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The Monthly Magazine of the St. Louis Blues Society

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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.

Contents

Letter to Members	3
Rich McDonough	4
20th Annual Noelathon	6
Were You There?	8
The Art of Noelathon	9
CD Review	10
From the Crowd	12

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Special Thanks...

to Lynn Barlar for allowing us to invade her house to photograph her collection of Noelathon t-shirts for this month's issue!

Hello Blues Lovers,

Thanks for a Great Year!

Breathing new life into the Blues Society has been our mission for the last several months. The year is almost gone and we want to thank all of our members, volunteers, board and supporters of St. Louis blues music for giving us great feedback and support in our efforts. We also want to thank our BluesLetter staff and content contributors for all the work they have done to get this magazine started and we thank our family, friends and band mates for putting up with activities that took much of our time.

We've had great success with the Blues Brunch on the last Sunday of the month at The Great Grizzly Bear in Soulard this year. Last Sunday, November 25 was a special treat with our guests from New Orleans Luke Winslow King and Esther Rose. Thank you to all the fans that came out to support the Blues Society at these events.

We promise our monthly Sunday show in 2013 will be just as exciting. We kick off 2013 on Sunday, January 27 with a new name **BlueSundays** and a new time 1 pm to 4 pm. We'll be back at the Grizzly Bear for the months of January, February and March and then we plan to take the show on the road—three months at a time at favorite venues around the area. Look for details to come in the January *BluesLetter*.

We are making progress in our efforts and we look forward to lots of kewl blues stuff to do in 2013. If you're interested in being involved, have ideas you'd like to make happen, or just want to know what's going on, please get in contact with us through the website, or even better, come to the board meetings. The Blues Society works best when as many people as possible are involved.

Have a cheerful holiday season and be sure to support your local musicians.

Mary Kaye and Jeremy

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Rich McDonough: a gentle giant on the guitar

By Bruce Olson

Rich McDonough is such a big man he makes just about any guitar he plays look like a toy. As he sits in his chair, he hunches over so what you see is the top of his Irish cap and his mighty hands running low on the neck of the instrument.

He's a gentle giant, his playing has a keen touch matched by only the very best blues players.

Born on Dec. 28, 1963, in southwest St. Louis County, McDonough's life has centered on the guitar. His father was a pipe fitter who gave the instrument a try and discarded it to the hall closet where Rich found it when he was 12. At 16, he watched a television ad for B.B. King. "It kind of struck me ... that's a great way to play guitar," McDonough said during a BluesLetter interview earlier this year outside BB's Jazz, Blues and Soups.

"I didn't know what I was listening to but it sounded like the right thing to play to me. I couldn't stand MTV then and I can't stand it now. I still have the exact same taste I did then. I started digging for records and a friend of mine's older brother turned me on to Albert King. That really knocked my socks off."

By the time he discovered Albert King, McDonough had dropped out of high school ("I quit the day I turned 16") and was working at GrandPa Pidgeon's warehouse in Ballwin, moving crates by day and prowling the North Side music scene by night.

In 1983, then 20 years old, McDonough met legendary St. Louis harp player Keith Doder and began playing at Witts' Lounge on Martin Luther King Drive with Doder, veteran bluesman Skeet Rodgers and drummer David 'Capp' Tims as the Blue City Band. Learning quickly, he immersed himself in the '80s revival of St. Louis blues, playing with one eye on his gigs and another still on the man he was most influenced by—Albert King.

Although recording for Stax Records in Memphis, King maintained a home across the river in Lovejoy III. and continued to play around the St. Louis area. McDonough was blown away. Albert King, he said, "transcends any city. In the history of music, of any instrument, he produced one of the most unique sounds ever created. Nobody had the imagination before him to take the strings and bend them the way he did.

That bending, that's how he got those notes."

"I do that, sure," he continued. "Albert influenced every guitar player in the chain even if they don't know it. He was from the older school. He had an urban sound all the way—with the raw feel on the strings. He played his guitar like a human voice, not the best technically but when he hit a note you knew it."

