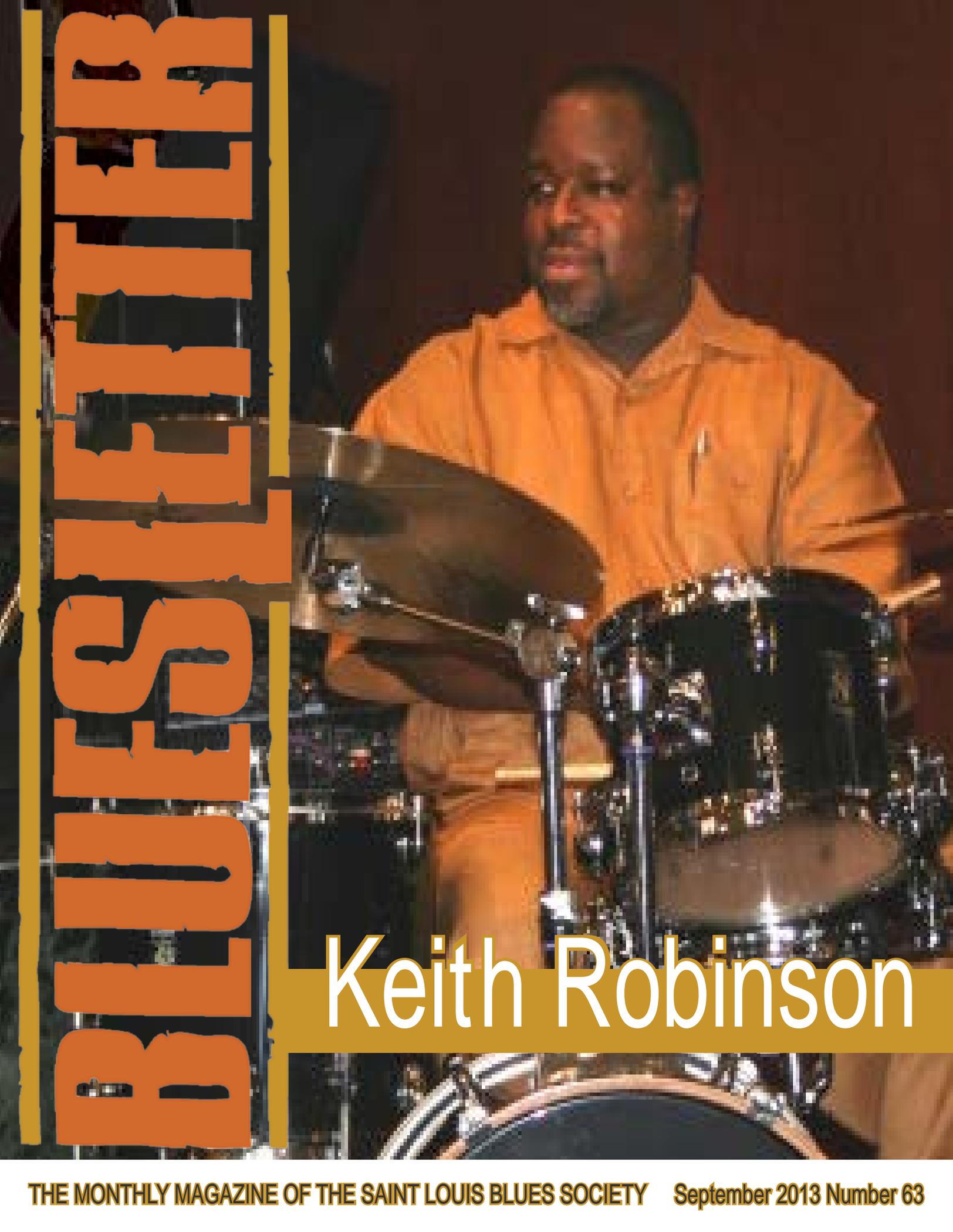


BLUESLETTER

A photograph of Keith Robinson, a Black man with a beard and glasses, wearing an orange polo shirt. He is seated and playing a drum set. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting a stage or club setting. The lighting is warm, highlighting his face and the drums.

