

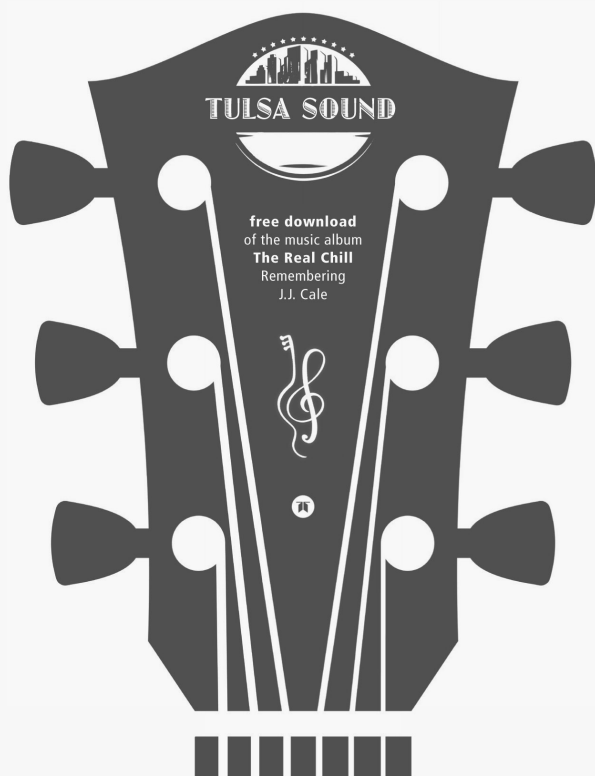




Richard Koechli

# J.J. CALE

**REMEMBERING HIS UNIQUE  
LAIDBACK MUSIC**



**Analysis of  
a Life's Work**

# Imprint

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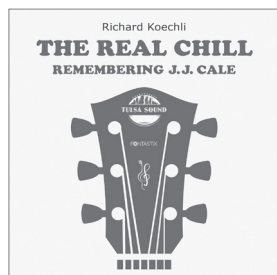
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The link for a free mp3 download of the album can be found at this internet address:

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# Preface

John Weldon Cale (December 5, 1938 - July 26, 2013), known as J.J. Cale. With his serene mix of blues, rockabilly, country and jazz, he made an invaluable contribution to music history. His records enjoy cult status, his songs have been covered by famous colleagues such as Eric Clapton, his guitar style was a great inspiration for Mark Knopfler, his aesthetics of quiet singing remain unrivaled, his laconic lyrics are impressionistic works of art, his recordings milestones in the history of recording studios. Everything has been achieved - and yet hardly anyone outside the fan zone seems to know him. Cale was not made for the big hype. The lone wolf spent half his life working to remain unrecognized; for a long time, especially here in Europe, hardly anyone knew the face behind this ominous songwriter because he refused to be depicted on his albums on principle. His concern was music, nothing but music. His own person seemed unimportant to him; he wanted to have his peace. Not that he was cool or dismissive, quite the opposite. John was naturally modest, humorous and self-deprecating. He knew what he was capable of, looked for his chance, but never took off, never got too close to the sun. Success, yes, but only just enough to be able to live and work in a relaxed manner. He wanted to be ordinary.

Nothing is more inspiring than writing about ordinary people. And then there's this music - a never-ending source of joy! His laid-back sound is groundbreaking, timeless; his role in music history is 'criminally' underestimated. Cale's famous students have all long been in the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame, the Blues Hall of Fame or in any list of the best guitarists of all time - he himself has not. At least there is this wonderful documentary film "To Tulsa And Back" by Jörg Bundschuh. Not a substitute for a book though; the two media are too different. My story here is not intended to be a documentary anyway, not a biography in the conventional

sense, and certainly not an authorized one. Only someone from his private circle could write something like that; his widow Christine Lakeland-Cale, for example, or his long-time manager Mike Kappus. We all hope that this will happen soon.