In 1987, McDonough joined another player he had his eye on. Rondo Leewright led one of the hottest bands in a town brimming with hot bands, big crowds and the new Soulard scene. "I followed him around with my guitar. He'd let me sit in at the end of the night here and there and when I found out he needed a guitar player I called him and he asked, 'Do you play slide?' and I said, 'Yeah.' But I really didn't play it. I had a basic idea, but it was baptism by fire in Rondo's band. He used lots of slide and in the first two or three months people got a chance to hear the worst slide you ever heard because I didn't know what I was doing. They were patient with it and I started developing my sound there." McDonough said.

Rondo's Blues Deluxe took St. Louis by storm, packing hot bodies into the Elvis Room at Blueberry Hill every weekend, traveling to nearby towns, playing five, six, sometimes seven times a week. "Rondo was an entertainer's entertainer. We didn't play one packed house after another for nothing. He played to the crowd, he had a super powerful voice." McDonough said. He also had a super powerful guitar player, a player who had already developed a recognizable style behind his recognizable hunch.

McDonough lasted a wild five years in Rondo's band. "That had run its course—let's just say Rondo was fighting with his own demons," he said. For two years he played with singer Erma Whiteside in a band called the Imperial Blues Band. This stint included a memorable performance at a memorable concert—the St. Louis Blues Celebration in 1994.

In 1997, McDonough did what so many St. Louis blues players find inevitable—he joined the Soulard Blues Band, playing with bassist Art Dwyer and his '90s gang while branching out into a separate small group with Larry Griffin and Eric McSpadden, an acoustic trio called Willie and the Blue Cats.

He left Souldard in 1999 to tour with old running mate Keith Doder on a national sprint through places like Cleveland and Indianapolis then into South Carolina and back to Arkansas. Back in St. Louis, he decided it was about time to form his own band. The Rich McDonough Band started in 2000 with Rich on guitar, Marty Spikener, from the Blue City Band on drums and vocals, Craig Thornton from Rondo's Blues Deluxe on bass and Matt Murdick on keys. In 2003, the band traveled to Hungary to headline at the Debrecen Jazz Nepok (Jazz Days).

After several personnel changes beginning in late 2003 with the departure of Murdick, the band finally came together as the formidable foursome of McDonough, McSpadden, Sharon Foehner on bass and Joe Pastor on drums, a band that holds together today as Rough Grooves with new drummer Derek Bonn.

McDonough continued to tour though the decade, playing the road with Rockin' Jake and touring Europe with Kenny 'Blues Boss' Wayne. "Touring with Rockin' Jake we saw a lot of stuff. I'd never been to the Pacific Ocean, but when you are 6-feet-7 that van gets old. We had plenty of gigs here so it got to the point where I asked myself why put myself through that."

McDonough now plays in Rough Grooves and in several other bands, including a recent duo with McSpadden that has had several gigs at BB's, in the all-star St. Louis Social Club and with Anita Rosamond and at various festivals.

This year, McDonough was named Blues Artist of the Year 2012 at the St. Louis Bluesweek Festival in May, adding to the previous trophy of Rough Groove's 2008 Riverfront Times Best Blues Artists award.

Now approaching his 50th birthday, McDonough has seen the St. Louis blues scene through the great rise of the '80s and '90s and the fall in the 2000's with the passing of most of the leaders of the older generation. McDonough is something of a new elder in today's scene as it regains its strength following the recent recession and troubled economic times. He's an optimist about the future.

"I think it's been better lately, just in the last few months. We are starting to see more faces back out. It's still not where it was, when the economy changed you saw it fall right away. Some places closed and some struggled to keep afloat. Our crowd has always been people in their 20s up to people in the 80s—that's a constant. And we have a handful of regulars we see once a month," he said.

