

# BLUESLETTER

THE MONTHLY  
MAGAZINE OF THE  
SAINT LOUIS BLUES  
SOCIETY

January 2013 Number 55

Charles  
Hunt



# The St. Louis Blues Society

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# BluesLetter

## The Monthly Magazine of the St. Louis Blues Society

### Number 55

The St. Louis Blues Society is dedicated to preserving and perpetuating blues music in and from St. Louis, while fostering its growth and appreciation. The St. Louis Blues Society provides blues artists the opportunity for public performance and individual improvement in their field, all for the educational and artistic benefit of the general public.



*The St. Louis Blues Society is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit Missouri corporation.*

Memberships to the Blues Society are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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## Contact Us

St. Louis Blues Society

P. O. Box 78894

St. Louis MO 63178

[www.stlouisbluessociety.org](http://www.stlouisbluessociety.org)

[mktonnies@stlouisbluessociety.org](mailto:mktonnies@stlouisbluessociety.org)



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Happy New Year!

We hope you and your friends and families have enjoyed your holidays and got out to see a few local shows during the season. The cold weather is here now; don't let it stop you from supporting our musicians by attending a live show. Our musicians work hard both on and off the stage—lugging instruments and heavy amps around in the slush isn't fun—make them feel loved and needed during the cold months too!

Our monthly blues fundraiser, now known as BlueSunday, begins 2013 back at the Great Grizzly Bear on January 27 from 1 to 4 pm. BlueSunday will be a traveling show; every three months we will be changing venues and locations in an attempt to be sure every blues lover in the area gets a chance at attending a show in their own locale. January's act is Cherry Bomb Hurricane—a fun name for a great act—Margaret Bianchetta on flute and vocals with Mary Dee Brown and Sharon Foehner on guitars. Cover is \$5.00 unless, of course, you are a Society member then your cover is free.

You may have noticed our numbering system has changed for this issue. When the BluesLetter was revived in May 2012, it was uncertain what issue we were on so the choice was made to just begin with number 1. Well now we know... The first issue of the BluesLetter was published in January of 1989. We honor all of the hard work and dedication that has been put into each and every one of the previous issues and are taking up the proper issue number—55! Thank you to Ron Edwards and Bruce Olson for doing the math for us.

**WE NEED YOUR HELP:** We need some volunteers, sponsors...or the likes! Can you help? Please consider getting involved with the Blues Society. Our next board meeting is Tuesday, January 15, 7:30 pm at Schlafly Tap Room, 2100 Locust. We would love to have you there.

**ATTENTION MUSICIANS:** Don't forget we are creating a Blues Society database of musicians. Get on our list and we will email you a copy of the BluesLetter each month with a special section for musicians beginning in March 2013 along with other information especially for musicians. Paul Niehaus IV is collecting musician information for the Blues Society. Please let him know you want to be involved.

Thank you for being blues lovers and for your help keeping the blues alive in St. Louis.

Mary Kaye and Jeremy

## Blues Society Half-price Discounted Events for Members

*BB's Jazz Blues and Soups*

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# Charles Hunt: Getting It While the Getting is Good

By Bruce Olson

Charles Hunt, the 62-year-old bluesman and mainstay of the Ground Floor Band, has been playing guitar for 50 years, but it is only in the last few months that he has been able to do it full time—and he is ready; ready to get it while the getting is good.

Born on April 6, 1950, Hunt is a life-long resident of East St. Louis and he's seen it all, from the all-night joints to hotel lounges, from international touring to playing St. Louis clubs big and small on both sides of the Mississippi.

He has also put in a long life of work, including 33 years as a maintenance mechanic in the big eastside zinc plants in Brooklyn, Illinois, Amax Zinc Co. and its successor, Big River Zinc. His is a classic blues life, one that he has enjoyed to its fullest.

"I worked all day and played all night," Hunt said during a BluesLetter interview at a table at Beale on Broadway before a recent show. "The zinc plant was interesting work. I loved what I was doing. I'd get dirty, but I'd love it. I learned a lot of stuff. I learned how to weld, how to pipe fit, how to work with pumps, a lot of stuff," he said.