For my book, I have chosen the concept of the fact-based novel. A very personal view of Cale's life's work. The novel form allows for improvisation, embellishment, interpretation; as a blues musician and as an author, I can't exist without that leeway. I think it suits J.J. - when you hear how free he was with his songs on stage, you know he was a player too. So how much of this is fact and how much is fiction? The story with Alvin, the young music journalist, and with Brian, the old man and Cale fan from the very beginning - that is fictitious. Alvin and Brian talk about J.J. Cale's music and the course of his career over the course of a week, and of course I tried to be as precise as possible in my research. The dates, factual content and original locations are based on information that is publicly available. In many cases they are confirmed, but as always there are some question marks and contradictions, even with official information - and that's why you keep hearing Brian and Alvin say "I don't know", "probably", "possibly" or something similar. Another topic is the rumors, the curious myths that surround Cale. Some of them have since been debunked and refuted, others possibly not. Perhaps some are even part of the hide-and-seek game that Cale used to distract attention from his private life. It makes him all the more exciting.

The music is clearly at the center of this book. However, I am also fascinated by the story surrounding it, the music-historical context. No artist in this world becomes great alone; there were a lot of exciting people involved in Cale's career, both famous and less famous. Those who influenced, accompanied or otherwise supported him. Those who inspired him, were inspired by him or were simply around at the same



time. Although not everything is directly linked to J.J. Cale - I am interested in such details. If we understand the history of the style better, we can feel the songs even more deeply and perhaps even discover other artists.

When Alvin and Brian discuss J.J. Cale, they often refer to statements that Cale made in interviews. I would find it rather boring to use them verbatim. That's why I generally refrain from using original quotes and only use the content in spirit. In the dialog, these statements are sometimes spun out in a playful way. In my opinion, constant references to sources would get in the way of liveliness and reading enjoyment - it's like constantly shouting "I heard this lick from Muddy Waters, this one from Elmore James, and this one from Chet Atkins" while improvising. It's not going to work out that way, so I'll take the liberty of thanking the esteemed journalists and media who made it possible for me to acquire the basic knowledge only in the epilogue.

In certain moments, for example when the two of them discuss show business or the philosophy of reduced music, it has nothing directly to do with J.J. Cale, of course. It's either the subjective views of two fans, hypotheses or parts of my own thoughts. Well, if a few private insights from my 35 years of involvement with music find their way into the story here, it does indirectly have something to do with J.J. Cale - because he has accompanied and inspired me all these years.

You can spin it any way you like, the story here has only one purpose: to awaken and deepen interest in J.J. Cale and his unique music. It works best in a double pack - the book in one hand, the audio player in the other. Virtually every song mentioned in the book can be listened to legally on the Internet, and you can get even closer to the secret of his music if you get hold of his albums!

Enjoy this fantastic ride through the history of Laidback music! As a free supplement to the book, you can download

my tribute album *The Real Chill*, Remembering J.J. Cale (released in 2020). If you would like to say thank you, you can support an animal welfare organization, for example - the welfare of animals was J.J. Cale's express and intense wish.

By the way, this book was also published in 2020, but only in music stores, as a supplement (a giant booklet, so to speak) to the aforementioned tribute CD "*The Real Chill*". To ensure that the story reaches as many J.J. Cale fans as possible, it is now also being published in bookshops.

A professional, high-quality English translation of the original German edition would cost me a fortune, I really can't afford it. That's why I translated the book with the help of AI (deepL); not simply by pressing a button, of course, but in an effort to check each translated sentence afterwards and optimize it if necessary. However, my knowledge of English is limited, which is why there may still be a couple of strange sentences here and there and the quality of the German text could not be transposed into English in all nuances (e.g. with regard to humor). I ask for your understanding and hope that the worldwide J.J. Cale fan community will still enjoy the book.

Sincerely:

Richard Koechli

# Chapter 1 - Tim's crazy idea

Alvin drives slowly, takes his time, is overtaken left and right. I hear there are countries that only allow left-handed overtaking. That's an odd idea. It works perfectly here. Best on one of the two middle lanes, there's no stress with stressed out people. Highways are for everyone. Alvin Lindley knows the track, he drives it every day. From Temecula to San Diego to the editorial office, sixty miles. If it's urgent, it can be done in less than an hour. Not today. He's been working for the San Diego Reader for more than ten years. Not a bad job; a newspaper with a good reputation - and with enough budget also for stories about music. Interviews, reviews, concert reviews, announcements of events. A daily hour there and back, that's worth such a job. And the ride is really fun here in this area. A paradise.