"We've got a good scene here. In general, we've got a scene that is musician friendly. I hear that from other people who come here. We don't have the cutthroat, paranoid attitude. Everybody knows everybody."

After playing with so many people—recording, traveling, and gigging with band after band—Rich McDonough is a solid rock in the St. Louis landscape.



Photo by Madison Thorn

The big-shouldered guitar hero in the Irish cap with what looks like a toy guitar in his rugged hands is a player who can get a crowd up dancing or put them into a peaceful trance. He seems always able to touch a chord in the listener that remains in the heart and the soul. 🎸

Rich McDonough discography:

Blue Earth, Rough Grooves, 2011
Can't Stop Now, Kenny 'Blues Boss' Wayne, 2008
Play Something Pretty for Me, Uvee Hayes, 2008
How Long, Alvin Jett, 2008
Attitude, Kim Massie, 2006
Live at the Grizzly Bear, Souldard Blues Band, 2006
This Is Christmas, Anita Rosamond, 2006
Johnnie Be Eighty, and Still Bad, Johnnie Johnson, 2005
Live at the Sheldon, Rich McDonough Band, 2005
School for Fools, Larry Thurston, 2002
Rich McDonough Band, Rich McDonough Band, 2002
There'll Come a Time, Uvee Hayes, 2001
Blue to Bright, Keith Doder, 2000
"and Rush McAllister...on the feet!!", various artists, 1999
(with Willie and the Blue Cats)
A Glimpse of Glory, Ken Hensley, 1999
Cross Eyed Cat, Rondo's Blues Deluxe, 1994
Shack Pappy's, Rondo's Blues Deluxe, 1990

The 20th Annual Noelathon

By Mary Kaye Tönnies

The annual *Noelathon* at BB's Jazz Blues and Soups being held this year on the Sunday before Christmas always promises to provide great entertainment and fun surprises. The show features as many local musical acts as the event host, Margaret Bianchetta, can squeeze into the allotted time and she recruits a timekeeper to make sure things stay on schedule. Emcee Beatle Bob brings along plenty of CDs, calendars and other curios for attendance prizes awarded between sets.

Each year, Bianchetta produces a compilation *Noelathon* CD for sale at the show featuring the musicians performing at the event. Invited bands and solo artists from several genres record a holiday tune during the month of December at guitarist Steve Martin's Absolute Studio. The songs are either originals, covers or creative parodies and the band is sure to play theirs live (sometimes for the first time) during their *Noelathon* set.

The concept for *Noelathon* began with a show The Mighty Big Band members hosted in 1993 called *Hot Club Canary Timeline Party* where they each invited every band that they had ever played with to do one big fantastic show. Bianchetta said the show was such a success and she and Martin had such fun producing it that they decided to start a tradition and chose the holiday season for their new event. She has two other reasons for producing the show. First, she said, she wants to document as much St. Louis music as she can, "keeping alive the sounds of bands that may no longer exist." Second, she said, "I never get a chance to hear other bands!"

Much anticipated fun comes with the unveiling of the year's *Noelathon* theme. Bianchetta tries her best to keep the theme secret before the show. Most often, she chooses one of the songs as the title track for the CD and as the theme for the evening. Some years, theme ideas pop in her head from some funny situation

she experienced during the year. Twice, tributes were made to fellow musicians who had passed during the year. 'Big Bright Star' in memory of Mike Tabacci in 2002 and 'Swinging on a Star' in memory of Rich Cotton and Mark Osborne in 2010. Working with Bianchetta on the top-secret project is local caricature artist, Bill Michel who produces the artwork for the CD cover and souvenir event t-shirts, or lately, coffee mugs.

And what would a *Noelathon* be without the Torture Chamber Orchestra? Another project of Bianchetta's, the TCO with all its

members in attendance can be as large as 25 musicians. Members are local musicians, musicians' spouses and music fans, and membership is open to anyone who tells Margaret they want to join. The catch—a member cannot play an instrument he or she knows, so if you are a professional musician, you have to play an instrument different from the one you make money on...hence the name. The TCO plays a monthly gig at the Shanti and has played different venues around town. They play for tips (or drinks) and have become the favorite sing-a-long act at *Noelathon*.

