

BLUES



**THE MONTHLY
MAGAZINE OF THE
SAINT LOUIS BLUES
SOCIETY**

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The St. Louis Blues Society

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BluesLetter

The Monthly Magazine of the St. Louis Blues Society

Number 56

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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Hello Blues Lovers,

We had a great time at the first blueSunday show at the Grizzly Bear. Thank you to those who came out. We saw lots of new faces in the crowd and of course that pleases us very much. The women of Cherry Bomb Hurricane were fabulous and shared their beautiful versions of blues and jazz standards and folk tunes with the crowd. We are looking forward to the next two shows at the Grizzly Bear: February 24 with Marty Spikener on drums, with friends John Erbllich on harmonica and the Harris brothers, Sean and Jason, on guitars; and March 31 with the Bottoms Up Blues Gang.

We've seen some new faces at our monthly board meetings recently too. The Society's open board meeting happens the third Tuesday of each month at the Schlafly Tap Room at 7:30 pm. Please consider becoming more involved with the Blues Society. There are so many things we would like to do for our membership and our beloved musicians but we need people power to accomplish them all.

And, don't forget we can use your digital participation too. With a click of your mouse you can visit our Facebook page, send your 'from the crowd' photos to Madison at mthornphotos@yahoo.com, or send Mary Kaye your local band videos for inclusion on the new St. Louis Blues Society You Tube Channel at mktonnies@stlouisbluessociety.org.

It's already February, which means Bluesweek is just three months away. Look forward to coming BluesLetters with information about the events happening in the big, warm St. Louis month of May.

Lots of blues luv,
Mary Kaye and Jeremy

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Melissa Neels

The assembly line blues

By Bruce Olson

Her inspiration comes from Chuck Berry, Bonnie Raitt and Patti Thomas. Her experience is from two decades of club dates and festivals. Add in 14 years building minivans on the Chrysler line in Fenton and it all adds up to the St. Louis blues singer-guitarist, Melissa Neels.

Catch her on stage at Hammerstone's: You get a couple of sterling originals, "Broadway" — her escape from the assembly line "down to the city to get some blues tonight/ Headed down to Broadway to make everything all right" — and "Norma Lee" — "sweet as an angel, heart like gold, drive the men half crazy," her homage to her grandmother, who loved to Jitterbug and do the Imperial Swing.

And there are some sharp covers on SRV's "Pride and Joy," Bonnie Raitt's "Love Me Like a Man," Susan Tedeschi's "I Fell in Love," Clapton's "Tore Down" and Delany & Bonnie's "Only You Know, I Know."

She handles a crowd that sometimes doesn't listen and might be drinking a little too much, keeping the show on the road, driving the guitar leads, giving room for her band mates to step up. Her band is tight — Matt McCauley, playing piano since 1968; Buck Buckler, hitting the bass since 1966; and Bud Rager, the drummer who has been behind her since she started in the early '90s.

Born in Oakville in South County July 13, 1974, Neels heard a lot of Joplin, Cream, Delany & Bonnie and Ray Charles on her mother's record player growing up. But it was a tape of Chuck Berry's "Greatest Hits," played on family trips to the Lake of the Ozarks, that got her going.

"I thought, man, I want to learn how to play guitar like Chuck Berry," she said during a BluesLetter interview at Blueberry Hill, the very club where Berry still appears every month.

"I got a chance to open for Chuck Berry here at Blueberry Hill, that was unbelievable for me. My band and I played downstairs here in the Duck Room, in 2003. I was so star struck. He signed the card that had my name and Chuck's name on it — he was really nice. "We were

told not to talk to him unless he spoke to us. But he wanted to meet me and say hi — it was just a great experience." Neels said.

She had met another hero far earlier — in the late 80s when she was 15. "It was sophomore year in high school. Bonnie Raitt came to the Muny Opera stage that summer. My mom got tickets right after she came out with 'Nick of Time.' Before the concert my mom says I should write her a note — tell her you are into her music, you admire her and she's a big influence on you. I go, 'Mom, we are never going to meet Bonnie Raitt.' We got to the concert. We send the note back to her and it got to the right person and she sent out two backstage passes for my mom and I — and we got to meet her." Neels recalls. "She was so sweet and so inspiring. She told me to keep playing those blues. From then on I was determined to do something with the guitar."