Alvin wouldn't want to live anywhere else in the world. Golden State! State beyond measure. Here you will find the diversity and richness of all America; forests, sequoias, mountain peaks, deserts, wild coasts, white sand beaches. And culture without end, entertainment at its best. Three of the most exciting cities in the world; San Francisco, Los Angeles - and San Diego, of course. A city to fall in love with! The pulse of a big city, spiced with Mexican influence. And then you get in the car and in less than an hour you can be a hermit somewhere in seclusion. The climate too - just the way Alvin likes it. Mediterranean, but not too hot. Mild Mediterranean climate; a long, warm and dry summer. It is June, Monday morning. It is the year 2015.

Anything but a normal Monday morning. Alvin's not going to the newsroom. He's on a week's vacation. Vacation is probably not the right word; he will be working - on a completely extraordinary project. But he has set himself the goal of working in a relaxed manner. This week is dedicated

to none other than the master of relaxed music, the king of "laid-back" sound. If it feels like work, it's not laid-back, it's simple. The anticipation is boundless, but there is also nervousness mixed in, because it's pretty uncertain. Maybe deep breathing helps. This chance here never comes back; he has to be relaxed!

Alvin lets himself be overtaken. A pleasure, this Mountain Freeway. "Mountain" is perhaps a bit exaggerated; the passing hills here, left and right, they are not really high - most of them barely six hundred meters above sea level. But they are close by, and will easily outdo you by three hundred metres. That looks like something; but never mighty, because they are not pointy. The four-lane road curves around the hills in a nice and easy way, showing the splendid colours, the Mediterranean mixture of green, brown and red. Up and down it goes. Not abruptly, and yet two hundred meters of altitude difference are already there. As if made for a laid-back ride. There is Pala Mesa in front, probably the deepest point of the track, only a few dozen meters above sea level. "Avocado Highway" is the name of the Interstate 15 section. Because here, on thirty thousand hectares, a large part of the Californian avocados are cultivated, picked and transported away. A business worth billions.

Ten minutes to the exit, he estimates. No, we can't get to San Diego today, not even to Escondido. Alvin's gonna take Exit 41 to visit the strange man. At Valley Center! Valley Center isn't the same as Escondido, it's just nearby. Even the late laid-back master must have lived somewhere in this area. Not in Escondido - the title of this record was cool, but staged. Also the album cover, this photo with the two of them at the roadside. It is not the road to Escondido; the picture was taken at the Paramount Movie Ranch in Los Angeles. In the Santa Monica Mountains then, on a Western property where TV series like "Dr. Quinn - Doctor of Passion" were shot. Was it Clapton's idea?

Alvin thinks back to the story told to him by Ralph, a former colleague from the editorial office. The story about Clapton and Cale. Eric Clapton recorded this famous album with his great idol in the summer of 2005, "J.J. Cale & Eric Clapton, The Road To Escondido". One year later the songs were finally mixed and J.J. Cale took his time as usual. The release was finally scheduled for November 2006. A few months before the release, Clapton came back to the area for a photo session for the album cover. A concentrated series of interviews was organized for Cale and Clapton in a hotel in Los Angeles to get the press hot. Ralph had apparently only been in the editorial office for a few days at the time; just to try it out, still without a permanent job. As always in such cases, they'll snarl you up as an assistant first. He helped out as a cable carrier, lighting technician, and he had the job of keeping things quiet during the interview. And then, when the whole thing was over - the big disappointment! Ralph had his old guitar and a felt-tip pen with him, approached superstar Clapton shyly, wanted to shake his hand and politely ask him to sign the cheap instrument. But his guitar hero had no time; Ralph stood there like petrified. J.J. Cale noticed the situation, approached the young assistant and squeezed his hand with a smile: "No stress, man. Eric doesn't mean it. I think he's tired. The next interview starts in two minutes; it's been going on all day, yesterday it was the same thing."

