

A Conversation with Kim Simmonds



Savoy Brown
Kim Simmonds

One of the founding fathers of British Blues, **Kim Simmonds** is a true pioneer whose contributions to the evolution of Blues-Rock, as the founder and driving force behind Savoy Brown, are as critical to rock history as fellow UK luminaries like Clapton, Page, Beck and Green. As an exclusive member in this elite group of British guitarists, Simmonds' influence was critical in molding the Rock and Roll landscape of the late sixties and seventies.

Kim Simmonds takes us through his formative years and cites his influences and also explains the joys and pains of musical creation and live performances.

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I want to go back a little to your first introduction to music and the guitar. Tell us about getting your first guitar and some of the music you were listening to.

I started plucking around at thirteen. I actually saw one of those little adverts in the daily newspaper in London that said, "Acoustic guitar, make friends" or something, they probably still run it. So, I sent away for this guitar, I must have saved up my paper route money, which was quite a step forward because my family just weren't that way inclined. Lo and behold, it arrived and I was sort of embarrassed really, it seemed like a silly thing to do, you know, like writing poetry when you're a kid or something. So, I took the guitar, went upstairs, and of course my parents must of known what was going on all along, but you think that you're hiding something. I opened up the brown cardboard box expecting to see some kind of guitar, but all I saw was pieces. The catch with it, with this cheap guitar, was that it was going to arrive in pieces and you have to assemble it! So, I haven't got a clue but somehow or other I assembled the guitar. I was big into Chuck Berry, he seemed pretty simple to do, so I learned what I thought were Chuck Berry licks, but probably weren't anything close to Chuck Berry. I actually appeared not so long after in the living room and of course I played this and people were amazed, they looked at me and said, "Wow!" And it amazed me that they were amazed, I suppose people were easily impressed! Then I started taking it to school and people were impressed with this playing and to me it was like not doing anything. I suppose I got quick confidence.

Your style is so unique. The influence and feel of the Blues masters like Lightnin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters and BB King was combined with the improv of Jazz guitarists like Grant Green and Kenny Burrell. Were these the musicians who gave you your foundation and did you work on trying to incorporate both styles?

Yeah, very much so. I've always loved Jazz but I connected with the Blues. That's always been a mystery really, but I have a deep feeling for the music and I just loved certain musicians. People like Earl Hooker and Grant Green. But when it came to the Jazz aspect, which I love, again I loved the more Bluesy aspects of Jazz. I wasn't too keen on the technical side of the Jazz thing, I always liked the simplicity of Blues. I loved the dedication of Jazz musicians, I love what it takes to be a Jazz musician. When I listen to Jazz, I always listen to The Bluenotes stuff, that seemed to be heavily Blues influenced. I could tell immediately, and still can, a Jazz musician even though he's not playing Jazz, if he comes from the Blues. So, those were the Jazz musicians I particularly liked. I wanted to develop my guitar playing so it was very important to me that I only listened to the best because I wanted to be the best. I wasn't interested in average musicians, so for me it was people like Earl Hooker and Hubert Sumlin, and obviously the BB Kings of the world. When it came to Jazz, Grant Green was the obvious one. I was putting a tape together for the band and I was listening to my own guitar playing, which I don't often do, only on those occasions when I'm making up tapes for band members to look at, and on the "Street

Corner Talking" album there are the Grant Green riffs, some that I've forgotten to play. I'll think "Wow, that's a pretty good lick" and it's a Grant green lick. So, it was a wonderful time to be a musician in the sixties because I was a product of that generation. I was very lucky to have the people to play me music and to educate me in music. Probably nothing to do with myself but to the people around me, guys that weren't musicians, but guys with a great love for the music, great understanding, great taste for music that actually put that in me. I think I'm a product of that really. I'm a product of being very lucky to have people around me that played me all of The Bluenotes stuff and said, "Listen to this, this is great." People who were very excited about music, people who it was *food* for them. So, I was a big fan of Grant Green, and all The Bluenotes stuff really. Luckily again, I was growing up in that London period where I could go and see Georgie Fame play when I was a kid, I could see guys that were actually *doing* that stuff in the clubs. I could go to Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club or my local church hall and see The Downliners Sect or some R&B group. I saw all the Howlin Wolfs and Jimmy Reeds that toured even before I was playing. Mose Allison is another great. So, I wasn't in a vacuum, but I probably was certainly one of the only Blues players in England at the time, thinking about it now, that actually incorporated that Jazz into their playing and I still do. Someone was talking to me the other day about the "Looking In" record (Savoy Brown's fifth album, 1970). I was saying what a good Rock record it was, and he said, "Well, don't forget that there is a ton of Jazz on that record." So, I went back to listen to it, again with the new group in mind, and sure enough there's a lot of Jazz in that record. I always considered that like a four piece Rock record, but it's not.