He got his start on the guitar with encouragement from his father. "I'd been playing horns but I picked up the guitar when I was 11 or 12. I started taking lessons and by the time I was in high school—Eastside High—I was playing in a combo called Little Soul. We put it together at the music store there—Sonny Shields Music. Sonny's brother-in-law had a band and he wanted me to play in it. That's how I got started."

Just out of high school, Hunt joined up with a singer named Big Bud and his band the Corvettes,

playing at the Lakeside in Eagle Park, an eastside club made famous in the 1960s by Eugene Neal and the Rocking Kings.

It was at Lakeside that Hunt met his longtime partner, James Ross. "Ross sang with a band called the Profiles and they had a hit record. He used to travel with Albert King. Me and him got together in the early 70s and we'd play a place called the Swank House in Brooklyn," he said. This was a period when the Swank House was host to big shows, both from St. Louis as well as Chicago. The St. Louis city venues closed in those days at midnight or 1 a.m. but Brooklyn stayed open until 6 a.m.

Hunt said, "[I] played in Brooklyn with Charles Drain, he was over there. Jerry and the Soulful Five; that was the first time I really played with Ross. Me and Ross started to do some things. He was the singer and the writer. I'd put the music to his words."

They collaborated on a single in 1978, then put out an album, *Rosebush* in 1986 on Gino's Records, produced at Oliver Sain's Archway Studios in north St. Louis. It featured ten Ross & Hunt originals with Sain appearing on the synthesizer, an example of the soul blues sound developed in St. Louis in the 70s and the 80s.

"We got a lot of gigs in those days," Hunt said. Even though he had his rugged day job, he added, "We were getting it while the getting was good."

At one point, fellow eastsider, Albert King, invited Hunt to join his band for a road trip, but Hunt turned him down, "Because I had the job. And I have no regrets about that. Gus Thornton went instead. I

always had a place to play. Enough to keep me going, enough to keep my hands going, learning songs, keep me out there,” he said.

The Ground Floor Band developed by 1989 with Ross as the front man and Hunt on guitar. It originally also included an Ike Turner veteran, Vernon Guy, who had been playing with Bennie Smith at Leo’s Tavern in Eagle Park. Smith had “got into it with his gal and they put him out of the place, so they needed a guitar player. They called me. I took Bennie’s place

can’t play like nobody else. I tried and tried but I just can’t do it, so I put my own style on the guitar and that’s what I play. If you like it, you like it. If you don’t, you don’t.” I liked a lot of guys, the country western guys, the jazz guys and the fusion guys. I liked a lot of guys. But I just had to play the way I play and that’s it,” he said.

Hunt, Johnson and Tims are regulars in the Thursday and Friday night band at Beale, while others sit in, such as conga player Julius Davis. Hunt also pops



photos by Madison Thorn

and I started playing with them,” Hunt said. The band worked at Molly’s in Souland and had a five-year stint at the Holiday Inn in Collinsville.

In 2002 he made his second record, again on Gino’s Records and engineered by Oliver Sain. *Get It While the Gettin’s Good* includes eight Ross & Hunt originals, with Deric Thomas on keyboards, Nephew Davis on bass and “Double J” Johnson on drums.

He then got an offer to play *Blues Estafette* in the Netherlands and “a couple of the guys I had didn’t have the passports.” This forced a shake-up in the band and Hunt hired Eugene Johnson on bass and David “Cap” Tims on drums. Along with Thomas, they were the players who stuck with him after the death of Ross in 2003.

Hunt said his playing was influenced by Albert King, but that his attempts to copy others didn’t work. He said, “I tried to sound like other musicians but I never could. So I just developed my own style. I just

up in different places, such as across the street at BB’s Jazz, Blues and Soups where he was found on a recent Friday night ripping his licks with an impromptu band that included Eric McSpadden and David Dee.

