

THE AARON CLIFT EXPERIMENT

By Jackie Pardue Scripps & The Aaron Clift Experiment



(L-R) Joe Green (bass), Aaron Clift (vocals, keyboards), Jim Ragland (guitar), Joe Resnick (drums)
Photo by Brio Yapan/Brio Photography

The Aaron Clift Experiment is not your average prog rock band. The members didn't grow up jamming together in a suburban garage. They don't live together in some shabby Eastside party den. These four men are professionals, classically trained and currently making their way around the Austin performance circuit. We caught up with these Austinites, ranging in age from their 20's to 60's, to hear their story and see what fires up their passion for music.

Jackie Pardue Scripps: Describe your sound in five words.

Aaron Clift: Dynamic, intense symphonic progressive rock.

JPS: Why does the Aaron Clift Experiment make music?

Clift: I can't imagine life without music. It's such a big part of who I am that I just can't help but write songs. For me, songwriting and performing is a rich, rewarding experience. My hope is that our music will play a role in bringing people together and helping them get in touch with their emotions.

JPS: How long has The Aaron Clift Experiment officially been together and how did you join up in the first place?

Clift: In early 2008, I had a vision of a solo

project in which I could write and perform music that would combine my classical and rock influences. At first, the project consisted of me on vocals, my friend Julianne on keyboards, and drummer Joe Resnick, who was recommended to me by a recording engineer friend of mine.

In fall 2009, Julianne, Joe and I went to the studio and recorded demos of “Seven,” “Lonely Hills,” and “My Andalusian Love.” When I listened back to the finished recordings, I realized that there was a hole in our sound that needed to be filled by guitar and bass. I also wanted my music to rock harder, so I decided to make the project into a full-fledged band and model my songs after the music of the progressive rock bands I really liked. As part of turning the solo project into a band, I gave the band a name – The Aaron Clift Experiment.

In late 2010, Julianne and I mutually parted ways due to musical differences (though we remain really good friends to this day) and I took over keyboard duties. I spent 2010 and 2011 trying to find a guitarist and bassist. After several false starts, finally in October 2011 I found the right guys for the positions. Jim Ragland (guitar) and Joe Green (bass) had both recently moved to Austin (Jim from Los Angeles and Joe from Houston) and were eager to play original music. I felt that Jim’s background writing music for theater and Joe’s background playing jazz combined with their professionalism and excellent musicianship would make them the perfect additions to the band. With Joe Resnick on drums and me on vocals and keyboards, the band lineup was complete.

JPS: You all have such unique musical backgrounds and training. Clift (vocals, keyboards) studied music at university and classical composition in grad school. Jim Ragland (guitar) started in the New York rock

scene and composed theatrical scores including that of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play *The Kentucky Cycle*. Joe Green (bass) studied music at university, performed in a jazz combo in Minneapolis, and has studied under a Dallas Symphony Orchestra member. Joe Resnick (drums) also studied and taught music at university and performed with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. How does the underlying commonality of the band’s experience in composition and classical training play into your sound? And into the writing process?

Clift: For me, it all goes back to dynamics and intensity. Rock music at its core is all about a raw, visceral experience. Classical music sometimes reaches rock levels of intensity, but overall seems to be more concerned with more subtle, nuanced expression.

What I think unites all of us in the band musically is the understanding of how to blend the raw power of rock with the sophistication of classical music. I’ve said it before and will say it again that my band mates are the finest musicians I’ve had the pleasure of working with.

JPS: Who or what are your biggest musical influences?

Clift: In rock music, my biggest influences include Genesis, Pink Floyd, Rush, Led Zeppelin, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Kate Bush, Porcupine Tree, and Opeth. In jazz: John Coltrane and Miles Davis. In classical: Ravel, Debussy, Bartok, Schubert, Bach, Reich, and Shostakovich. I also like a lot of soul singers like James Brown and have lately been listening to a lot of underground hip hop artists like Tech N9ne and Hopsin.

My biggest musical hero is Frank Zappa – to me he represents the consummate artist: he was an amazing songwriter, producer, guitarist, composer, comedian, and philosopher.

Jim Ragland: Ry Cooder, Frank Zappa, Lyle Lovett, Randy Newman, George Harrison, The Band, Brian Setzer, Leo Kottke, George Martin, Paul McCartney, Eyvind Kang.

Joe Green: Led Zeppelin and Miles Davis.