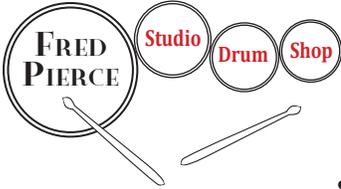


Photo by Maureen Nichols

Proceeds from the event and sales of *Noelathon* merchandise benefit the St. Francis Cabrini Academy band instrument fund. St. Francis Cabrini Academy is located on Oregon Ave. just off Gravois in Benton Park West. Like most of today's Catholic grade schools, St. Francis Cabrini Academy is the result of the consolidation of several old parish schools. Approximately 165 students. Today, the academy is supported by ten downtown and south city Catholic parishes and the Diocese of St. Louis and is open to children of all religions and backgrounds.

The Academy proudly boasts of their 'Cabrini Band.' The band performs at several local and school events throughout the year and is open to all students in grades five through eight. Students who cannot afford an instrument are loaned one by the school and that is where the *Noelathon* comes in—helping to keep the Cabrini kids in band instruments and supplies and nurture their mind by opening their world to music and art.

The 20th Annual *Noelathon* takes place this year on Sunday, December 23 from 2 to 8:30 pm at BB's Jazz, Blues and Soups, 700 South Broadway. This year's line-up includes the Harris Brothers Blues Project, The Mighty Big Band, The Fabulous Foehners, the Western Satellites, Lonesome Highway, Willem Von Hombracht Group and Box of Nerves. Come on out to enjoy the music and support the musicians and a great cause. 🎵



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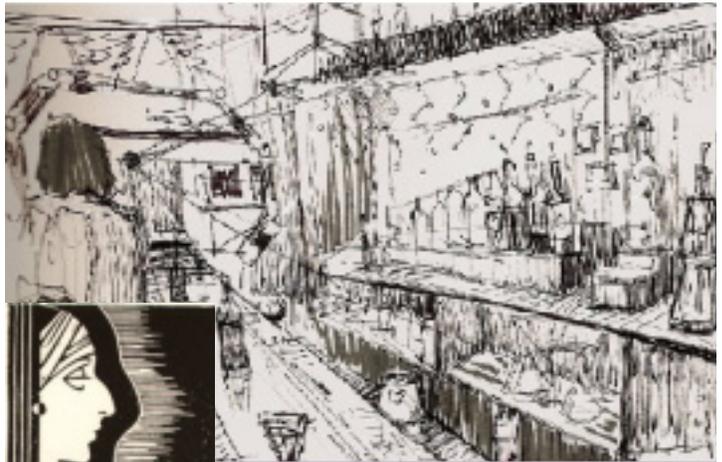
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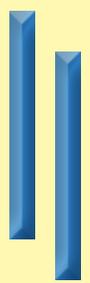
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Were you there?

Beatle Bob's Noelathon Remembrances

Christmas time is here again! When I dig out my *Noelathon* CDs every December I feel like I'm visiting with some of my oldest and dearest friends. With that in mind, I hope you too have enjoyed the past 19 annual *Noelathons* as I have. And I hope you can join this year's *Noelathon* Christmas celebration that goes down as smoothly as a mug of hot cider. Put it on your Christmas wish list if necessary; it is an experience you will remember with pleasure throughout the year.

Canned Christmas music is ubiquitous now. Soon nice recordings will be played in shopping malls across the city. Recordings in a store are a musical wallpaper that references enjoyable emotions. How revitalizing it will be, therefore, to encounter yet another freshly conceived annual *Noelathon* holiday performance. *Noelathon* is sometimes mistakenly referred to as a Christmas concert. This show is not exclusively about Christmas, nor will concert-goers experience anything resembling sing-along Christmas tunes or Santa appearances. It is however, a true holiday extravaganza, and a fabulous way to kick off the festive season. This timeless music, a lovely weave of some of St. Louis finest sounds is perfect for the many moods of this season Christmas, the winter solstice, or any time the snow sparkles on a clear, cold night. The music provides solace, inspiration and so much more.