“I’m lucky to be still playing,” he said. “There’s just two musics that are never going to die—the blues and the country. That’s the basics. They are very close. That’s where it all come from. When they taught me to play I learned the country western style. Then when I got out in the clubs, I had to learn to play the blues.”

He said, “And now that I’m retired from the zinc plant, I’m getting out to see what I can do. I got some songs that me and Ross wrote. When he passed away we was in the studio doing some new songs.”

It’s been a long road for Charles Hunt, but he looks all the world like a very happy man as he sits onstage at Beale, playing a unique style of blues guitar that reflects the old days of the eastside and the new enthusiasm of a performer with an energized life. 🎵





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# The Latest Update: National Blues Museum gets \$6 million donation, to open in 2014

By Bruce Olson

The National Blues Museum's drive to open a 23,000-square foot facility in downtown St. Louis got an electric jolt of funding support in December from a \$6 million contribution from Pinnacle Entertainment, owners of the Lumière Place Casino.

The planned opening of the museum is on track for 2014, the 100th anniversary of the debut of the most famous blues song of all time—W.C. Handy's "The St. Louis Blues."

The museum says it will offer an interactive experience that includes a mix of artifacts and technology-driven exhibits, aimed at showcasing blues music from St. Louis and around the nation. Plans call for a \$14 million facility on Sixth Street and Washington Avenue in the old Dillard's department store.

The space awaits the final capital fundraising drive and designs also call for a performance venue and education programs exploring the history of blues music and its influence on rock, jazz, hip hop, gospel and R&B.

Rob Endicott, chairperson of the museum and a local musician, said the contribution was a "tremendous start for our capital campaign to make the National Blues Museum a reality for St. Louis and for blues music fans everywhere."

Since the last decade of the 19th century, St. Louis has played a central role in the development of blues music. Handy said that as an exhausted, homeless and unemployed resident in St. Louis in 1892, he tried to sleep on the cobblestones under the Eads Bridge. He "heard shabby guitarists picking out a tune called 'East St. Louis.' It had numerous one-line verses and they would sing it all night." The song became "The St. Louis Blues," played and published in 1914. It got a sensational immediate reaction and went on to become the most popular blues song ever, recorded at least 1,800 times.

In the early 1900s, St. Louis became the ragtime music center of the nation, bringing African American music into the parlors of the United States. In the 1920s and 1930s, St. Louis was home to the world's earliest blues stars, including Lonnie Johnson, Peetie Wheatstraw, Victoria Spivey,

Walter Davis, Roosevelt Sykes, and many more. Henry Townsend, who began recording in 1929, played his brand of personalized blues in St. Louis until his death in 2006.

In the 1940s, Miles Davis exploded out of the East St. Louis blues tradition to become the leading jazz figure of the 20th century.

In the 1950s and 1960s, St. Louis was home to Albert King, Johnnie Johnson, Little Milton, Chuck Berry and Ike Turner, who pushed the music forward into urban blues, R&B and rock, earning critical fame and selling millions of records.

A thriving blues community developed in north St. Louis and on the eastside during the decades following World War II, and dozens of blues clubs and juke joints hosted a variety of musicians from dusk to dawn.

In the late 1970s the blues—led by Tommy Bankhead, Bennie Smith and Oliver Sain—spilled over into the south side of the city and led to bustling entertainment areas in Soulard, on South Broadway, along the Delmar Loop and in the waterfront area, Laclede's Landing.

Today, St. Louis remains one the deepest blues venues in America, with young, homegrown players and recent arrivals joining veteran blues institutions like Big George Brock and the Soulard Blues Band to follow the stars who passed in the early years of the 21st century.

Endicott said he was elated about the Pinnacle donation, which is part of a deal with the casino builders and the city that allowed construction of the downtown gambling house in 2004. That building displaced Mississippi Nights, one of the city's premier live music clubs, and led to a decline in the entertainment level in the Landing.

