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Charlie Musselwhite has seen more than Rand McNally and Samsonite.

The rugged blues harmonica player was reared next door to Leahy's trailer court in Memphis, Tenn. During the 1960s he spent five years driving around Chicago working for an exterminator in Uptown. A couple of years ago Musselwhite was nearly killed when a semi truck hit his small rental car as he was driving through Playa del Carmen, Mexico.

On Feb. 26 Musselwhite will release "One Night in America" (Telarc Records). It is the 21st album of his storied career.

It is the best road album I've heard since Townes Van Zandt's 1994 "Road Songs" that featured a knockout take on Lightnin' Hopkins' "My Starter Won't Start (This Morning)."

A high-grade road album sets a mood. It takes you places. Good road music keeps you awake because it keeps you wondering. And Musselwhite paints a compelling pastiche of flickering neon signs, searching hearts and small-town sidewalks, the kind of pathway where a pedestrian turns around for a second take on a stranger. In the Kieran Kane ballad "In a Town This Size" Musselwhite gruffly sings: "If you smoke a cigarette/they'll be talking about your breath." Now that's small.

Other "One Night in America" chestnuts include a dark cover of the Stanley Brothers'

"Rank Strangers to Me," which features country singer Kelly Willis; Roger Cook's "Trail of Tears," and Ivory Joe Hunter's "Cold Grey Light of Dawn," which takes Musselwhite back to his lonely drinking days. He's been sober since 1987.

The album's title comes from the Los Lobos tune "One Time, One Night" that Musselwhite draws the blinds on in "One Night in America." The new album's cover features a neon sign of the Desert Edge Motel (in Arizona) at dusk.

I had to know where Musselwhite was coming from.

I called him at his home in a small town in the Sonoma County, Calif., wine country.

"I'm the only musician that moved to the wine country and quit drinking," Musselwhite cracks. "There's quite a few musicians around here. Tom Waits is a neighbor."

Musselwhite, 58, is a long way from the motor court along the Cypress Creek in Memphis. He grew up in a house behind the motor court where cottages now go for \$130 to \$150 a week and kitchenette trailers range between \$130 and \$160 a week (901-452-7456). "My mother still lives there," he says. "She's 90 years old. We moved there from Mississippi in 1947."

Musselwhite was born in Kosciusko, Miss., in 1944. The trailer court became his neighborhood. He lived near the trailer camp until he left for Chicago in 1962. "Gypsies would come and go," he says. "Carnival workers. You'd go from trailer to trailer and get a snack or something. It was really a lively place. There were a lot of itinerant people for one reason or another; it made for a different flavor than any other street around.

"Later they built some houses across the street and [rockabilly legends] Johnny and Dorsey Burnette moved in. Then our next door neighbor was Jimmy Griffin [who later became guitarist-vocalist for Bread]. Slim Rhodes was a rockabilly guy who lived in the neighborhood. He had a house on the corner and he'd have a barbecue and invite the neighbors. He'd stand out there in his big white hat and play guitar with his amplifier. And Johnny Cash lived nearby. I went to school with his brother Tommy, but I remember Johnny driving around in his Thunderbird."

"One Night in America" rolls out into a musical road map. Although Musselwhite is known predominantly as a blues musician, the record touches on jazz, soul and even Johnny Cash ("Big River"). "I listen to all kinds of music," he says. "I always listen for musical feeling. I've got one foot in country and one foot in town. 'Rank Strangers to Me'

was a tune I heard a long time ago that grabbed me."

Bluegrass legends Ralph and Carter Stanley had a hit with "Rank Strangers" in 1960, but the tune was first recorded by the Crusaders Quartet in the late 1940s. "The setting of that song was perfect for me," Musselwhite says. "I was an only child. My father left when I was 3. My mother worked all the time, so I was alone a lot. I'd play around by the creek. Other kids' moms would call out and say, 'It's dinner time,' and they'd all go home.

"But there was nobody calling me home.

"It stuck with me all my life. When I moved to Chicago, I didn't know anybody. I kind of drifted around. I became a loner because I grew up that way."

When Musselwhite arrived in Chicago he moved into an apartment building at 4040 N. Broadway. He paid \$25 a week for a furnished apartment.

"Interestingly enough, there were gypsies living there, too," he says. "The building is no longer there. But there were storefronts where they would tell your fortune. I met the exterminator up there. He hired me to drive him around. And in driving all over the south and west sides of Chicago, I'd see posters and signs in windows in bars talking about Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed and Little Walter. I'd make a note where these places were and at night I'd go back and hear these people I'd be listening to on the radio in Memphis. I never even knew there was a blues scene in Chicago. I just went there looking for a job. But that was the turning point in my life."

These days Musselwhite and his band motor around America in a 28-foot Crystal Coach bus. The bus was built in 1997 for an Arizona hotel to take guests to an area golf course.

"I took out the little seats and put in bigger seats," he says. "You can stand up in it, so you're not all cramped like in the van we used to have. We have a CB radio in there, which is even better than having a radar detector."

Musselwhite didn't hesitate when asked about his favorite road record. He offered "Clifford Brown With Strings," the classic 1955 recording of the jazz trumpet player covering standards like "Blue Moon" and "Willow Weep for Me" over lush arrangements by Neil Hefti. Brown died at age 25 in a 1956 automobile accident. His wife (who was driving) and his piano player also perished in the Pennsylvania crash.

"Clifford has great tone," Musselwhite says. "He is a hell of a phraser. I listen to a lot of jazz for ideas. [Hard bop guitarist] Grant Green. [Tenor saxophonist] Hank Mobley. Or anything by all the classic Chicago [blues] guys like Howlin' Wolf, Muddy [Waters] and Jimmy Reed."

Musselwhite survived a near-fatal car crash of his own in December 1999, which is the centerpiece of "Walking Alone" on "One Night in America." The stark ballad was written by Swedish guitarist Pontus Snibb, a member of the band the Mescaleros. "I guess the name of the band means people who drink mezcal," Musselwhite cracks. "They perform in Mexico a lot. I was with them when I had my wreck. An 18-wheeler T-boned me right into the side of the road. He was haulin' pretty good. When I saw him, I hit the gas to get away, but I didn't quite make it. In the end, nobody was prosecuted."

Musselwhite was rushed to a hospital in Cancun. He had 11 broken ribs. His kidney and spleen were punctured. "At first they thought I was going to lose those, but I didn't," he says. "My wife [Henrietta] was with me, but luckily she was only bruised by her seat belt." It may have been that one night in Mexico that created the ardent depth of "One Night in America," a record you will remember like a rich vacation.