

# Mighty Lester



At almost every gig, somebody rolls up to one of the members of this powerhouse blues and soul octet and asks, “Which one of you guys is Mighty Lester? Is it the singer? Is it the guitar player? Is it the sax guy? Who is it?”

As the band explains in the liner notes to their May 2006 release, *We Are Mighty Lester*:

“The truth is that none of us is Mighty Lester. In spite of what some old-timers might claim, it’s doubtful that anybody in the band at this point can even remember what he looked like very clearly. When he took off for parts unknown, all he left was his name. But it’s a pretty good name, so we decided to keep it.

“We are Mighty Lester, and this is who we are and what we’re about as we celebrate our fifth year: We are Todd, pourin’ out his soul into the lyrics of every song. We are Lenny, wringin’ another smokin’ lick out of his Silvertone. We are Jon, ticklin’ the eighty-eights and takin’ us all to church with the B-3. We are Dave, makin’ sure his bass stays locked right there in the pocket. We are Rick, swingin’ and rockin’, always layin’ down that monster beat. We are the Mighty Horns—Jeff, Joe, and Alex—blowin’ some of the biggest, fattest, hottest sounds you’ll ever hear wailin’ from a tenor, a bari, and a trumpet.

“And we’re all about havin’ a real good time playin’ music that makes people want to get up and dance and have a good time, too.”

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Mighty Lester began life in late 2000 as a trio that included current guitarist/bandleader Lenny Terenzi and drummer Rick Cassidy. The band quickly expanded to seven pieces, but after their first gig, the three founding members decided to kick it up a notch: they wanted that big sound, that “slam you in the chest” wall of sound laid down by top blues acts like Roomful of Blues and the B.B. King Band.

After paring back to the original trio, they put together a three-

piece horn section (including current sax man/horn arranger Jeff Thomas) and added a new keyboardist. The new lineup’s very first live performance took place at the Triangle Blues Society’s 2001 Blues Competition in September, and by the end of the evening the Society had crowned Mighty Lester as its 2001-02 champions. The win opened up gigs at several local venues, and the band was asked to play at the Carolina Hurricanes’ 2001 season-opening home game, as well as filling the opening slot at a concert for World AIDS Day headlined by Kate Hudson of the multi-platinum pop band The B-52s.

Early 2002 saw the band release its first, self-titled CD, a collection of covers ranging from Albert Collins to Sam and Dave. “It started out as a demo to send to clubs, but quickly spun out of control into a full album,” notes Thomas. “But at least it gave us something to sell at gigs besides tee shirts.”

In early February, the band headed to Memphis, TN, to represent the Triangle Blues Society at the 2002 International Blues Challenge. At less than full strength (a two-piece horn section) and competing against bands that had been performing together for five, ten, and even twenty years, ten-month-old Mighty Lester made the semi-final round and even attracted the attention of the president of a well-known blues-oriented reptilian record label.

Returning home much more confident and self-assured, Mighty Lester quickly began making a name as the area’s must-see live band. The band felt it was on a path that would add another name to the stellar blues history of North Carolina.

In Spring 2002 founding drummer/vocalist Rick Cassidy decided it was time to try something a little different and left the band. After a three-month search, Eric Weaver was selected as the new drummer, the Mighty Horns were brought back to full strength with the addition of bari-sax man Joe Sunseri (whose extensive resume includes seven years as musical director for blues legend Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown), and gospel singer Todd Dewberry signed on as Mighty Lester’s new lead vocalist/frontman.

## “Loads of Fun!”

—Bruce Iglauer  
*Alligator Records*

Audience response to the new lineup was overwhelming. The revamped Mighty Lester's first show was at the annual Bele Chere festival in Asheville, NC, before a crowd estimated at five to seven thousand. They more than held their own against regional favorites the Cigar Store Indians and got rave reviews from key members of the headlining act, blues-rock legends Foghat.

