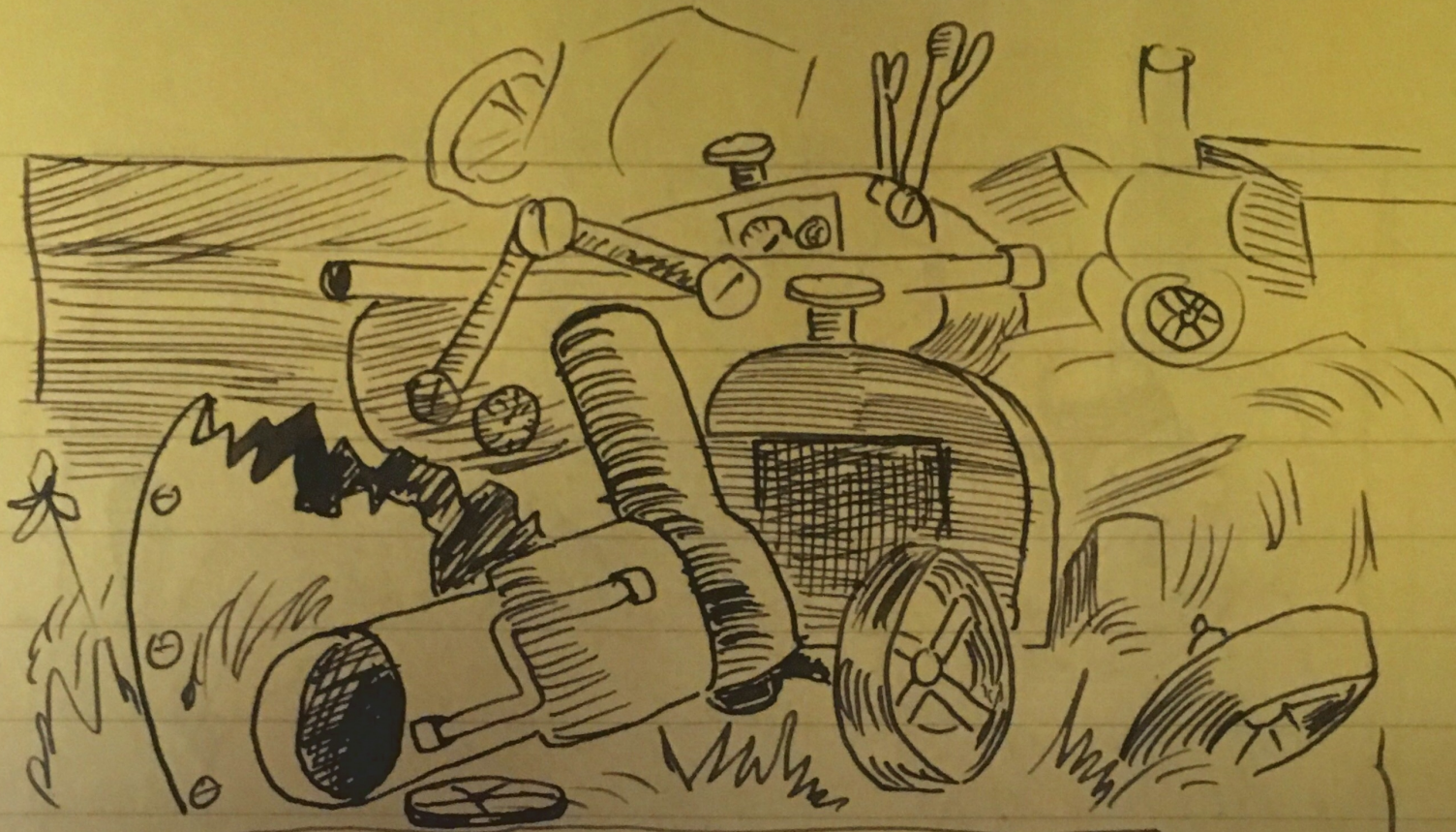


NO DEPRESSION



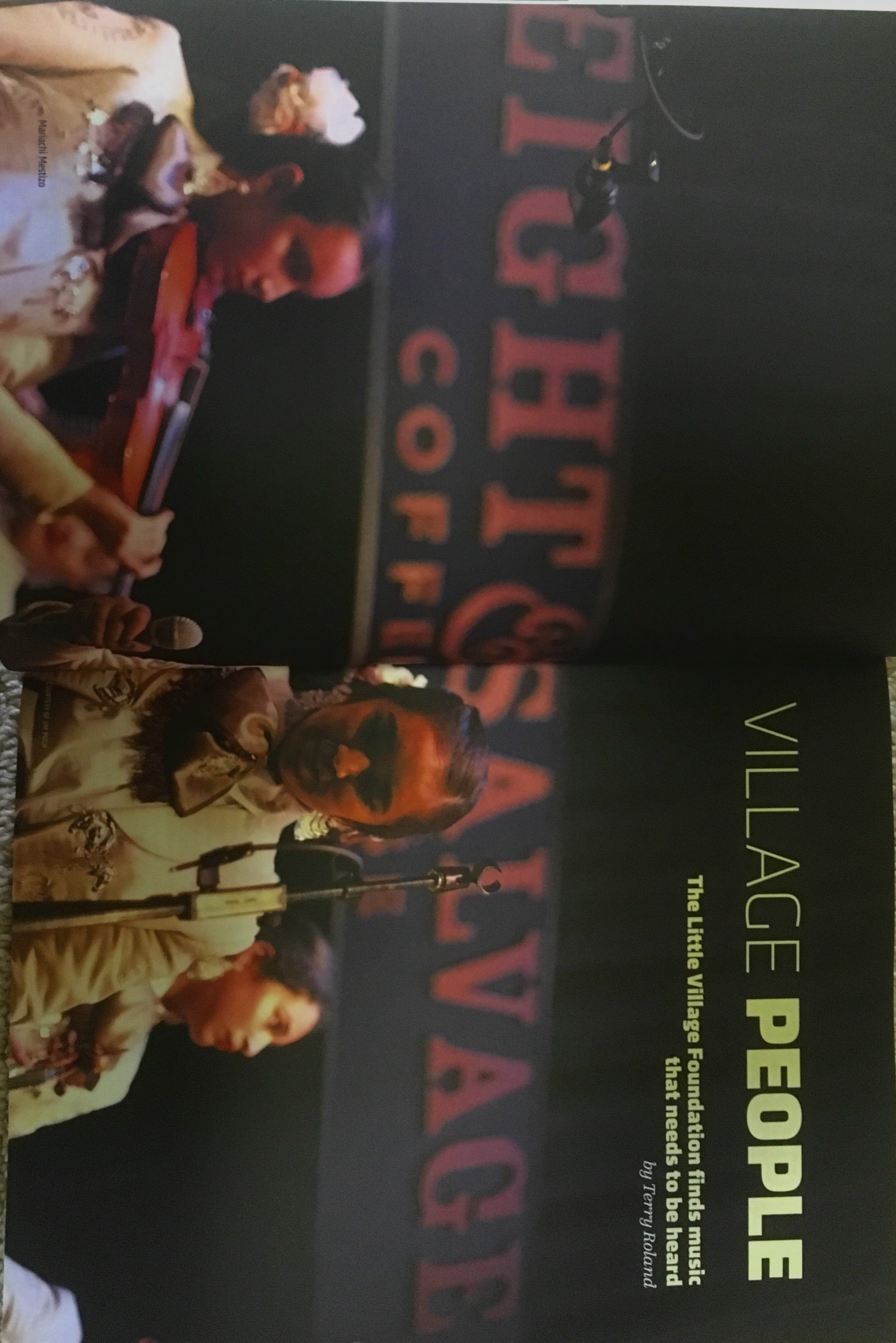
OLD POLITICAL MACHINERY

"ALL THINGS ARE
TRANSIENT, FLEETING,
AND DESTINED TO PASS
AWAY" ----- "BUDDHA".

VILLAGE PEOPLE

**The Little Village Foundation finds music
that needs to be heard**

by Terry Roland





Airene Espiritu

IN THE SUMMER OF 1968, WHEN I was 13, I witnessed a life-changing performance by James Cotton Blues Band at a rock festival in Southern California. Cotton played the blues harmonica like Jimi Hendrix played guitar. I wanted to be James Cotton. I wanted to play the way he did, like I could call down the thunder with that little instrument. I practiced on a cheap harmonica while I was on a three-day road trip to West Texas. At a family reunion in the Panhandle one evening, an unassuming grandma stepped up to me, saw me struggling, and asked, "Can I see that harmonica?" As she began to play, something magical happened. She recreated the sound of a high, lonesome railroad train whistle followed by the chug of the engine. She broke into the most beautiful country song I'd ever heard. I was spellbound. In that spine-tingling moment, I gave up on the harmonica. But I never forgot that Texas grandmother and the music that came out of her.

