

# Freddy Koella

## Blues (and more) by way of France

For any guitarist, joining the band of a well-known artist can be an intimidating experience. But when your new employer is Bob Dylan, the definition of the word “pressure” should be rewritten. • In 2003 Freddy Koella, a native of Mulhouse, France, found himself taking the place of recently-departed Charlie Sexton in Dylan’s band. Koella quickly meshed with co-guitarist Larry Campbell and the duo was soon churning Dylan songs like “Honest With Me” and “Summer Days” into furious deep-blues maelstroms further roiled by Freddy’s incendiary solos.

It’s a long way from the east of France to Bob Dylan’s side, and Koella recently talked about the journey, his career, and his new solo CD, *Minimal*.

“My dad is a Bach fanatic. He is a very eclectic classical music lover, so I was hearing this music all the time,” Koella recalls of his childhood. “And my mom played a little bit of piano. So that is what I was listening to when I was younger. But when I was 14, my sister brought home some blues records – and that was the end for me!”

Still, Freddy’s affection was divided between guitar and violin, splitting his efforts between classical and blues. Not surprisingly, Koella’s parents voiced their preference about their son’s choice of music.

“My parents did not like when I played the blues. I was living in a small town in the east of France, so there was absolutely no connection there with the blues social phenomena. So for them, it was very bizarre.”

While the sounds of Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Jimmy Page resonated with Freddy, the fathers of the blues were his greatest influence. Young Koella soon had a close encounter with one of these originators, despite living thousands of miles from the U.S.

“When I was 16, the first gig I ever did in front of an audience was blues rock, and we opened for Memphis Slim in a very small place in my area. So that was very exciting. I was just playing with a drummer – and emptying a bottle of cognac!”

Soon though, Koella crossed the ocean. In 1983, at the age of 23, he played for a year with Cajun musician Zachary Richard, then returned to the States for good in 1990.

“You know, for me it was logical that I would move to America because I was hooked on this music,” Koella acknowledges. “In France it was just

a copy – I had to see what was here, to try to find a connection with this music, and my future... It’s like how you would do if you were into Russian music – you would go to Russia. I was so possessed that I didn’t really think, I just went!”

“The first time, it wasn’t difficult at all, when I was younger. When I came in 1990 it was more difficult – I was 32 then, and it was tougher. But I had to do it because I couldn’t see any future in France for me.”

After first musically reuniting with Richard, Freddy met singer Willy DeVille, who first rose to prominence in New York’s CBGB scene in 1977 with the band Mink DeVille. Ironically, the meeting came about thanks to a fellow French expatriate who would play a large role in Freddy’s life – guitar builder James Trussart.

“He’s an old friend of mine from the east of France,” Koella notes. “He gave me Willy’s number.”

That call led to a 15-year alliance that continues to this day. But Trussart would play musical matchmaker once again. In 2003, Trussart and Koella had separately migrated to Los Angeles.

“I was at James’ workshop in LA, and Tony Garnier, the bass player (with Bob Dylan), came in,” Koella recalls. “They were rehearsing with a guitarist and it wasn’t very exciting, apparently.”

Soon, Koella was adding an adventurous element to Dylan’s music – and occasionally sparking ire from Bob’s more conservative fans.

“I was aware of that,” Koella says. “But it didn’t bother me. I’ve been playing this music for so long, so I’m just trying to stretch a little bit. I listen to lots of ethnic music and different stuff – I’m not a blues fanatic. I used to be, but now it’s just my vocabulary and that’s it.”

Koella found his onstage position



immediately to Dylan’s left to be a source of inspiration.

“I like to improvise, and that was ideal. Especially being on Bob’s side, you can feel him and you can do the connection, you know. It was great.”

Health problems brought the association with Dylan to an unexpected close. After a troubling period of months being unable to play, Koella turned to the creation of *Minimal*.

“It was done right after I was back on my feet,” he explains. “I thought, ‘What can I do to express myself, and to do it quickly?’ I thought, ‘Let’s see what I can do with just one instrument in my hands.’”

Most of the songs feature an 1895 Martin OO-28 Martin that Koella borrowed from a friend, as well as Koella’s 1947 Gibson J-45, National tri-cone

reissue, and ’57 Gibson ES-125. He also plays one of Trussart’s instruments. But his oldest companion is a ’63 Fender Stratocaster he bought in France when he was 21.

“A friend in my home town had a music store, and one day told me he had a guitar I should see,” Koella remembers. “He had traded an organ, a cheesy organ, for this guitar. So he sold me this guitar for about \$400! But you know, at the time it wasn’t completely crazy with the vintage stuff.”

Koella plays live to promote *Minimal*, will be touring with Willy DeVille, and hopes to forge similar musical alliances in the future.

“You know, I’m a shy guy,” Koella explains. “I like vocalists, and I guess being behind someone fits me well.”

– Frank Moriarty