The festive charity event benefiting the St. Francis Cabrini music department is put together by Margaret Bianchetta whose vocal expertise brings something ageless and timeless to each and every song she sings. Some of the songs on the deservedly well-loved *Noelathon* CD collection (sold at the show) have rarely been sung better and Ms. Bianchetta who lends such a distinctive flare to some of the Christmas chestnuts that it'll take you a moment to realize you have heard the song before. She shares the view that our little genre has a wonderful musicality to it.

In fact, if there is a more entertaining St. Louis Christmas compilation than the annual *Noelathon* CD, I have not heard it. This is a Christmas treasure that will quickly become a favorite of anyone who owns it, a gift to be unwrapped 365 days a year. It's a party platter that includes tracks of R&B, blues, folk, exotica, rockabilly, novelty, and more. This is a nonstop Christmas party—definitely the one place you'll find the disparate likes of local acts like the Soulard Blues Band, Box Of Nerves, Celia's Yuletide Express and the Torture Chamber Orchestra breaking fruitcake together. 🎵

The Art of Noelathon

Bill Michel, who holds a BA in Fine Art from Southeast Missouri State, has been working as a caricature artist in St. Louis for four decades and estimates that he has done 40,000 caricatures during his career. He contracts out through local artist guilds to do private and corporate parties and events, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and festivals. He also does commission pieces. Each year, the *Noelathon* art, he says, works the same way as any other commissioned work. “Margaret tells me what she wants and then we go back and forth several times until we agree that that is what she wants. The first one I do is never the one she wants.”

The “back and forth” is much easier now for commissioned work than it used to be for artists. Like the rest of the world, caricature art has gone digital.

For the last few years Michel has worked on a Corel program called Painter 12 and uses a tablet computer to produce his caricatures. “It used to be when they wanted something different you had to start all over each time. Now, I just make changes to what I have already done,” he said. Submitting work for approval is much easier now too—done via email—another time and heartache saver for an artist.

Michel has been doing the artwork for Noelathon since its inception in 1993. He has only missed two years—the years Bianchetta’s son Kaleb Kirby submitted his ideas. Lately, Kirby has been busy attending Berklee School of Music and the University of Missouri so Michel doesn’t have to worry about being bumped anymore. 🎵



Barbara Carr

Keep the Fire Burning

Catfood Records, 2012

By Bruce Olson

It's been almost 50 years since Barbara Carr signed with Chess Records and launched a recording career that has seen more downs than ups. Discovered by Oliver Sain in Gaslight Square, Carr was the replacement singer for Fontella "Rescue Me" Bass and in 1966 recorded "Don't Knock Love," and "I Can't Stop Now," a pair of songs that could have been hits if Chess was paying attention.

They were not, however, and Carr became a well-kept St. Louis secret, playing the bigger North Side clubs, sometimes sharing a bill with the likes of Etta James, raising her children and holding on to her musical sanity.

She ran her own record company, then did a series of Memphis-recorded albums aimed at what might be delicately referred to as an 'adult' audience, songs with titles like "Bone Me Like You Own Me" and "Footprints on the Ceiling" on albums that showed a strong singing voice but with lyrics that didn't exactly encourage mainstream recognition.

Finally, however, at age 71, Barbara Carr sounds like she's found her home in the Texas-based Catfood Records, where her lyrics have caught up with her stylish, deep-toned voice on her new release *Keep the Fire Burning*.

