

What I remember about this visit is how Peter Wolf, formerly of the J. Geils Band begged to come along to the show. We had networked about used record stores in Boston and Chicago.

Wolf drove a pretty beat up van, one of those vans where you always see discarded Mickey D's hamburger wrappers on the floor. He picked me up at the hotel with a young waifish male companion and we went to see J.J. Cale.

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BOSTON From a distance, gypsy troubadour J.J. Cale looks like he's spent much of his life panning for gold. His weatherbeaten face is spiced by a salt-and-pepper beard; the eyes behind his tinted glasses are old coins in a couple of tin cups.

That is how Cale prefers to be seen - from a distance.

"I'm a background person," Cale said before a recent set at the Channel nightclub here. "I'm not a household name. People have heard my music, but all my famous songs were made famous by somebody else (most notably, Eric Clapton's 'Cocaine' and Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Call Me the Breeze').

" But that was my goal. I didn't do too many interviews and kept my pictures away. I've had more pictures taken of me in the last two months than in my whole career. When I put my new album ('Travel-Log') out, I decided to do a little American marketing. Like we sell Pepsi-Cola, right? I haven't overdone it, so it's been fun. But I am a background person."

Backed by a musicologist's entourage, Cale will step to the foreground Friday at Park West in Chicago. Cale's six-piece band features saxophonist Steve Douglas, who brought the raunch with Duane Eddy and Phil Spector; keyboardist Spooner Oldham, an ex-Atlantic Records session player who also co-wrote soul hits like James and Bobby Purify's "I'm Your Puppet" and the Box Tops' "Cry Like a Baby," and bassist Tim Drummond (who has played with James Brown, Ry Cooder, Bob Dylan).

Hitting the road is more demanding for Cale than the average rock act. His laid-back lifestyle reflects the soft shuffles of his music. Cale spent two years living in a 24-foot trailer anchored near Anaheim, Calif., and he drives a car only when he must.

"When I lived in the trailer park, I didn't own a phone, so I didn't do much," Cale said. "If you don't own a phone in America, you don't do too much business. And, I'm 51 years old, I got to take care of my health a little bit. Musicians are not known

for their longevity.

"So I started riding a bike. I'd get groceries on my bike, and that's hard to do in L.A. I've been listening to music. I like some rap. I'm a guitar player, so I like heavy metal. I love Eddie Van Halen. You can never stop trying to learn. Over all, I tried to slow it down and enjoy it a little bit. I've bought me a house, and I got into mowing the lawn every Saturday I'm not working."

Now, there's an image.

Cale has hit the road to promote "Travel-Log," his first album in six years and his debut for Silverstone/RCA. The record diverges from traditional Cale fare by way of a couple of lush arrangements and contemporary rhythm structures. Another difference is that "Travel-Log" was recorded in Los Angeles, while much of Cale's earlier material was cut in the backwoods of Old Hickory, Tenn.

Cale always will retain the open spaces between his smooth country chord changes and seductive Jimmy Reed bass lines.

"I always try to put that in," he said. "Sometimes I overplay, but I try to keep it kind of sparse. My music is a little more rattly than it used to be. I don't know why. I've lived in the Los Angeles area for 10 years, and it's a little more uptown than Tennessee. That probably had something to do with it."

What also had something to do with it is that Cale's sensibilities are true to his Tulsa, Okla., roots. Cale graduated from high school in 1956 and began playing country swing and rockabilly in Tulsa bowling alleys, nightclubs and school dances, fronting bands like Johnnie Cale and the Valentines.

About a dozen Tulsa musicians - including Leon Russell, David Gates of Bread and Cale's splendid percussionist, Jimmy Karstein - migrated to Los Angeles in the early 1960s to seek work in the music industry. Cale's first gigs were as a studio engineer. He once told an interviewer, "I like the smell of electronics."

On his earliest records, Cale sounded like a singer on the outside looking in. On "Travel-Log," he is a centerpiece, surrounded by a tour bus of well-traveled musicians. Such a transformation suggests that Cale has been composing on piano. "I'm not really a piano player," he said. "Just enough to get the chord changes down.

"I mainly write on guitar. Sometimes I cut the tracks and write the words afterward. Sometimes I'll write with the guitar and voice, and add the band to what I already did. I've tried every way there is. The only thing I don't do is try to be a poet. I very seldom write the words and try to put music to it. It's either the music first or the music at the same time."

The most unusual track on "Travel-Log" is "New Orleans," with a quirky arrangement pitting street funeral horns against a cheery string section. "Yeah, he

(Al Capps, arranger) knocked me out on that," Cale said. "I liked it so well, I was going to take my voice off it and make it an instrumental. There are a lot of musicians on that - strings, violins, a big rhythm section. We had 15 or 20 pieces live."

In Boston, Cale's show took on the texture of a revue. He opened his set with an acoustic version of "After Midnight" before the band appeared - one by one - to a sinister cover of Cow Cow Davenport's "Mama Don't Allow It."

After covering new songs such as the hard-driving "Hold On, Baby" and "New Orleans," the band went around the horn, playing its best-known tunes. Drummond stepped out with "Lickin' Stick" (those are his bass lines on the James Brown original), which bled into Christine Lakeland's saucy cover of Ry Cooder's "Down in Hollywood." Oldham offered a heartfelt reading of "I'm Your Puppet" before Cale kicked in with "13 Days" from the new record. Cale seemed to appreciate being out of the onstage limelight.

Much has been made of the time between Cale's albums. His last release was "Special Edition" on Mercury/Phonogram in 1984. It's not like he has been sequestered in a studio, trying to make the definitive Cale album. "The truth is, I had a four-album contract with Phonogram, and I owed them two more records," he said. "I got burned out and tired. So I asked if they'd let me out of the contract.

"I'd still write a song now and then, and in five years, I had accumulated 15 or 20 songs. Maybe twice a year I'd go in the studio and do a tune or whatever I was in the mood for. After listening to them, I noticed I wrote a bunch of songs about places and towns. That's why I titled it 'Travel-Log.' "

Without a record contract, Cale sent out about 20 songs on a demo tape. Silvertone, a British record company, bit. "Travel-Log" was actually released last year in Europe, where Cale is tremendously popular.

Cale decided to tour in part to close the book on his mystical private persona. "I wanted to get rid of the recluse deal," he said. "The reason they made the recluse thing up is that if you don't do interviews and don't make yourself accessible, they say, 'Oh, he's private.' I'm no more private than any other guy walking around. It's just that I've always considered myself a songwriter. When you go out on the road, you're out front and that kind of deal. I don't do that too much. I am not a performer, I am a songwriter."

And with "Travel-Log," Cale is a songwriter who has struck gold.