The early Savoy Brown is perhaps one of the most true-to-the Blues UK bands to come from that time frame, the mid to late sixties. Is that what you wanted to achieve with that first incarnation of Savoy Brown, a genuine, no-frills Blues band?

Looking back I think it was supposed to be a replica of The Muddy Waters Blues Band which was in Chicago at the time. The Muddy Waters Band was the cutting edge group. I mentioned Earl Hooker earlier, Hooker played on those great records, "You Shook Me" and stuff like that. I tend to think myself that it was Earl Hooker that really influenced Muddy Waters because after that "You Shook Me" record I tended to see Muddy playing those kind of licks. I don't think he played them before Earl Hooker. In fact, there was a great record released in England that influenced everybody and it had "You Shook Me" on there. Not only was it such a big influence, I mean Zeppelin did "You Shook Me" on their first record and later on AC/DC did a song called "You Shook Me All Night Long" which was obviously influenced by that song. So, it was a fantastically influential song. There are certain songs that really turned the tide in music for Rock and Roll, and there's one of them. You have all the ingredients; you have a Willie Dixon song, one of the greatest songwriters that's influenced Blues and Blues-Rock; you had a fantastic guitar player, Earl Hooker, doing the lead and you had Muddy Waters singing! This record had all the ingredients that *any* of us would want. If you were a guitar player it was like, "Oh, man that's good stuff! The guy's playing it like a violin." If you're a singer, "Oh, listen to this voice!" If you're a songwriter it was like, "Oh, straight to the point."

That leads to my next question. What records would you say were critical to you falling in love with the Blues and pursuing music. The records that made you say, 'I want to learn how to do that, this really moves me'. "You Shook Me" sounds like one of them.

That one definitely. There was "Groaning in the Blues" by Otis Rush, an old Cobra record and it's astounding. It starts off with a guitar lick and it's just astounding that you would make a record like that. All of a sudden there's this fantastic guitar lick that starts off and then stops. Just exceptional. The whole thing that got me going was "You Shook Me" by Muddy Waters. That incorporated everything. There was the Blues band, there was the great guitar, there was the singer. As soon as I heard Earl Hooker I knew that was the future of guitar. And I knew I wanted to be a part of the future. I want to be *there*. That's exactly what I thought. You had the Les Pauls of the world, and all these people, but from my ears, it was not that warm, singing sound that made you say, "Wow, this is what I've got to play. This is it." Obviously, a lot of people felt the same way! You cannot hide what you are, and luckily, as I say, when I was in my formative years I started playing music that was right and it always comes out in your music. I was very lucky to have those people around me that said, "This is the real stuff".



It was almost thirty years until the release of your first solo album. Was it simply a matter of it being the right time or did something in particular spur you on?

When I started with the band I wanted the best I possibly could get because the music I was listening to, I only listened *to* the best. I think as a young guy I quickly differentiated between the best, within Blues I'm talking about now, or R&B or different things I was listening to and even Rock and Roll. You could easily differentiate between what was the best, what was good, and what was just really mediocre. I didn't want to be mediocre. I wanted to be the best and I didn't have time. I wanted to do it right there and then, I wanted to be the best. Therefore, I just didn't have the time to develop my voice. I think over the years, I've had all the experience to where I can say, "You know, I haven't got a bad voice at all." It could be the climate is different as well. I've got more experience and I'm a different person than I was when I was a teenager, when it was like, "Yeah, I'm not going to do this unless I'm the best." Now, it's more, "I am Kim Simmonds

and I'm just going to express myself."

Explain your creative process and what you think is essential to writing a great song.

It's changed over the years. I used to think that a great song was a great guitar riff. Nowadays, I feel firmly committed to the fact that you *have* to have a good lyric. It's finally getting through to me that a good song tells a story. It's so obvious yet it never hurts to be reminded of that fact. It applies to all music but anything I say might really be applied to Blues and roots Rock, my area. You have to express your feelings within a storyline because it's the storyline that *really* will catch people. I'm certainly way down the pecking list in terms of accomplishing that. That's where I'm coming from. I'm coming from a good lyric, I'm coming from telling a story. I just do everything by feeling and it's not much craft to it and after a while it's, "How did I do that?" That has always been a problem with me, right from playing guitar to writing, I go on emotion. Sometimes I get it right, sometimes I get it wrong. But, the older I get I'm beginning to figure out, in fact, I think I probably *have* figured out how to do it. How to let the craft take over at times.