She met Raitt again the next summer: "My life changed when I met Bonnie Raitt in high school. People my age were listening to horrible music. I was going back to 1972 looking up her older albums and I felt so different from the other people listening to the music that was popular in the early 90s." After she graduated in 1992, she saw her next major influence — the St. Louis blues band Patti and the Hit Men, who was playing in Webster Groves.

"She did all the classics and I met her and talked to her and got to see a real live band up close. That got me sneaking into bars, underage, not to drink, just to hear the music being played around town," Neels said. She also said the blues guitar of Rich McDonough played a big role in her development.

She got into a couple of all-girl rock bands, the Skillet Sisters and Delilah — but didn't like the sound. She wanted to express her own feeling through her music.

In 1998 her grandmother Norma Lee, passed away, and she decided it was time to form a band of her own. She and her drummer, Bud Rager, found a couple of other musicians from an ad in the River Front Times and the Melissa Neels Band was on the air.



Melissa Neels photo by Angie Knost

She jammed with Patti Thomas at the Broadway Oyster Bar and got gigs at Mike and Min's in Soular. Keyboard player Matt McCauley joined up in 2001 and the new band played the Big Muddy Blues Festival and the Baby Blues Showcase in 2003. The band opened for Berry and Little Milton that year and for Ike Turner in 2004.

All this came at the same time she held down her day job at Chrysler, building Dodge Caravans on the assembly line, a job that started in 1995. In 2005, the company ordered her to the night shift and she had to quit playing music. "We were playing 10 or 11 gigs a month and I got a little burned out working at the same time, 40 to 50 hours a week. So I decided to take a break for three months, but it lasted two years," she said.

Back on the dayshift in 2007, she fired the band back up with a new bass player, Bob Keller, who had played for Allman Joy, the Gaslight Square band that evolved into the Allman Brothers. The next year, however, Chrysler ended her career as an autoworker by closing its Fenton plant, bringing to a halt a run in St. Louis that at one time employed 8,000 people. Like many people who had worked for the plant, "I had to reevaluate everything again," Neels said.

She quit playing music and went back to school, becoming a medical assistant. She got a job in that field but was laid off again last year. Now, she's got a new bass player — Buck Buckler — and says she's happy now with "the right mix of guys." And, she has so far resisted getting another day job.

She has had some special moments during this latest period, playing a few times with an all-female lineup — a group called Sisters Getting Paid — and doing a Stevie Ray Vaughn tribute last November at the Pageant where she played lead on "Pride and Joy" and "Texas Flood" with the Steve Pecaro Band.

The current Melissa Neels Band has been playing together for the last nine months and the gigs are starting to add up again. Maybe this time around Neels can become the full-time player she has wanted to be since she heard that tape of Chuck Berry in her parents' van. 🎵

Neels has a CD out, the all-original "Shine," produced by Stephen Martin in 2009. She and the band can be heard live the first Friday of the month at Hammerstone's in Soular, and regularly at Satchmo's in Chesterfield, the Halfway Haus on Michigan Ave., The Broadway Oyster Bar downtown, The Jane Event at Just John's in the Grove, the Cottleville Wine Cellar, west of St. Peters; and at the Robbler Vineyard and Winery along the Missouri River in New Haven, Mo.

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February Live Music Schedule

2	Cherry Bomb Hurricane
7	Funky Butt Brass Band
14	Miss Jubilee and the Humdingers
16	Aaron Griffin Mojo Rising
21	Sarah and The Tall Boys
23	Mojo Roots
28	Little Rachel Fenton

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Fontella Bass

1940 to 2012

By Bruce Olson

Family, friends, fans and fellow performers gave one of the greatest St. Louis singers, Fontella Bass, an emotional memorial tribute early in January following her death December 27 from complications following a heart attack. She was 72 and lived in University City. She was praised as a woman who lived her life “straight up — no chaser,” who added a “great deal to the rich landscape of St. Louis music,” and who in the music business was sometimes “labeled a troublemaker because she stood up for herself.”