Ralph complained in his usual dramatic way that a world had collapsed for him back then. Alvin wonders today how much of the story is true. It's not impossible that the good guy put a lot of flourish on it back then. To make himself important? Whatever. Ralph no longer works for the San Diego Reader; his style wasn't very well received on the executive floor. But Alvin liked him. And in the end it was Ralph who made him aware of the master's music. So in a way, it was fateful. Alvin had hardly noticed this J.J. Cale before, and suddenly the inconspicuous songwriter entered his life. And how! He became the center of attention in a

very short time. And not just because of the songs. Of course, Alvin had gotten all his records, could hardly get out of his amazement and enjoyment and knew that he had dug up a musical treasure for himself. But that's not all, not by a long shot. Cale's music was like a miracle - and saved his family. An incredible story.

Alvin has been married to his wife Sandy for thirteen years. In the beginning it was all like a fairy tale. But then they noticed the strange behavior of their only son Tim. When he was four, they diagnosed him with Kanner Syndrome. Tim suffered from infantile autism. Life became difficult, the nerves often lay bare, and the relationship with Sandy ended up more and more on the test bench. Tim could usually only express that he wanted something by screaming and hitting - and nobody but him knew exactly what it was. The boy's speech was very limited, he could hardly communicate and was restless almost all the time. Until this miracle happened. At home they had heard a lot of music from the beginning, sometimes all three of them together. Alvin always had this idea that sounds and melodies could somehow help Tim, too. Sometimes he actually thought he could feel an effect. In everyday life, especially outdoors, there is noise everywhere; autistic people react to it very strongly. Tim always gets dizziness and headaches. When he listened to music, he sometimes became a little quieter - depending on what kind of music it was. It didn't have much of an effect, but it did. Then eight years ago the big breakthrough happened. Alvin put on a record of the treasure he had just dug up: J.J. Cale. He can't even remember which album, but the magic was incredible. Tim seemed transformed, within minutes. You could tell by his features, his posture, his whole being. There was something that he had never seen before. A mixture of serenity, joy and discovery. The little boy, who otherwise avoided almost any eye contact, looked his parents in the eyes, open and with an expression of familiarity. Alvin and

Sandy were crying with joy - and at the same time they were getting scared. It couldn't be right, it was like a spook.

And the haunting did not stop. Tim started talking on the second song. The way he talked was extraordinary. Mostly Tim spoke very little, and when he did, he spoke monotonously, sometimes stuttering, but always with unnatural emphasis. Now he talked completely authentic, relaxed and concentrated. Only a few words, but they hit the heart: "I can see it. Please turn the music up a little louder, so I can see it more clearly." Alvin and Sandy looked at each other questioningly, and the boy kept concentrating. "The sound is real, I can see it, I can walk around in it." Now he closed his eyes. "When my eyes are closed, I can see it even better. I see the sounds, I see colors and shapes. I never told you this - it's always been true, but mostly it's blurred. Now it's sharp, very precise. It's never been so beautiful as this music."

The doctors seemed more or less familiar with the phenomenon, but they were very surprised at the unusual progress Tim was making in a matter of weeks. Of course, the boy was still autistic, often with very difficult moments. But whenever he grabbed the headphones to listen to J.J. Cale's music, this incredible change came. And then it disappeared again, but as time went on, the effect stayed longer. It was as if the effect stubbornly tried to implant itself again and again in Tim's brain and in his soul, until a small remainder of it finally stayed in to give the boy a new form and strength. The changes were obvious. And Tim emphasized again and again that he only wanted to hear this music. "The others just play the piece, but the music is missing. J.J. Cale makes a perfect sound, this man has character." It's amazing how he put it, when he was nine years old.

None of this would have happened if Ralph hadn't been here. No, Alvin has nothing against his former colleague - and after all, Ralph was the only one on the editorial staff who had the good fortune to meet the master in person at that

interview in Los Angeles. Awesome! Apparently not even the strange one had this luck.