Joe Resnick: I've been influenced by too many bands and too many styles to name. Probably the most jarring moment of my young musical life was the first time I heard *Abbey Road*, side two specifically. That feeling of amazement and wonder hasn't been duplicated since, although I'm inspired constantly by new music.

JPS: If you could play your dream show with any musicians or bands, who would they be?

Clift: I wish Frank Zappa were alive so I could do a show with him. As far as living artists go, I would love to tour with Porcupine Tree, Opeth, or Marillion.

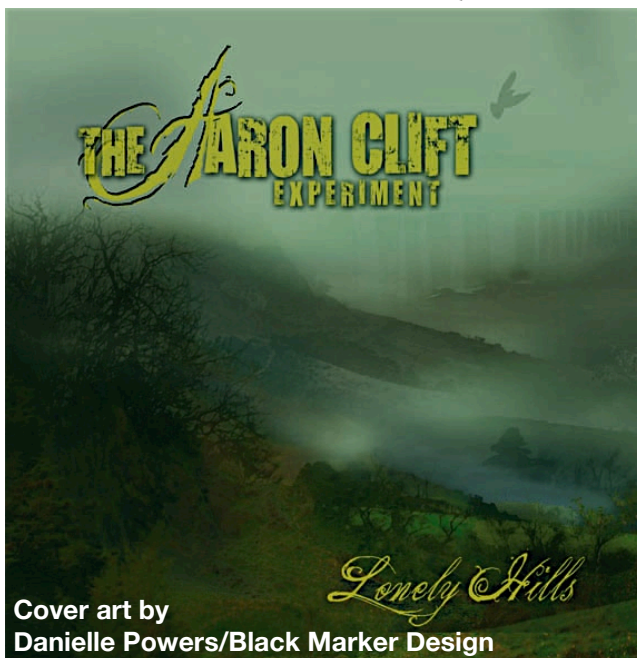
Ragland: I would be Robbie Robertson's replacement in The Band, with all the other members still alive, of course.

Green: My dream show would be to play with Elvis.

Resnick: I love many different types of music and find myself favoring particular songs as opposed to bands. Some songs I'd like to play include "In Your Eyes" with Peter Gabriel, "Comfortably Numb" with Pink Floyd, any song from *Graceland* with Paul Simon, "Sober" with Tool, and "I'll Be Gone" with Cotton Mather. I'd also love to play a show with Silversun Pickups, Santigold, or Regina Spektor.

JPS: You just released your debut album, *Lonely Hills*. First of all, congratulations! Can you describe the process of recording the album, from the initial decision to go into the studio to completing the finished product?

Clift: We approached the recording of *Lonely Hills* a bit differently than most bands would record a debut album. Usually when a band records a debut album, they've been playing together live for a while. We kind of did the



reverse by recording the album first. Thankfully, we had producer Matt Noveskey to pull everything together.

I met Matt in July 2011 totally by chance. My mom was shopping in a Nordstrom in Austin and being the very social person she is, struck up a conversation with a woman in the shoe department. She was telling the woman about my music, and the woman said, "My husband, Matt, is a musician as well. Tell Aaron he can e-mail him with any questions he has about music."

My mom called me up the next day and said, "I met a woman in Nordstrom yesterday and she says that her husband plays bass in some band called Blue October. Have you heard of them?" I said, "Are you serious?! Blue October is an internationally-famous multi-platinum band!" I couldn't believe that I was going to get in touch with such a famous person!

I e-mailed Matt a few days later and struck up a conversation with him. He said that he was on tour but wanted to know if I was interested having him produce my music.

In February 2012, we hit the studio, and Matt played a vital role in helping organize and direct all the players as well as help me realize the sound I was going for with the album. He even

became somewhat of a mentor for Joe Green since both of them happened to use Aguilar bass equipment. Matt also pushed me to deliver some of the best vocal performances I've ever given.

I also have to give credit to the outstanding job of my bandmates. Even though we hadn't been together long and the music was still new to them, they really pulled through with the project. We recorded in two weeks what could have taken months to do.

March 2012 through May 2012 was filled with mixing and mastering the album as well as album design and artwork.

We also have a 10-minute documentary on YouTube that contains behind-the-scenes footage of the album recording. [It's called "The Making of Lonely Hills."](#) You can check it out [here](#).

JPS: What is your favorite song of the album and why?