Her best-known performance was certainly the 1965 hit, “Rescue Me.” But it was only a brief moment in a musical career that spanned seven decades from the time she first started to sing at the Pleasant Green Baptist Church in North St. Louis until her stunning appearances at the Big Muddy Blues Festivals in the early days of the 21st century.

Her family was drenched in church music and so was she. Born July 3, 1940, by age five she was playing the piano with her grandmother, Nevada Carter, at the Buddy Walton Funeral Home. Her mother, Martha Bass, was a gospel singer who took the 9-year-old Fontella on the road with her while she sang with the Clara Ward Singers. “I sang my first solo when I got baptized,” Fontella recalled in a 1989 interview with the New York Times. “Everybody would sing their song and ask the church to pray for them. I sang ‘How About You,’ and pretty soon people would come to church just to hear me sing that song. But when I had it real good the other kids started to sing that song so I had to learn another one.”

With her mother, “We would sing from town to town,” she said. “One night we’d go 50 miles, the next time another 50, the next night we’d get to New Mexico, and on like that clean over ‘till we’d get to California. When we’d get tired of singing, we’d just fold up and come home.”

At 16 years old she met Willie Mae Ford Smith, based in St. Louis and one of the most important gospel singers of the 20th century — and now a fellow member of the St. Louis Walk of Fame on Delmar Boulevard. Fontella wanted to join Smith’s group on the spot. But her mother wouldn’t

allow it and Fontella got a job playing piano at the Showboat Club near Chain of Rocks. Bass’ singing always reflected these early gospel influences, especially once they blended with her other experiences while growing up — the rock ‘n’ roll she was hearing on the radio, and the blues and jazz at clubs in East St. Louis.

In high school she started playing piano with J.C. Story & His All-Stars and the band won a talent contest preceding a Ray Charles concert. The St. Louis Argus ran her photo and she was on her way. She graduated from Soldan High School in 1958, singing teen hits like Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti.”



Photo by Wiley Price / St. Louis American

She auditioned as a singer for a carnival show then passing through St. Louis and for two weeks sang with the Claxton carnival, making an enormous \$175 a week. She was preparing to go on to the next town when, “my mother literally dragged me off the train,” she told the Times.

During the carnival she was spotted by Little Milton Campbell, the St. Louis R&B singer who was working clubs on the North and East Side with Oliver Sain. Milton and Sain were by then involved in the launching of Bobbin Records, the St. Louis label that also signed Albert King, Benny Sharp and other prominent performers.

Her first appearance on a record came in 1962 with Little Milton’s Bobbin cut “So Mean to Me.” Her first solo was “I Don’t Hurt Anymore,” a bluesy vamp on a song made a hit by Diana Washington. Also in 1962, she was on a fine example of the work being done by the Oliver Sain Orchestra, “Honey Bee.”

In 1963 she recorded “I Love a Man” with Ike Turner and the Ikettes and did a duet with Tina Turner on “Poor Little Fool.” She was also moonlighting under the name Sabrina. She had a dispute over a New Year’s Eve booking in 1965 and quit Sain. By then Bobbin had closed and along with Little Milton she decided to move to Chicago. Newly married to trumpeter Lester Bowie, who had also quit Sain, she was ready for a new phase.

Little Milton, now working for the Chess brothers, had a No. 1 R&B hit in March 1965 and Bass signed with their Checker label. There she teamed with Bobby McClure, who was also from St. Louis and had sung with the Sain Revue, for a duet on “Don’t Mess Up a Good Thing.” Ironically, the song was written by Sain — he’d penned it on a car ride while driving from St. Louis to Chicago for the session. Producer Billy Davis added a dance beat called the Uncle Willie and Fontella went onto the Billboard charts for the first time, lasting for 15 weeks and reaching into the Top Five.

Davis then brought in Phil Wright, an arranger, and began putting together the song that would become “Rescue Me.” Davis recorded Fontella’s vocals during a long session at the Chess studios and also got the bass line and the drum. The writing credit went to Carl Smith and Raynard Miner, who had written the Little Milton hit.

Bass always disputed the writing credit on the hit. In “Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records,” Bass told author Nadine Cohodas she “was tricked out of the publishing [rights].”