That was the summer I discovered you didn't have to be a star on a concert stage to play great music.

More recently, I've learned that the greatest musicians and songwriters may live right across the street. That's also the view of veteran blues keyboardist and founder of Little Village Foundation Jim Pugh, who told me that great talent is too often hidden in our towns and cities, far from the spotlight so often reserved for only the most famous names. It is the mission of his Little Village Foundation to find this talent that lives outside our view and shed a little light on it.

In his 40-year career, Pugh has played and recorded with Robert Cray, Van Morrison, and Etta James, and he founded the Little Village Foundation in 2014 with the desire to help artists who would otherwise be overlooked by the industry. Pugh sought out musicians who reflected their communities and brought a sense of cultural identity to their music. But he couldn't predict how the foundation would help the individual artist's spirit.

"I was finished with the road," he says. "I'd traveled all over the world. It sounds glamorous, but it's not something you look forward to at 60. So, I looked at the things I always loved the most, which was music and helping people."

In some cases, helping these artists has been like an act of redemption, resurrecting talents and careers that had fallen by the wayside. Pugh makes sure that each artist Little Village works with doesn't pay a penny to get their record made. The albums themselves are professionally produced by Pugh and his friend Kid Andersen, who also provide their considerable instrumental skills on keyboards, guitar, sitar, and percussion. The artists receive a monetary stipend along with 1,000 copies of their CD to market however they choose. The artists are linked up to social media and online streaming services.

Little Village's first wave of releases came in 2015. The artists included talent as diverse as Dave Ellis, a singing cowboy from Central California, and Wee Willie Walker, a veteran bluesman who was resurrected out of obscurity with his album, *If Nothing Ever Changes*.

This year's schedule includes the youthful Mariachi Mestizo, singer-songwriter Aireene Espiritu, bluesman John Blues Boyd, and Indian-American solo artist Aki Kumar.

Little Village artists are a diverse group who are all driven to have their music heard and embraced as they invite us to their own utterly unique world. Rather than seeking celebrity, they celebrate the music.

Growing a Little Village

Pugh describes the genesis of Little Village as an outcropping of his worldview. "Little Village represents the way I've lived since I was a teenager," he says. "It combines everything I love: music, diversity, and helping people. My real talent isn't in musical virtuosity, but in being able to feel and reflect the emotional commonality between different kinds of music."

This intuitive lean toward finding the connections across genre lines is the essence of the diverse roster of artists signed to Little Village Foundation. Each is compelling, each has a strong reason for making their album, and each is woven into the tapestry of today's American music. They stand for the America we all know is there beneath the loud rantings that dominate our political discourse these days.

For Pugh, this project has become a

proactive, positive way to surmount the anger that has been gaining so much traction during a divisive election season. "You know, [we all] may not agree on the immigration issue today," he says, "but it's hard not to smile and feel goodwill when you hear the music of artists like Mariachi Mestizo."

The stories behind the discovery of the artists also explain a great deal about the foundation and its leader. "I just wander around, talk to people, run into musical situations that mean something to me," Pugh says. He discovered Mariachi Mestizo while driving through the group's hometown of Delano, California, just north of Bakersfield.

He was looking for an all-female mariachi band to provide an alternative to the machismo found in Western culture, and someone pointed him toward Mestizo — a band comprised of 12 high school girls and three boys. They were playing in a park for a community event. "Something in the emotion behind their music really jumped out at me," he recalls.

Indeed, the history of California's music culture extends back to early 19th century, when the Golden State was still part of Mexico. Thus, mariachi music is not an import; it is as American as it is Mexican. It never actually left its homeland.

The unique blend these young musicians have created, with the leadership of mariachi master Juan Morales and the Mariachi Studio in Delano, carries the influence of early Mexico's Mestizo subculture, which began during the Spanish conquest in the early 17th century. Originally, Mestizos were Mexican-born people with origins in Europe and other integrated cultural and racial backgrounds. So, this band of youth well represents today's Californian-Mexican experience and connection through music.