How does your creative process differ when writing solo material as opposed to writing for Savoy Brown? Or is it basically the same sort of process.

Well, I thought it would be different. Doing the solo records I thought, this is going to be a piece of cake. I'm not going to have to rehearse a band or worry about whether the singer can sing it. I'm not going to have to worry about whether the drummer can play it. I don't have to worry about anything. It's going to be me, how simple this is going to be. Well, surprise, surprise, it was harder. Absolutely harder. The same thing applies when you've got a ten-piece band or whether you're alone doing it. In fact, it's probably harder because you still have to have a good song, which you have to sweat over probably even more. You still have to rehearse. Instead of finding the song for your singer, you have to find a song to fit *your* voice. All of a sudden you realize, I can sing *certain* things and that the singers you had in the band could only sing *certain* things. You just automatically assume they could only sing *certain* things, so you *wrote* the *certain* things, but you did it all in a natural fashion. When you come to do it yourself, you start trying all sorts of oddball things before you realize the fact that, "Hey, you're limited! Oh, my God. Now I have to work within that limitation." So, the whole process was exactly the same as with the band. There were no short cuts. Just because it's yourself it became even harder.

Performing live has always been a great love for you hasn't it?

For me it's a blast. I love it. I always say, the analogy is, when you perform you have to drop your pants. Show everything. A lot of people don't want to do that and I think we all want to see, and respond to, performers that are naked on the stage. It's a very scary thing to do. It's something I couldn't do. When I started playing I *literally* would be hiding behind an amplifier on stage. *Literally* would be hiding behind the amp. My manager would say, "Look Kim, at some point you've got to step out from behind your amplifier!" and I was like, "Oh, right. I suppose so!"



To what do you attribute the staying power of Savoy Brown's music and the ferocious loyalty of your fan base.

I think it's because the band never had any major hits. People are surprised when they hear that. Sometimes it surprises me too, that when I look back, we had only one Top 40 record and that was "Hellbound Train". All the others were simply not big selling records. I think the music struck a chord. People write in to the web site all the time and say how much they prefer the Savoy Brown records from that time period to other, more household names. Interesting that peoples' tastes should be so varied, but the point being that the music had a big influence on musicians, had a big influence on people, yet were not massive record sellers. Perhaps there's the cult thing involved. I'm certainly that way as well, I think it's interesting to feel you've discovered something. To tell the truth, that's the kind of person I want to be. When I started off, *this* is the kind of musician I wanted to be. I wanted to be a musician that people *discovered*, as *I* discovered musicians. The musicians I still admire, who I still cry when I hear them play guitar, are not household names. That was my dream, and I think that's tended me to lead a similar life, as a person and professionally.

You and your brother Harry opened up a Blues club in London where Savoy Brown was the house band. Tell us how this came about and a little about playing there. You mentioned earlier about hiding behind the amplifiers in the early days. Were you doing this at the club?

I think it was when I first came to America that I was hiding. I look at the early photos and I'm standing out there smiling and playing, a jolly little guy. When I came to the States it was like, "Oh my God. This is scary. These people really want me to play guitar!" So that's when I was hiding. That had its drawbacks though because I realized that I *thought* I could play guitar until I came to the States. Actually, Canada was the very first dates we did in North America, and the same thing applied. These people are very demanding people! I've got to do something here! That was one of the problems. I was hitting Scotch very heavily because to get that *feeling*, to *give* crowds what you *had* to give, what they *demand*ed, you just *had* to get out there and really *play* and the only way I could really get that going was to sort of knock back the Scotch before the show. That *really* had its repercussions fifteen years later. But at the time it was the only way I could find such courage to get up there and face however many people it was. Actually, it was thousands of people at these shows.

You were still so young at this time. You were all of nineteen or twenty years old, weren't you?