“Anybody can do rhythm takes. You have to put the melody over the top of them. When we were recording that, I forgot some of the words. Back then, you didn’t stop while the tape was running, and I remembered from the church what to do if you forget the words. I sang, ‘Ummm, ummm, ummm,’ and it worked out just fine,” Bass said.

According to Cohodas, Bass was paid \$11,000 for the artist royalties, but felt that was too low. All the others concerned said she had nothing to do with writing the song, except Pete Cosey, the guitar player who thought she had “embellished quite a bit, especially the ending.”

Davis estimated the record sold somewhere between 700,000 and 1 million copies. But the Chess royalty rate was lower than other companies and to be certified as a million seller the company had to open its books to Record Industry Association of America. Leonard Chess refused to open his books to anyone.

Either way, the song was one of the label’s biggest hits. It reached No. 1 on the R&B charts and No. 4 on the pop charts and lasted 19 weeks. Bass was named the No. 1 female R&B vocalist by Cash Box for 1965 and No. 4 in the general category behind Petula Clark, Shirley Ellis and Marianne Faithful. The song made her name, hitting at a time of the increasing popularity of soul music. Some dubbed it the “biggest hit Aretha Franklin never had.” It was also a big favorite of the troops in Vietnam, who identified with the title and the gutsy show of strength in the vocal, as while as digging that rousing trombone line.

But Fontella didn’t get rich off “Rescue Me” and became ensnarled in the dispute with Chess over the royalties. An LP followed the hit but it didn’t sell well, nor did her follow-up single “Recovery.” She decided to go to Paris,

where Bowie joined several members from the St. Louis Black Artists Group to play and promote Black Nationalism and avant jazz. She recorded “Les Stances A Sophie” and “Art Ensemble of Chicago With Fontella Bass” with Bowie, records that had no chance commercially but that are now well-known jazz albums and sought by collectors.

In 1972 she returned to the United States and did the LP “Free” for Paula Records, a company out of Shreveport, that was recorded on Natural Bridge Avenue at Sain’s Archway Studios. Bass was well into the politics of the time, beginning the second phase of her career. “Free” is another lost classic that showed how her gospel roots and powerful voice could rise to any occasion. The All Music reviewer called it a “deeply spiritual and moving examination of post-civil rights America.” It includes powerful cuts like “To Be Free,” “Talking About Freedom,” and “My God, My Freedom, My Home.”

When this didn’t sell Bass retreated to St. Louis and aside from a single, “As Soon As I Touched Him,” in 1977 for Epic, she stopped recording until she found new energy from the church and recorded her first gospel album, “Promises: A Family Portrait of Faith,” with her mother and brother.

Struggling to make a living by then, she got a break when American Express used “Rescue Me” without her permission. She obtained a nice settlement and finally got the pay-off she was due from her hit. In 1995, she made another gospel LP, “No Ways Tired,” and began singing at the Mt. Beulah Missionary Baptist Church in University City.

She also parlayed her earlier experiences in Paris to pull off successful tours of Europe and played occasionally around St. Louis. In 2001, she had a particularly memorable appearance at the Big Muddy Festival when she showed off her European touring band, including the St. Louis multi-instrumentalists the Bosman Twins. “I wish more people in St. Louis knew about her,” longtime friend Dwight Bosman said after her death. “She was known and well-loved all over the world, in Germany, Switzerland, Italy and France, doing international festivals where they would chant ‘Fontella, Fontella.’”

She was certainly well-loved by the crowd at the Jan. 4 memorial, where the Bosmans led the horn section for a rousing finish to the evening at the Shalom Church City of Peace in Florissant. Marsha Evans, who had opened for her in Europe, lived up to her mentor’s reputation on “Every Day I Have the Blues” and on the finale where the whole congregation joined in on “Rescue Me.”