With their debut album, *Te Doy La Libertad*, Mariachi Mestizo have recorded songs steeped in the traditions of Mexico, with the emotion of the finest romantic ballad singers. The quality of their voices and the emotion behind them transcend culture and language and leaves the listener waiting for more from these young musicians.

The sound of this album is sweetened by Pugh's ingenious idea to record it live

in the main room of Capitol Records, where Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole made their classic, sonically warm music. According to Morales, "Jim really liked what we were doing. He fell in love with the story and he said he wanted to go a step further and take us to Hollywood to record at Capitol. That was a shock for us. For the kids, it was like a dream." The session took four hours. It was mixed down into two tracks, resulting in a vibrant, accessible album full of passion, humor, laughter, and tears — all inherent in the mariachi tradition. At times, the young singers break down into tears as they perform passionate songs of innocent love. Their work transcends their own culture, into something more universal.

The Stories of Places

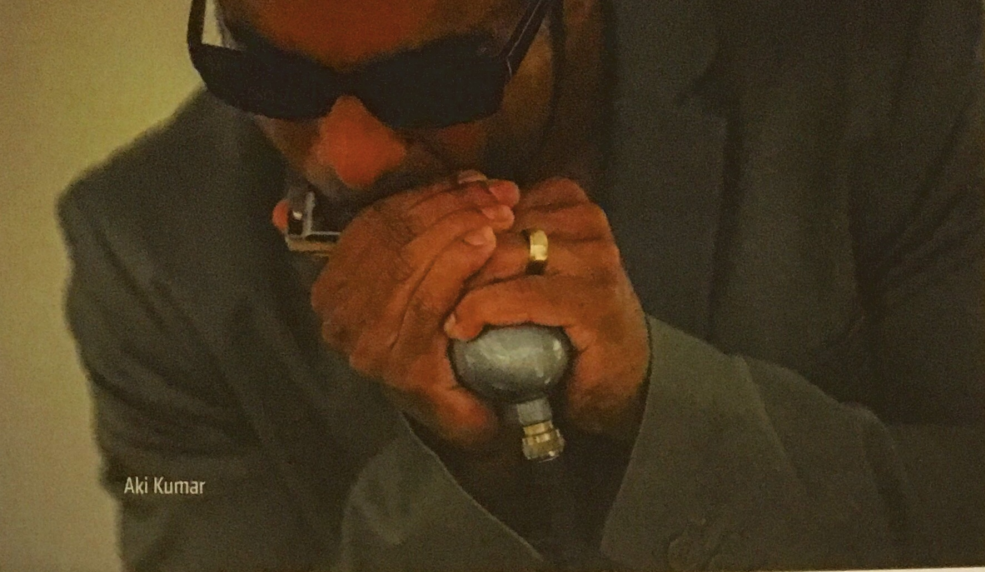
While Mariachi Mestizo draws from music that has been familiar to California for many years, singer-songwriter Aireene Espiritu's cultural and musical pilgrimage has come from distant lands.

Born in the Philippines, Espiritu came to the United States when she was 10 years old. She grew up in three cultures: the old country, the new country, and the marriage of both worlds. This is also an apt description of the music found on her Little Village Foundation release, *Going Back Where I Belong*. It feels like a kind of homecoming.

Espiritu grew up in Northern California's Bay Area. During childhood, her family custom included weekend afternoons with music by her uncles on ukulele and guitars. Her orientation was always toward the stringed instruments of those early days. But what led her to pursue music as a career fell at her feet.

It was on a fateful afternoon spent browsing in a bookstore that Alan Lomax's book, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, literally fell off of the shelf. She began to explore the influence of Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Bessie Smith. Then, she began writing her own songs.

With her own unique twist, Espiritu presents an irresistible and inspired sound that is as soulful as it is engaging. She combines the writing skill of John Prine with the vocal talent of Etta James. The result reveals a powerful new talent.



Aki Kumar

She has recorded two albums of original material with the help of a family of skillful musicians in L.A. and San Francisco.

Pugh discovered her in a way similar to how he found Mariachi Mestizo. “I was at a Folk Alliance in California,” he remembers. “There were so many artists there who were being promoted and given so much attention. I saw Aireene, this tiny girl with this ukulele and this great voice, holding a capacity crowd in this small corner of the conference. It seemed to me she needed to be heard.”

It took some time to find just the right project for her. Her second album, *Put Back Charlie*, was critically successful and allowed her a fine calling card to book shows as she made her way into the international house concert circuit. But Pugh wanted something special for an artist with such a distinctive vocal talent.

