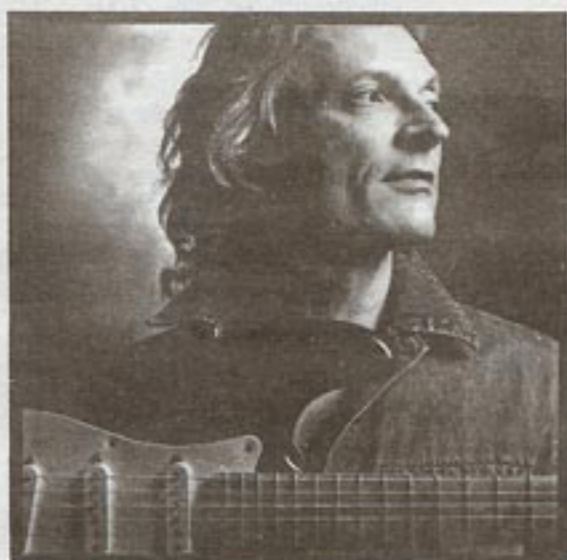


THE SIDE MAN TAKES CENTER STAGE



SONNY LANDRETH

WATER STREET MUSIC HALL,
204 N WATER ST
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16
8 P.M. | \$22.50-\$25 | 325-5600

Sonny Landreth makes the six strings on his guitar sound like an angel singing over her cocktail at last call. There's enough swampy swagger going on to summon up bayou mojo every time the Louisiana-based slide guitarist plays, no matter the venue. Night after night Landreth boogies through live sets that are drenched in the blues, interlaced with zydeco grooves, infused with Cajun spirits, and blasting with the intensity of a rock 'n' roll power trio.

The slide, with its tendency to make your standard guitarist sound like he's just hoping to land a right note, is a tool that Landreth works with precision. He's got grit in his playing, as if he were using a real bottle neck instead of a glass slide, and the notes are crisp, soaring out of the guitar and over the edge of the stage. All this is done while Landreth watches his instrument intently, without showboating or ostentatious antics. Think of him as a Cajun version of Duane Allman.

IT'S BEEN THREE YEARS since Landreth released his last studio album as a leader, "Grant Street." Now on "From the Reach,"

due May 20, he's assembled a musical Who's Who on one disc, bringing in some heavyweights to join his regular working trio. Sitting in with the band are Eric Clapton, Mark Knopfler, Vince Gill, Eric Johnson, Robben Ford, and Dr. John. Hell, even Jimmy Buffett gets in on the action.

"This was a really different kind of project for me, because I actually wrote the songs with all of the above in mind," Landreth told City via phone from a tour stop in Ashland, Kentucky. "So [the songs were] geared toward their influences on me, or their style, or their vibe."

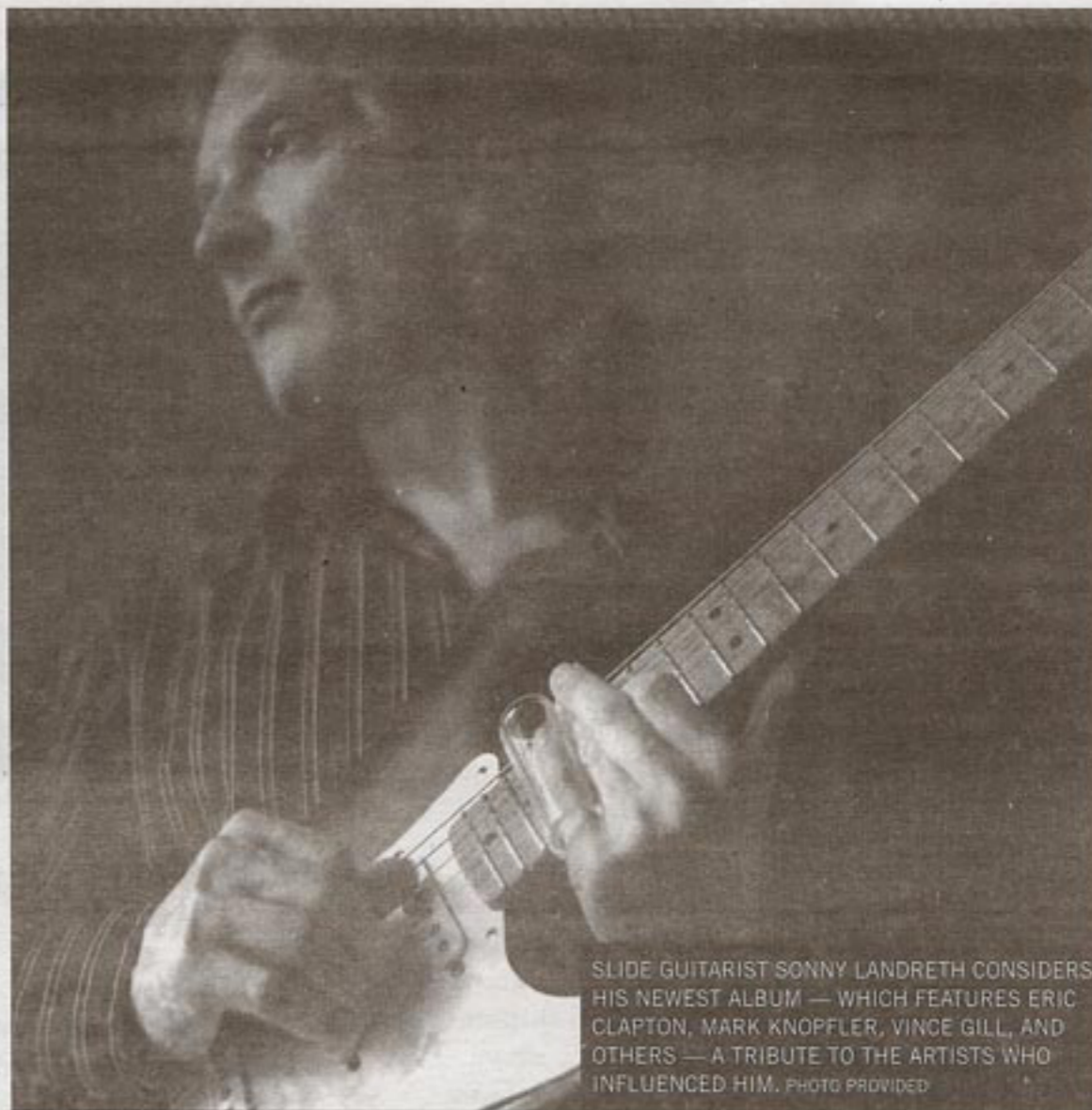
Landreth is no stranger to these fellas. Over the years he's done projects with some, and become good friends with others. "In a way, it's as a tribute to them as much as anything for me," he says.