By then the obituaries had been written for every major media outlet around the world and the tributes poured in from every corner of the United States and Europe. “Come on baby and rescue me, Come on baby and rescue me.” ♪



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Glazer's



Rum Drum Ramblers Mean Scene Lightnin' Thunders Music/Big Muddy Records, 2011

By Lee Howland - aka East Side Slim

The Rum Drum Ramblers are “favorite sons” of the St. Louis music scene, appealing to older semi-jaded blues hounds, younger punkers and scenesters, acoustic-minded folkies and most everyone in between. For the benefit of readers not familiar with the band, it is comprised of 3 young south city men (St. Louis): Mat Wilson – guitar and intense man-of-a-thousand-voices vocals, Joey Glynn – basses of all sorts and laid-back demeanor, and Ryan Koenig – harmonica, vocals, percussion, mandolin, washboard (and anything else he can fit in his case.)

Rum Drum Ramblers have a sound like no one else – making new sounds that sound old but yet new via their talent, vibrancy, energy and inventiveness. Passion is the essence for what they do, starting with a base of pre-war blues and taking that in any direction that pleases them. Mean Scene is their 3rd album that I am aware of, with each being a step forward in the evolution of the band’s sound (from a very strong start.)

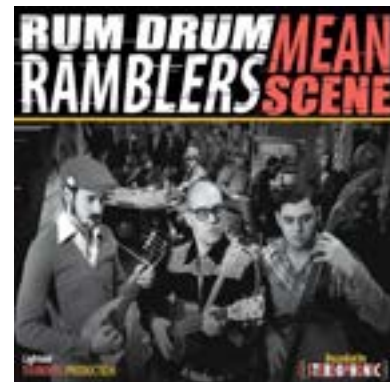
The ‘Ramblers brought in a few special guests and friends to augment some of the cuts on the CD, including: Adam “Lightnin’” Hoskins (lead guitarist for Pokey LaFarge), Tim Sullivan (piano & organ), Felix Reyes (lap-steel) and the Funky Butt Brass Band horns (Matt Brinkmann, Ben Reece, Adam Huckle and Aaron Chandler). Reyes was instrumental in achieving the rich yet old-school sound of the CD via his production work, along with Mike Hero, Dave Herrero and Shane Kiel. The CD (an LP version is also available) artwork is also special and entertaining in its own right, courtesy of the talents of Bill Streeter, Shane Kiel and Ashley Marciano.

The Songs: (all songs written by Rum Drum Ramblers)

- 1. Jack & Tom** - This jaunty yet sparse tune represents Rum Drum Ramblers’ sound at its core – percussive acoustic guitar work, kitchen-sink hand percussion, melodic acoustic bass fiddle and idiosyncratic vocals – old school soul for the modern age.
- 2. Jump Into A Frenzy** - This laid-back, melancholy tune sounds like it walked right out of Tin Pan Alley...and only in a positive way! The additions of piano (Tim Sullivan), trumpet (Adam Huckle) and clarinet (Ben Reece) flesh out the sound a bit, reminding me of the music the Asylum Street Spankers performed early in their run.
- 3. Mean Scene** - The title cut for the CD, this mid-tempo rousing tune recalls the bluesy hokum of artists such as Tampa Red. If you are not familiar with the music of Tampa Red (Hudson Whittaker), well shame on you...
- 4. If It Have To Be** - I’ve heard this song dozens of times and I’m still not sure how to describe it – other than exceptional. Maybe take some Sonny Terry, throw in some early period Lowell George bluesy eccentricity, and stir it up among an unforgettably catchy bluesy melody...yes...that might do it!
- 5. Nothin’ New** - This track works an earthy, loping, Texas swing vibe, replete with acoustic back porch-styled harp work. Catchy? Indeed.
- 6. Gonna Haunt You** - From the watery chording and falsetto howling at the beginning of the track you might be unsure where this one is heading, but after that short introduction the song settles into a fine romping bluesy number. At first listen the vocal delivery and harp squalls will catch perk up your ears, but listen to closely to the wonderfully melodic bass lines provided by Joey Glenn. His melodic playing allows Mat and Ryan to wander off in eccentric directions, adding great color and emotion to the band’s music. Per CD notes, this song is “dedicated to the memory of Robert Ward and his untouchable Magnatone sound”. (A nice pun included by the way, as Robert Ward was a founding member of an early version

Mean Scene is the sound of Rum Drum Ramblers maturing, absorbing all their influences and ably assembling them into a sound of their own. While the bands’ rawness and edginess are still very much on display, so is an attention to song craft and musicianship that would seem to transcend the calendar ages of the band members. Mean Scene is an album the band has every right to be especially proud of, as well as being an album that is a gem to listen to. Let’s rate this bad boy – East Side Slim is handing out an STLBlue-someter rating of 4.50 to Rum Drum Ramblers’ Mean Scene. Turn the volume up a bit from time to time so that you can experience every nuance contained within.

