

charlie gillett

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Saturday Night on BBC London 94.9 FM

8 November 03

Robert Cray plus Liu Fang live

Always a warm and gently enthusiastic sparring partner, Robert Cray is an unusual radio guest on at least two levels. He not only has the gift of being able to summarise what he likes about a favourite record in just a few words, but is able to appreciate and react to an unfamiliar record on hearing it for the first time.

Robert's choices mostly straddled the blurred line where blues meets soul. I had not known before that Ike & Tina Turner's 1969 single 'Bold Soul Sister' featured blues guitar hot shot, Albert Collins; Aretha Franklin's song featured blues in its title. I wondered if the distinction could simply be that blues singers usually played guitar (or piano), while hands-free soul singers could play around with microphone stands?

A vital part of the Miami soul scene of the early 1970s, Little Beaver was typical of those who could be classified in either camp, a singing guitarist like Robert himself. Along with two other Miami veterans, Benny Latimore and Betty Wright, Beaver is among the musicians involved on the debut album by Joss Stone, a 16-year-old white singer from Devon in south west England, who sounds like she grew up in Alabama during the 1960s, singing in church every Sunday.



As we started to play a track from a vinyl album by Junior Wells, a sudden power shortage caused the entire radio desk to close down. Luckily, we were only a minute away from the news break that splits the show in two, and we were able to decamp to another studio and start the same song again after the news.



Hearing Oliver Mtukudzi for the first time, Robert was reminded of Toots Hibbert (of Toots and the Maytals), noted the unusual harmonies, the sudden changes of gear and the uplifting spirit of the song; in Salif Keita's 'Baba', the rhythms sounded Brazilian. Robert and his band play the Hammersmith Apollo on Monday night (10th Nov), supported by John Hiatt.

At the beginning of the show, we took advantage of a brief visit to London by Liu Fang, the Chinese musician now based in Montreal, who has the final track on the Rough Guide to the Music of China. Playing the pipa, a four stringed lute, she started quietly, with each note ringing out in a manner that sounds uniquely Chinese; but as the tune ebbed and flowed, the occasional crescendos of fast picking were reminiscent of Appalachian mountain style banjo. Masterful, graceful and riveting, Liu will surely return for UK concerts next year, hopefully including WOMAD Reading.

These shows are now [streamed](#) for a week, almost immediately after the transmission. We broadcast from 8 to 10 every Saturday Night on BBC London on 94.9 FM in the London area and worldwide at www.bbc.co.uk/london

Guest images by Philip Ryalls.

In the playlist below, tracks marked with an asterisk were those chosen by Robert.

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1. Bubba Sparxxx