It's a blues album in the southern soul tradition, with a couple of references to St. Louis. Overseen by Mississippi soulman Johnny Rawls, who is featured on one duet with Carr, the album is solid on production values and thankfully lacking in recorded gimmickry, electronic beats or dirty lyrics. Instead, we get a full measure of Barbara Carr, a woman who can tell a story in a song, who can work a tune without resorting to falsification or technological gyrations.

Whether she sings of loneliness where she can't get up in the morning in "Hanging by a Thread," or whether she's yearning, promising she'll change her ways in "Come on Home" or whether she's hooking up with an old flame in "Back Together Again" her approach is an honest one.

Her voice plays well with Johnny McGhee's smooth southern guitar runs and is well mixed by Rawls and co-producer, bassist Bob Trenchard with an easy, three-piece horn section.

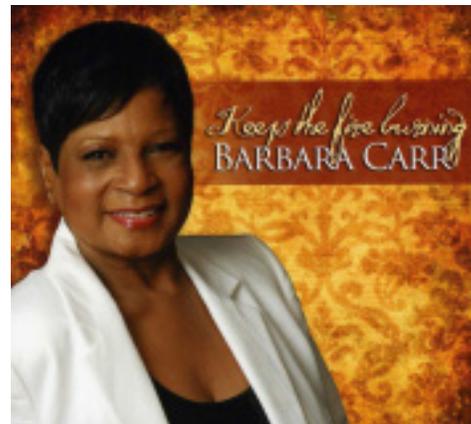
On, "I Got the Blues" McGhee starts with a riff that reminds me of Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" then Carr gives us a little autobiography about her St. Louis roots where she listened to Albert King and Little Milton to learn her blues. The song, probably the strongest on the record, finishes with a nice workout that would go over well live.

Another high point of the record comes as it heads into the home stretch, the duet with Rawls on "Hold On To What You Got," where the veterans trade verses and sing together on a song reminding an older couple to keep things together despite the difficulties of the world.

It comes as a counterpoint to the finale, "Sweet Talk Snake," where a loyal woman resists the charms of a Deep South seducer, standing at her door, a man who shows up out of nowhere with a wicked smile. "For me it was love, for you, just a game," she sings, never faltering nor weakening, the woman stays strong. "You talk so sweet but you can't come in," sung with the experience of a woman who has lived an honest life and knows where she stands.

The record was No. 10 on last month's Living Blues Radio Chart and Catfood says Carr will be featured in the next issue of *Living Blues*. The company also said the CD received a rare 4.5 star rating from *Downbeat* magazine and is going on their Best Albums of the Year List for 2012.

Carr rarely plays St. Louis these days, content instead to take her show to Europe where she shared the bill last month with Irma Thomas, Charlie Musselwhite, Guitar Shorty, Rosie Ledet and Marquise Knox at the *Lucerne Blues Festival* in Switzerland. But for her St. Louis fans, what is perhaps the best record of her career is available on the Internet. 🎵





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Jimmy Lee Kennett took the stage at the beginning of the night and showed the crowd how a true veteran puts on a show. Kennett's band had Bill Montgomery on bass and Fred Pierce on drums.

Artwork: RK

From the Crowd

with Madison Thorn

Rip Kastaris, a world-renowned artist, and I attended the Stevie Ray Vaughan Tribute at The Pageant on Nov. 10th but we left with very different results.



Steve Pecaro's band was the headliner for the evening and they made their presence known by making their work look easy. Pecaro's band had George Potsos on bass and Daryl Whited.

Photo: MT



Tony Campanella and his band mates, Nick Collico and Terry Melton, brought the house down with their incredible, high energy set; teaching us not to doubt the power of a trio Photo: MT



Monica Valli was one of the special guests for the event and she shocked the audience with her ability to run with the big dogs. Other guests included Melissa Neels, Sharon Bear, Gabriel Strange, Danny Liston and Obeid Khan. Artwork: RK

If you'd like to see your pictures From the Crowd in the next BluesLetter edition, send them to Madison at mthornphotos@yahoo.com

Join the St. Louis Blues Society today!

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