If you happen to see that Rum Drum Ramblers are playing a venue near you, strongly consider catching the show. The primary reason is the talent level of the band and the joyousness of the music. Also, due to various commitments by the band members Rum Drum plays a limited amount of live dates, but rest assured it will be a night to remember – guaranteed.🎵



of the Ohio Players who were called the Ohio Untouchables at the time.)

7. Hometown Blues - I guess the toy piano used here qualifies as part of Ryan’s percussion accessories! The percussive guitar chording heard here comes close to merging a Dixieland jazz style with ‘30s blues lament. It’s very much a rhythmically oriented mid-tempo blues, with various flourishes that ensure that you know this is a Rum Drum Ramblers tune.

8. Get Behind The Wheel - Mat’s love of old cars is showing on this tune, played in a jaunty 2nd line fashion with the Funky Butt Brass Band horns. The lyrical content is full of delightfully eccentric twists and turns, adding to the joyful vibe of the song, with the tune continuously building in intensity until it feels like it is going to fly off the highway in a trail of blown rubber.

9. Kicks - A pleasant little ditty speaking to the desires of a younger man toward a woman a few years his senior... the only thing missing is a cat playing jug (although the bass fiddle fills in pretty well.)

10. Do You - This pop-folk tune is reminiscent of things you might have heard in the early to mid ‘60s, from folks such as Koerner, Ray and Glover. It has a very pleasant melody, featuring what almost sounds like tack piano (a piano with tack pushed into the hammers.) The pleasant melody is in juxtaposition to the lyric, which has a much more pointed edge – which to me sounds like a warning about being too hard, too cynical, not be open to the joys of life and people and ideas around you.

11. All The Little Days - Ah, here’s Rum Drum at its raw best – an idiosyncratic slow blues with shades of Pat Hare and Lester Butler (yes, combining new and old) - the individuality and honesty of the ‘Ramblers’ music will draw you in and keep you there!

12. What I Must’ve Done - This set-closer almost qualifies as a ballad, although it’s just a tad too quirky and quick of tempo for that. This one is an acoustic solo piece from guitarist Wilson featuring a melancholy and gentle feel, but still possessing a raw edge.



From the Crowd

with Madison Thorn

For this month's *From the Crowd*, we'll be taking a look at the one-of-a-kind venue, The Blues City Deli. Twice a week you will be greeted with more than the usual and delicious food, you'll find some of the best live music and the nicest people. Check out their website bluescitydeli.com for daily food specials and their concert calendar.

The Zydeco Crawdaddy's rocked the place in full Mardi Gras regalia in honor of The Deli's Second Annual "King Cake Smackdown" on January 19th. Photo: Reed Radcliffe



Deli owner, Vinnie Valenza (far left) sits in with the Blu-City All-Stars on December 29th. Pictured left to right are Aaron Chandler, Adam Hucke and Mike "Big Mike" Aguirre. The band and crowd closed out the year in uproarious style. Photo: Dan Costello



The greatest compliment a child can give: Preston Hubbard gets part of a cookie from a Deli regular, "Munchkin", while he plays with Chris Ruest, Joe Meyer, and Hector Watt on January 12th Photo: Madison Thorn

If you'd like to see your photos of The St. Louis Music Scene in the next *From the Crowd* edition, send them to Madison at mthornphotos@yahoo.com

Join the St. Louis Blues Society today!

The St. Louis Blues Society is a Missouri 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation dedicated to preserving blue music, to fostering the growth and appreciation of blues music, and to providing blues artists with an opportunity for public performance and individual improvement in their field, all for the educational and artistic benefit of the general public.

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

Membership benefits include:

- * Notification of blues concerts
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