Clift: It's hard to pick a favorite song, but for me it's a tie between "Staring at Fruit Out of Reach" and "Shipwrecked." Both songs rock hard and feature every element of the band's sound – lots of interesting sections, a huge variety of excellent guitar riffs and solos, excellent rhythm section work, cool vocals and effects, and even a four-minute keyboard solo at the end of "Staring at Fruit Out of Reach" – and I'm not normally a solo guy.

Ragland: I don't have a favorite because there are just too many moments on the album that I enjoy.

Green: "Staring at Fruit Out of Reach," especially the jam session at the end. It's a real nice change of pace from the rest of the album.

Resnick: My favorite song on the album is "My Andalusian Love." It's not a song with any acrobatic drumming, but that's not important. In my opinion, it's the song that's important, and I love the way it feels. I like the chord

changes, the feel, and the melody, especially in the chorus. It soars.

JPS: What are your favorite lyrics of the album and why?

Clift: Without a doubt, my favorite is "Lonely Hills." I had been writing poetry and stories since I was a kid, but the lyric for this song was really the point where I felt that I had come into my own as a writer, finding a way to combine a very personal experience (a breakup with a girlfriend) with a poetic metaphor, and still maintain directness with my audience.

Ragland: It's hard to choose, but I like the imagery in "My Andalusian Love."

Green: "Staring at Fruit Out of Reach" has a really interesting story in the lyrics, and I like that.

Resnick: "My Andalusian Love" – it makes me want to visit Spain!

JPS: You were recently interviewed on KOOP 91.7 FM's progressive rock radio show, Virtual Noise. How did that come about and what was your favorite part of being on live radio?

Clift: Ted Thomas (a.k.a. "Professor Ted") and I had been friends for a while through the Austin Progressive Rock Record Club, a group that



Photo by Brio Yippan/Brio Photography

meets about once a month to listen to progressive music. When I first met Ted, he gave me his business card for his DJ position as a host of Virtual Noise, a progressive rock radio show on KOOP 91.7 FM. When The Aaron Clift Experiment released *Lonely Hills* in June, I got in touch with Ted and asked if he would interview me on the show.

One of my favorite moments of the interview was when Ted played “Shipwrecked.” While the interview was going on, there was a huge thunderstorm going on outside. The end of “Shipwrecked” also happens to have a thunderstorm. As soon as the song ended, the radio broadcast was interrupted by a National Weather Service advisory about severe thunderstorms in the Austin area. Talk about crazy coincidences!

JPS: Austin has the moniker the “Live Music Capital of the World.” What are your favorite parts about being an Austin-based band?

Clift: I like the fact that Austin musicians are super friendly people and helpful. I’ve had the pleasure of meeting some famous people who live in Austin (like Matt Noveskey), and all of them have been so approachable and down-to-earth.

I also like the fact that Austin is a city that’s growing and developing a vibrant creative class. Some people I’ve met don’t like all the change that’s been happening in the last 20 years, but I think that most cities would kill to be in our position.

Ragland: In Austin, a 62-year-old musician who hasn’t played progressive rock in 40 years can play with a great band like The Aaron Clift Experiment and simultaneously work as an Americana singer/songwriter - and make a living at it. There is no place else in the world where that would be remotely possible.

Green: My favorite part of being an Austin band is the respect people outside of Austin give to Austin players.

Resnick: It’s a city where people are happy to embrace most anything musically. I’ve always enjoyed living and playing here.

JPS: What are some challenges you have faced? In Texas’ music scene or in your own creative processes?

Clift: The biggest challenge to being a young band in a town full of bands is being noticed. On any given night in Austin, there are dozens of very talented artists who are playing, and that kind of competition for the public’s attention can be very intense.

JPS: What are some tips you would give to perspective musicians, or those who are already musicians but want to take the next steps into performing and recording?

Clift: I always tell people to not pursue a career in music unless you’re absolutely crazy about music. The music industry is such a difficult nut to crack that if you’re not totally head over heels in love with making music and determined to succeed no matter what, the industry will crack you!

On a more practical level, I recommend three things to the budding music professional: always be networking, stay organized and focused, and learn as much as you can about the business side of music. Also, try to find a mentor in the music industry. I have to thank The Austin Music Foundation for helping me in all these areas. For musicians who live in the Austin area, AMF is such a valuable resource. If you live in another town, get connected to your local professional musician’s organization or join a group like ASCAP or BMI.



You can buy The Aaron Clift Experiment’s album, *Lonely Hills*, at aaronclift.com or follow them on Twitter [@AaronCliftMusic](https://twitter.com/AaronCliftMusic).