Yeah. Very, very young. My school friends say that we were all much more mature than our kids, we've all got kids in their twenties. I don't say this but my friends say how much more ready for the world we were at sixteen. But, I look back and see a very, very immature person. I recall playing the Philadelphia Spectrum at the time, I think Sly Stone was headlining, Dr. John, and we were on the bill. The Philadelphia Spectrum holds 16,000 people and it was a revolving stage. So, here am I, scotched out of my head, on a revolving stage. I really had to give myself a strong talk. I was playing away, it's probably akin to working in a ditch, you're really shoveling up there, working, sweating, just trying to get the point across. I'd look up and there'd be a set of faces, and I'm playing, then I'd look up a couple of minutes later and of course there's a completely different set of faces because the stage is revolving! I'd never been in this situation before and I remember saying to myself, "Don't lose it now!" Then I came off stage in a completely flabbergasted state and there were people even worse than me! When I looked at Sly this guy was on cloud nine! I can't understand how any of us ever played. The whole experience, and of course it goes for today, is very, very unnerving.

Are there any Savoy Brown albums that you feel *really* capture the essence of what you feel the band is all about or perhaps the albums that you feel are essential listening for anyone wanting to discover Savoy Brown.

There's a ton really. If I had to impress people, I think that "Raw Sienna" is a cool record. "Street Corner Talking" is a cool record. I think a record like "Getting To The Point", which was the second record, is a very, very strong Blues record. I heard that John Lee Hooker had it in his car playing it. I think if you hear "Raw Sienna" or "Street Corner Talking", Chris Youlden's songwriting is really focused on "Raw Sienna" and that is the focus of the record, his songwriting. The band had really moved forward at that point and certainly with "Street Corner Talking", which is my songwriting focus. There was still a heavy Blues influence but I think that both those records appealed to a completely new audience that wanted that sincerity in the music but didn't want to necessarily listen to Robert Johnson or some of the old guys that they couldn't relate to. All the singles and the first two albums were very, very strong Blues records. I like people to discover those early Blues things because they put things in perspective. If you joined the band in the seventies perhaps it's hard to be reminded of where the band started. It would be like Fleetwood Mac if you joined after Peter Green. With Savoy it wasn't that dramatic a departure but it developed nonetheless. I don't think you can really understand anybody unless you listen to their early stuff. I find it weird to find myself in that position. When I started playing music I listened to Elvis Presley's early work and it was fantastic and it put into perspective what he had become. Same with Louis Armstrong. I'm a huge Louis Armstrong fan and I loved his early records, but of course, how was that compatible with "Hello, Dolly"? I think it's the same with Savoy Brown. It's very easy to miss the point if you don't do your homework and unfortunately too many people don't do their homework. I don't think there are enough good critics out there. I don't think there are enough good people that are pointing people in the right direction musically. I don't see people doing their homework and that's what music is all about really, investigating the past and putting it in perspective. I'm certainly not putting myself up there with Presley or Armstrong, I'm not even talking about myself, it goes for everybody. Look at The Steve Miller Band for instance, if you're not aware of The Steve Miller Band's early days perhaps you couldn't put his career in perspective. I certainly couldn't. I recall seeing Steve in the sixties, as a matter of fact I saw the very first band that came and jammed with me in England. They were an *incredible* band. You always keep that perspective in mind on an artist and I think that's the fun. Of course, not everyone can get that involved in music. Most people listen to it for fun and don't take it as seriously as others.

How do you go about recording your guitar solos? Do you have an idea or basic structure put together before actually recording it or do you go in there and try different things and improvise?

It depends on the song. When I was younger, I did it all purely with that little sort of craft to it. We'd record a song, I'd maybe dub over the solo, if I was going to dub the solo over, or even if I was recording live, it was like, "Hold on. This is not fitting. This is not the kind of song for a blasting solo." So, I'd search around for the right *sound*, for the right *tone*, really to compliment the vocalist. That's what I've always done is play against the vocalist. So, if the vocalist sings a *quiet* line then I'll sing *quietly* to answer that. If he

sings a *ferocious* line I'll be *ferocious* against that. I was simply echoing what the vocalist was doing. That's one of the main things that Blues is all about is guitar-vocal interplay. Really, the guitar was a singing device along with the vocal. I didn't intellectualize it like that at all but that's what I was doing. It was simply finding a mood to suit the song, to suit the vocal. My big suit as a musician has been my emotional content. That's been my strongest suit, I think, being able to bring out my feelings through the instrument, as opposed to all the other aspects of guitar playing, you know, being able to *swing*, all these aspects of the technical side of it. I was never very strong on the technical side. I think more than anything I was interested in getting my emotions out through the instrument. When I listen to the old records, which I occasionally do if I'm preparing to go on tour, I'm amazed at how I really played the *music* and not the guitar. To me, I'm not playing that much impressive stuff. I think what probably appeals to people is I'm playing in context. It surprises me how little I'm doing!

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