Alvin takes a deep breath, looks left and right out of the side windows. Soon comes the exit, which will lead him to the strange one. A good-natured little slap on the wheel - a Ford, pretty inexpensive car, family-friendly, environmentally friendly. He slows down the speed once more to enjoy the moment even longer. "As a side effect, I send even less exhaust fumes into the air," he thinks contentedly. I wonder at what speed car freak Clapton might have been driving on this route at the time. In a Porsche or a Ferrari? It doesn't matter. Alvin smiles and thinks of his son again. This spook that was and still is not over. The coronation is still to come. Tim soon grabbed his father's guitar to strum it. It sounded pretty strange at first. But the boy hardly gave the instrument out of his hand anymore - and that contributed to the improvement of his general condition. Suddenly Alvin and Sandy noticed that the boy wasn't playing anything, but the songs of J.J. Cale. No one had taught him how to play; he wouldn't take any advice from Alvin. He wanted to find out for himself. As time went by, it all took shape, got better and better - and Alvin couldn't believe his ears. The boy played the licks and riffs with incredible aplomb. It sounded loose, yet intense. And the most amazing thing: Tim didn't just play the notes. He doesn't replay anything - and nothing twice in the same way. The boy plays "in style of", he improvises. Sometimes he gets tangled up, sure; but when he's in a good mood, it comes across as incredibly real and groovy. The little one has long been playing better than Alvin, and that after only a few years, at this age! Alvin is not very talented; it doesn't matter, he is indescribably happy for his son. It's a gift, it's J.J. Cale's gift.

And because of this, Alvin had wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. Last fall, at the Escondido Music Store, the guitar store in town. A certain Brian Hartley gave an exclusive J.J. Cale workshop there; a fundraising event for



the benefit of the local shelter, in the spirit of the late master. The store was pumped full, although there was little publicity for it. Hartley is considered a freak in the area. Nobody knows exactly how old the man is, probably around eighty. He is said to be an incredible Cale fan, and a connoisseur; one who pretends to know just about everything about the Tulsa Sound. He is said to have studied the master's songs like no other, especially the guitar parts. In the local music scene, he's almost a cult; everyone knows him, most respect him. But somehow Brian Hartley has an ambivalent reputation. There are people who call him an impostor, others a slightly crazy person or a looser. In any case, everyone wonders why the man obviously never made a living from music in the past, given his skills. Nobody knows exactly what he did all his life; as a guitarist he would have gotten jobs for sure - obviously he didn't want to. And another thing people ask themselves: Why has this guy never met the great master in person? Since he has lived in the same area as J.J. Cale for many years. There's something about this old man, they say, that he's strange, mysterious. And that's why Hartley's been called "the Strange Man" in the scene, quite simply, for many years.

Anyway, he was very easygoing at that workshop, the Strange Man. He told some stories, strummed some guitar phrases every now and then and seemed to be surprised that there are people who hope to learn something concrete from him. "You're all better at it than me anyway," he said with a smile. "And don't get your hopes up - you can't imitate J.J. You can't buy the mojo." Alvin and Tim waited in the store during the workshop, at a safe distance behind the crowd; the boy couldn't have stood it otherwise. When the event was over and the people slowly disappeared, the two of them approached the strange. Hartley was still busy packing up his instruments and still greeted them friendly: "Hello you two - nice you came. You are Alvin Lindley and you write about music, right? The shop owner warned me. And that young

man is your son, isn't he?" Alvin didn't waste any time; it was time to use it. "Yes, that's Tim. He's dying to play something for you, just for a minute. We won't keep you long." Hartley looked at him friendly and said, "That's cool, Tim. Go for it. I've gotta roll up all this cable clutter here - but my ears are with you, don't worry. I can hear everything..."

Yeah, and then the boys just went on without saying a word. Alvin had counted on everything, he couldn't know what shape his son would be in. But Tim was wonderful. He didn't play a particular song - he just started with a typical J.J. Cale groove and improvised on it. Economical and relaxed, as if the child had sixty years of life experience. Alvin struggled with the tears, it sounded incredibly good! The strange man stopped fiddling with the cables with a jerk, turned around and watched the boy with fatherly sparkling eyes. One or two minutes - and the spook was over. Tim got into a rage, made an angry move, put the instrument aside and ran away wordlessly into the next room. Alvin tried to explain the situation to Hartley as best and as quickly as he could. "Okay, no problem," the old man said calmly. After much persuasion, Tim finally came back. "I don't want to play anymore, I want to go home," he shouted excitedly. The strange man put his hand on the boy's shoulder, looked at him buddylike and said in a soft voice: "Hey Tim, you're the man. You do what you want to do, understand? Don't be fooled in this world. You're the man. You're not gonna be a circus act. This is coming good, boy. You're the man."