The next eighteen months saw the re-energized Mighty Lester cementing their reputation as one of the most exciting and dynamic live acts in North Carolina, playing gigs from the mountains to Charlotte to Raleigh and all points between. Along the way, the band became good friends with the legendary Roomful of Blues, opening shows for the multiple Handy Award-winners and occasionally sitting in with them on stage.

But something was missing. After three years, the old spark wasn't there. "It kind of felt like we were just going through the motions," remembers Terenzi. "The area's live scene had turned to cover and tribute bands, and the audiences for anything else just evaporated." That, along with the creative-direction differences that confront most bands at least once in their lives, caused the band to call it quits in October 2003, much to the disappointment of Mighty Lester's many devoted fans.

During the period that followed, the band members involved themselves in various projects to keep their musical fires stoked. "But, no matter what any of us did, says Terenzi, "people kept asking, 'When is Mighty Lester getting back together?'"

In March 2004 the band received a call asking if Mighty Lester was available for a very lucrative performance. Not being wealthy enough to walk away from that kind of money, most of the band realized that it was time to fire up the old musical hot-rod again, at least for one gig.

Even though some former key players weren't available due to other musical commitments, at the first rehearsal it was obvious that the old Mighty Lester magic was still there, but reinvigorated and re-energized. "Ten months without having played together as a band, and we were ripping through tunes like we'd never stopped," recalls Terenzi.

After that August 2004 "big-money" gig, Mighty Lester decided to re-form permanently, but some players couldn't commit to the time required to keep the band in top shape. "We had some good musicians who had to leave, and that was tough," notes Terenzi, "but if we were going to do this, we were going to do it

right, with guys who are committed heart and soul to the kind of music and attitude that are the core of Mighty Lester." Then Fate lent a helping hand to restore the rhythm section's punch: Rick Cassidy returned to the drum throne, Dave Falardeau joined on bass, and Jon Newell was the obvious choice for keyboard duties.

But, for Thomas, the changes in the Mighty Horns were just as, if not more, important: "Alex Almasy came on board for the 'big-dollar' gig, and he was exactly what we'd been looking for all along. But the real magic was having Joe come back on bari sax. Musically, Joe and I are like some strange kind of Siamese twins—a single mind playing two horns, and our tones blend so well it's scary."

The renewed Mighty Lester spent the next twelve months performing in central North Carolina and decided they wanted another shot at the International Blues Challenge in Memphis. They entered the Piedmont Blues Preservation Society's contest in Greensboro, NC, and, in September 2005, emerged as champions against some very tough competition. "We knew we needed a new record, since the old one was no longer representative of the band, so we took a few months off to write some new tunes for the record and to get ready for Memphis," Terenzi recalls.

Mighty Lester's second trip to Memphis, in January 2006, proved to be momentous. After the first night, they became the "buzz" band of the contest, and their second-night performance on Beale Street packed the New Daisy Theater, garnering a standing ovation from the SRO crowd.

"That was just what we needed. We didn't win, but we came home a different, much better band," says Terenzi, "and, creatively, we just exploded." By mid-March 2006, when Mighty Lester walked into the studio to cut *We Are Mighty Lester*, they had ten originals (six of which

had never been performed in public) and two solid covers to wax.

Since the album's release on May 6, 2006, the response has been phenomenal: the well-versed blues crowd at the Carolina Blues Festival in Greensboro gave Mighty Lester a standing ovation after their set of tunes from the record; the band has received excellent reviews from critics for Raleigh's *News & Observer*, the *Independent*, and *Billboard* magazine, as well as kudos from many nationally and internationally recognized blues musicians and industry insiders; and the record has quickly become a fixture worldwide on the playlists of traditional-broadcast and Internet radio DJs.

"I've always felt that Mighty Lester was something magical," concludes Terenzi. "We're just glad to have the chance to share that magic with more and more people every day."

## **“A band after my own heart.”**

**—Chris Vachon**  
*Roomful of Blues*