An attempt to launch a blues museum in 2003 in the Landing failed but the idea rekindled with the Bluesweek concerts in 2010. Museum organizers subsequently got city support and obtained the space to house the facility in a building built the same year Handy heard those repetitive strains under the Eads Bridge. 🎵



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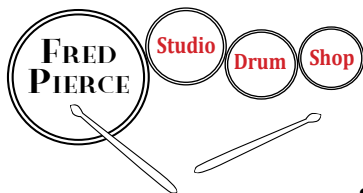


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## Royal Southern Brotherhood Self-Titled Release Ruf Records, 2012

by Bruce Olson

The Royal Southern Brotherhood, a “super group” with a decidedly St. Louis flavor, made one of the big blues splashes of 2012. It grabbed a No. 5 debut slot on the Billboard Blues Chart, was named the No. 1 Blues Studio Album by *Blues Matters* magazine and took a Best Rock Blues CD nomination from the Blues Music Foundation. The self-titled debut album was also the backbone of one the best shows of the year in the River City, a brilliant Big Muddy Festival set inside a steamy club on Laclede’s Landing.

The group is a combination of Mississippi River forces, with a dash of southern rock from Atlanta. Led by the New Orleans Afro rhythms of Cyril Neville, the St. Louis blues of native St. Louisan Mike Zito and the trucker soul of St. Louis resident Devon Allman, the band formed after the three performers met in the summer of 2010 in New Orleans, then played on a series of jam sessions in a studio in the Garden District.

The combination of the names Neville and Allman was too much to resist for Ruf Records, an independent German label that has sold over a million albums since it was founded in 1994, and the RSB record was released in late May.

From the opening “New Horizons” all the way to “All Around the World” this a CD filled with clean, original stuff. The group meshes into more than the sum of its parts in a rootsy stew of blues, rock, soul, and funk.

On “Moonlight Over the Mississippi” Zito spells out the combination of elements— winding his way down the Big Muddy, following the “river trying to find the answer to my dreams, all the way from St. Louis way down to New Orleans.”

The Brotherhood rolled into St. Louis at the beginning of September with Allman shouting from the Big Muddy Festival’s Main Stage: “We’ve been waiting all year for this,” before roaring into a flashy set that brought forth the best from the record.

The Grateful Dead’s “Fire on the Mountain” was a highlight, as, too, were the anthemic “Got to Keep Rockin,” and the tender “Nowhere to Hide” and “Ways About You”—all from the new album.

Joining Allman, Zito and Neville are bassist Charlie Wooten, of the New Orleans-based Zydefunk, and drummer Yonrico Scott, who has put in time with both the Derek Trucks Band and with Col. Bruce Hampton, an Atlanta-area musical legend.

The band’s official New Orleans’ debut came a couple weeks after its St. Louis appearance. The Big Easy show at Rock ‘n’ Bowl spawned dozens of YouTube videos.

Zito and Allman play twin guitar leads throughout and share the singing against the Neville-led rhythms. On the CDs opening cut, “New Horizons,” the singing is haunting; promising “to take our beat into the street and change the future’s course.”

By the next to last song, “All Around the World,” the eclectic approach remains in a grungy number with a taste of gospel that proclaims the band’s philosophy, “We sing and pray for joy, holding our hands up and shouting out loud.”

Allman has graduated from his St. Louis-based Honey-tribe days, Zito is as solidly rooted in the river blues traditions as always and Neville brings the Meters’ rhythm and funk to the party, pulling it together in a band that can only get better as the tours and CDs continue for this brotherhood of music royalty.

The band will appear at the Old Rock House, 1200 South 7<sup>th</sup> St., Feb. 17 at 8 p.m. 🎸



St. Louis native Mike Zito playing with RSB at Deb’s Blues Farm in Montgomery Mo. on August 31. photo by Madison Thorn

As you can see from the poster on page 11, Madison has been busy this month. **From the Crowd** will return in February. If you would like to see your photos “from the crowd” in the next BluesLetter, email Madison at [mthornphotos@yahoo.com](mailto:mthornphotos@yahoo.com)





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