FOR THE PAST 35 YEARS, Landreth has been on a cross-country musical journey with layover stops in taverns, concert halls, and festival stages everywhere from Maine to California. For the bulk of that time, Landreth has used the same musicians in his trio. "The bass player, David Ranson, and I go way, way back, and with Mike Birch on drums, I think we got something unique that works out really well as a trio," he says.

Three seems to be enough. Landreth fingerpicks and slides, creating as much sound as a full rhythm section all by himself. And with a couple longtime friends backing him, Landreth can explore the depths of the instrument's possibilities while in his comfort zone.

"I think there is a real powerful connection with the audience that we draw from as a three-piece band, in a different way than I have with larger bands," he says. "As long as we're hitting the magic, that's why I show up."

LANDRETH STARTED OUT as a trumpeter, until he heard the slide played for the first time. "I was totally mesmerized by the sound. There's a vocal quality to it that hooked me early on," he says. The Delta blues men he



SLIDE GUITARIST SONNY LANDRETH CONSIDERS HIS NEWEST ALBUM — WHICH FEATURES ERIC CLAPTON, MARK KNOPFLER, VINCE GILL, AND OTHERS — A TRIBUTE TO THE ARTISTS WHO INFLUENCED HIM. PHOTO PROVIDED

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was listening to were master storytellers and used the slide to let the guitar sing for them.

With New Orleans not too far away from his home in Lafayette, Louisiana, Landreth was able to hear other music that would influence his playing — jazz cats like Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Duke Ellington. "My jazz heroes had much the same goal: to emulate the human voice with their instrument. And I just think the slide guitar lends itself to that," he says.

Many musicians have heard the call of his guitar. Landreth has worked as a sideman recording or touring with John Hiatt, Dolly Parton, John Mayall, Junior Wells, and countless others.

WHEN HE PLAYS, Landreth is a mirror image of his neck of the woods — a true melting pot of musical styles with a spicy flavor to it. "I live in a part of the world that's Cajun and Zydeco, and it's really good for your soul — the food, the music, the culture."

His playing has earned him some pretty impressive fans. Eric Clapton referred to him as "probably the most underestimated musician on the planet, and also... probably one of the most advanced."

The praise from fellow guitar players hasn't stopped him from admiring a few of his own. "Derek Trucks is one of my favorite players,"

Landreth says. "There's a list [of musicians I'd like to play with]. Jeff Beck would be one of them. And there's another guy that you may not have heard of, and he's incredible — Monte Montgomery."

Landreth says that hearing good music makes him want to raise the bar of his own playing. "That fires me up and inspires me and makes me want to keep coming up and coming back to the well, so to speak," he says.

THE FUTURE MAY BRING more guitarists together if Landreth has his way. "I would like to do another guest album, but all instrumental," Landreth says. "And also I want to do an acoustic album."

He's been adding the songs he wrote for his upcoming album to his set list on tour, testing them on the road. "It's good to get out and play these songs — kind of let 'em loose and see how they live in the real world of gigs," he says. "I haven't seen anybody get up and leave yet, so I guess that's a good sign. I think we're doing OK with it."

With all the guest musicians on Landreth's forthcoming album out on the road, doing their thing, scheduling may be the hardest part of trying to recreate the studio magic live. Landreth says, "I've extended an invitation to any of them at any time, so we'll see who walks through the door."