinson told me he wouldn't let a musician learn a song, because the minute they learned it, they started getting "normal." So he'd try to cut them while they were still struggling to figure out what was next.

Chilton: There's some videotape of some of those sessions. You can see me play a totally anarchistic take of a tune. Then you see me at the end of the take going, "Well, that's pretty good and maybe a few more times and we'll have it." Then you listen to it, and you realize you didn't need to do that at all.

Vaughn: It's an amazing record. It's a recording of the moment.

Chilton: I love it. I find it jumps out of the speakers that way.

Vaughn: It's funny, Reggie Young is a name that also comes up with me. Working with him on the Arthur Alexander record, I learned about guitar in knowing when not to play more than play. He's always been great about waiting for a hole to fill. And working with Arthur himself. He's possibly my favorite songwriter, so getting a chance to work with him was a real honor.

Chilton: Did you get to watch him write some things?

Vaughn: Yeah, actually I did. What was weird is that he didn't play an instrument. He would sing a cappella when he was writing. It was my job to figure out what the chords were. He would sing a note and I would try to stick in a fancy chord. Man, he wouldn't stray from it. He wouldn't sing to what anybody would play. He'd bend you back. His melodies were almost like nursery rhymes.