"Keep me posted," Hartley said as he scribbled a phone number on Alvin's paper as he said goodbye; "... but don't make a monkey out of him at the zoo - we've got enough of these child prodigies already." Those were his last words before he calmly and carefully continued to roll up the wires on the floor.

Alvin is overjoyed. He turns on the turn signal - there's the exit: Gopher Canyon Road / Old Castle Road. The spirit

of this musician has changed his life; serenity, trust and hope floats over his family, and his love for Sandy is blossoming again like in the beginning. He actually kept the strange man up to date with this longer phone last week. But Alvin did not want to tell him about Tim in the first place.

Incredibly, he still can't believe that Hartley bought the idea from him. "Okay, if you think so," mumbled the odd one through the receiver, "come by, preferably first thing Monday. I've got all week - let's see if we can't come up with something clever." For once, even Alvin started to stutter with excitement. "Oh, um, really? That's f-fawful, Mr. Hartley. The old man laughed, "We'll see. I don't talk much unless you ask me good questions. Oh, yes, and... will you take the boy with you?"

Tim didn't want to come; he can't explain why. He doesn't have to. Would have been pretty complicated to sign the boy out of special school for a week anyway. "My son is going to spend a week with a strange old man to talk about the music and life of world-famous songwriter J.J. Cale" - they would have thought he was crazy. Maybe he'll come along this weekend, if the exercise hasn't been cancelled by then. Hartley is said to be quite unpredictable, it is rumored; if he doesn't feel like it, it's fun to finish quickly. Does the strange man simply want to imitate his idol? Even the master is said to be unpredictable and gnarled at press meetings. Or is that just a myth? It doesn't matter. J.J. Cale could afford to be headstrong. That's a position to be in! A couple of annual, kick-ass royalty checks, no matter what. This pillow was made by Clapton, no question.

All these rumors and Ralph's story about Clapton, they don't count now. Alvin wants to talk to Brian Hartley in a relaxed and focused manner about the art of the Tulsa sound. What a project! Hey, they're gonna love this in the newsroom. Nice and shady here on the Old Castle Road. Trees, bushes,

beautiful. That little valley up ahead - "South Fork Moosa Canyon", not exactly modest, that name. "Canyon..." smiles Alvin. There must be some car dealer here, and a small restaurant, if the road map on the internet is correct. Right, here it is. "The Pointed Roof Delicatessen." Sounds cool. Maybe even the great J.J. Cale once ate here, so quickly for the small appetite - he is said to have lived somewhere in this area. Don't know where exactly. Anyway, it's none of his business. Alvin must find the strange man, at least from him he knows the address. It's only two or three miles from here to Lilac Road. Pretty twisty now all of a sudden, and there's hardly any shade on the road. But the view of all the small hills and valleys is wonderful. Again these mediterranean colours; astonishingly much green especially - considering how often the fire raged here already.

A small, modest house in the mountains; this is what Eric Clapton calls the home of his friend J.J. Cale, in the impressive autobiography "Eric Clapton - my life". Well, small house perhaps, but Cale's property is said to have been three hectares in size after all. Sure, the contrast must seem huge to Clapton - Slowhand owns a few luxury villas spread all over the world. He is even said to have lived in the area, back in the eighties. I wonder where that might have been? Hardly on any of these abandoned hills here. Maybe Valley Center itself? The list of VIPs who reside or used to reside there is quite impressive: Gary Cooper, John Wayne, Fred Astaire. Not bad.

Alvin shakes himself awake. The house of the strange will probably be much smaller than that of J.J. Cale. Hartley is hardly very rich; he has probably kept his head above water with all kinds of jobs and somehow managed to buy a house or build one himself. But you don't know anything for sure. Soon Alvin will see the cottage; Lilac Road has to start right there. No, shit, that's not it yet. Then it must be the next one. Bingo, here it is! Another few hundred meters, then it's up to