The right project came from Oakland, California, where 80-year-old R&B singer Sugar Pie DeSanto lives. DeSanto was born to a black mother and a Filipino father. She grew up to be a great singer and entertainer. R&B great Johnny Otis, of “Willie and the Hand Jive” fame, added her to his road show revue in 1955. She also toured with James Brown in 1959. She scored a top five hit on *Billboard*’s R&B charts with “I Want to Know,” resulting in a contract with Chicago’s Chess Records in 1962. It was at Chess where she recorded probably her most famous song, “Soulful Dress.” In 1965 she recorded a duet, “Do I Make Myself Clear,” with Etta James.

DeSanto’s recordings, which are rare and few, reveal her to be a bridge between the sweet blues vocals style of Etta James

and the pop-friendly rock sound of Tina Turner.

However, it was in live performance where DeSanto carved out her legend. She was known for a dynamic stage presence. Her performances, preserved on YouTube, suggest a singer who is as comfortable in a roadhouse as she is on a big-city concert stage. At a time when sexual suggestion was taboo, DeSanto could boldly pack the lyrics to songs like “Rock Me, Baby” with innuendo as she strutted about the stage in full rapport with the band, like an early version of Mick Jagger. Even in her 80s, in a recent performance, she danced with attitude and jumped into the arms of one of the musicians as she sang the classic “In the Basement.”

Today, DeSanto is the feminine counterpart to Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters. In fact, she is wilder than both, making those blues giants look tame on stage. The union between Espiritu and DeSanto was a natural fit. However, there was some question of how Espiritu’s blues approach would mesh with DeSanto’s more electrified style. The answer: phenomenally well. Espiritu’s Little Village album, *Back Where I Belong*, based on the music of Sugar Pie DeSanto, encompasses a journey from Espiritu’s homeland through the heartland blues to that big-city blues sound championed by DeSanto.

“I had heard Sugar Pie years before, but it never crossed my mind to sing her stuff. It was Jim’s idea, out of the blue. I said, ‘Why not?’ We found some songs that stood out. I didn’t just want to do her popular songs.”

The songs on *Back Where I Belong* are

filled with the life of Espiritu’s spirit, and they come channeling through the power of her voice. She captures gospel and folk-blues and ultimately lands in the arms of songs that sound as though they could have been recorded at Stax in Memphis in the early 1960s. There are also some of the Filipino folk songs that Espiritu learned from her uncles when she was a child. For those, Pugh encouraged her to get her uncles into the studio.

“It all happened organically,” she says. “Initially, it was a tribute to Sugar Pie. We were sitting around and I started playing ukulele at breaks and I said, ‘Here’s the Filipino folk songs I learned from my uncles.’ Jim said, ‘Why don’t we record your uncles!’ They had only ever played in our living room.”

Early in July, at a release party for the album at Freight & Salvage in Berkeley, California, Espiritu had a rare opportunity to meet and perform for DeSanto. “I was so scared,” Espiritu says. “I was waiting for her to yell at me, but she was so gracious afterwards. She thanked me for keeping her music alive.”

Healing Power

John Blues Boyd is a testament to the redeeming power of music and to creativity that can find its birth at any time in life — no matter one’s age, occupation, or circumstance. The 71-year-old began working the Delta lowland cotton fields of Mississippi when he was seven years old. He was always interested in music, but focused his work on hard labor for the next 60 years, then retired from his job as a hot tar roofer in 2007 to care for his ailing wife. When she passed away in 2014, Boyd lost his way in grief.

“The blues really saw me through when my Dona died,” he says. “It was hard, you know. We had been married 49 years. ... I took care of her for 10 years when she had been so sick. When she died I thought I’d be alone. But Jim and Kid showed up with friends and we had a blues show. It was beautiful. I didn’t know I had so many friends.”

What could have dealt a mortal blow to Boyd’s spirit was turned around through musical alchemy as he returned to songwriting — one of his greatest passions when he was a young man. He

“Alan Lomax was an academic, an archivist. What I do is more about the heart. It’s for the human connection and love of people and their music.”

Jim Pugh

began writing songs to console himself. They seemed to just flow out of him. At one point, he wrote eight songs in one day. Music brought life back to him and it brought him back to life.

When Pugh signed Boyd to Little Village, his lifelong dream was realized. The album of original blues songs that he unleashed, *The Real Deal*, is a revelation of up-front, full-bodied, bold, dynamic blues. It’s fully charged, electrified. Some songs stomp and jump, while others lean on a tilting kind of R&B. There are clear influences here, including Big Joe Turner, Junior Parker, B.B. King, and Ray Charles. What is most remarkable is that these are original songs that sound as though they could have been written and recorded during the Chess Records creative peak years. They’re realized fully, with big horn arrangements, raging electric blues guitar, a full brass section, percussion, and Pugh’s soulful and skillful organ.

But, its Boyd’s story — his late-in-life debut after the loss of his wife and years of hard labor — that drives home the lesson that music connects us to each other in a way that is vital and life-giving. Boyd would have gone unnoticed were it not for Pugh and Little Village Foundation. This is a clear example of the redeeming and healing power of music. In today’s ever-changing world of music trends, this album and artist might otherwise never have seen the light of day.

Bollywood and the Blues

If the other three artists from this year’s Little Village roster share a sense of purity in their pursuit of genres rooted deeply within American music ethos, then Aki Kumar and his album, *Aki Goes to Bollywood*, is the most diverse and fusion-based work of them all. A longtime student of the blues harmonica, Kumar was born in India. In America, he has been a dedicated student of blues harmonica great David

Barrett. But when Pugh first met Kumar 10 years ago, he remembers him playing in the style of Little Walter.

Kumar’s music is unexpected. Americans are not used to hearing a sitar play blues licks. But *Aki Goes to Bollywood* is inventive and unafraid to take risks. It has to be heard to be believed. It is an album of traditional Indian songs, reshuffled and arranged into a contemporary blues musician’s dreamland. The music carries a mix of international flavors, bringing together elements that may have otherwise seemed too diverse to blend, though nobody told Kumar that.

At the center of it all, his musical soul rages. He pushes boundaries, transcends the traditional Indian elements with jazz and rock and roll textures, and sings out these pop and traditional Indian songs in both English and Hindi.

Kumar’s approach will prove jarring to the world of blues and Indian music purists. It may not satisfy traditionalists from either culture, but as the ever-broadening and re-defining world of American roots music goes, *Aki Goes to Bollywood* is an unassuming fit. The song “Back to Bombay,” for example, reinvents “Rolling and Tumbling” into a country-blues jam with a sitar and roaring harmonica as the lead instruments.

“Back to Bombay’ is a strange thing,” says 36-year-old Kumar. “[It comes from] this immigrant thing — you feel this longing to touch these certain things you miss about home, to find the things you don’t find here in the US. You are always in two worlds.”

Aki Goes to Bollywood is the kind of uncompromising work that makes legends and helps to create new genres of music. It is reminiscent of early Los Lobos in the way it is able to waltz across musical and cultural boundaries while retaining a solid blues-rock edge. For Kumar, the release transcends even his wildest dreams. “This concept had been in my head a lot, but Jim and Kid

Andersen pushed me to get it done,” he says. “Without people like that bringing this to reality, it never would have happened. I am so grateful that I met these guys.”

About the Heart

If the Little Village artists sound too diverse, musically, to be in the same room — or the same genre — listen a little closer. Pugh finds the magic and the commonality in the emotional charge behind each artist.

When asked if he feels like a modern-day Alan Lomax, he replies, “This really is something I need to address. Alan Lomax was an academic, an archivist. What I do is more about the heart. It’s for the human connection and love of people and their music.”

With that in mind, it’s not a stretch to say that there is a distinctly American flavor to Pugh’s and Little Village Foundation’s work. All of the albums he’s released are based deep in the roots of each artist’s unique world. Some sing in their native tongue with a strong nod to their native culture. But, make no mistake, this is the music of America’s true heartland — the one that is not divided by politics or pop culture preferences, but that lives around the corner and smiles a good-morning greeting when passing by.

“With racism coming back to the surface [lately],” says Aireene Espiritu, “These artists are heard [in] places not exposed to diversity. I just want to turn down the lights, play in the dark, have people be touched by performances and have them see [that] you don’t have to judge by looks; feel ... how it touches you.”

This is American roots music in the truest sense — we have, after all, always been a nation of immigrants; a place where millions have come from around the world for generations to see their dreams come true.

And they have always brought their music and culture with them. ■