Keith Robinson

The St. Louis Blues Society

BluesLetter

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The Monthly Magazine of the St. Louis Blues Society

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.

September 2013

Number 63

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On the Cover..

Keith Robinson, subject of this month's interview with Joe Pastor, is one of St. Louis' premier blues, R&B and rock'n'roll drummers. Photo courtesy of Keith Robinson.

DISCOUNTED EVENTS FOR BLUES SOCIETY MEMBERS

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26	Kilborn Alley Blues Band	10 pm
29	Biscuit Miller & The Mix	8:30 pm

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St. Louis Blues Society



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FREE



Noted music historian Robert Santelli will present "Rollin' and Tumblin': The Importance of Blues in American Music History" as part of the 2013 National Blues Museum Film/Lecture Series.

Santelli has written numerous books, including: *The Best of the Blues: The 101 Essential Blues Albums*; *The Bob Dylan Scrapbook, 1956-1966*; *This Land Is Your Land: Woody Guthrie and the Journey of an American Folk Song*; *The Big Book of Blues: A Biographical Encyclopedia*; and *Greetings from E Street: The Story of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band*. Currently he is the executive director of the GRAMMY Museum at L.A. Live.

Keith Robinson:

Leave Something for the Next Generation

By Joe Pastor

Anybody who is familiar with the St. Louis blues music scene must surely be familiar with Keith Robinson. Whether they know him by name or not, Keith is everywhere. He can frequently be found drumming behind major area acts such as Arthur Williams, Barbara Carr, Boo Boo Davis, and oh yeah, Chuck Berry. Robinson has been a regular member of Berry's band for well over a decade. Beginning when he was barely a teenager, Robinson has accumulated an impressive list of performing and recording credits which includes Johnnie Johnson, Oliver Sain, Albert King, Tyrone Davis, Rufus Thomas, Fontella Bass, Ernie Isley and Little Milton.

To those of us who know him well, Keith's personality is warm and jovial. He is a humble man who is quick to show his respect for area drummers and musicians, including those who have nothing like the resume he does. He will in fact name several local drummers who he believes are his musical superior. As a drummer myself, it is my long-held opinion that there is none better than Keith Robinson.

Robinson's time and groove are exemplary, as is his keen ability to follow subtle cues from the singer or bandleader—even without the benefit of prior rehearsal. He is known for his reliability, professional attitude and work ethic. Perhaps most importantly, he has a great sense of what his role in the band is and the discipline not to overstep it.

Robinson is grateful for an amazing career that started in his early childhood with Oliver Sain, and has continued with the biggest names in St. Louis music history. He feels a connection to that history and is working to see it thrive long into the future. His is an incredible story.

JP: I've heard that you grew up hanging out in Oliver Sain's recording studio. How did you get into that?

KR: It was weird, man, I had just moved onto San Francisco St. [in north St. Louis], I was a kid, I was about 6 or 7 years old. A friend of mine, his name was Duane, he stayed down the street from me and he said "I got a little job with this guy, he let me clean up around his studio. Do you want to go with me?" I said yeah so I went to his studio with him. And I was amazed because at that time, I had just started playing drums, and I didn't know it was

that kind of studio, you know? And so he started cleaning up, and said "come on, help me man," so I started helping him. Then later he said, "I don't want this job no more." I guess I was probably 10 or 11 by then. So I said, "I'll take the job if you don't want it." He said "Okay, I'll tell the man who I clean up for." So I started going around there then, every day, cleaning up for \$10 a week, but I didn't know who Oliver was.

JP: Did your mom know who Oliver was?

KR: Yeah, she knew who he was. From where our house was on San Francisco, when I walked through the alley, and his studio was right there on Natural Bridge, which is right behind the house there. She said, "Do you know that man? He made such and such song, and he recorded that one, and he did this..." and I'm like, "Oh, he did? Well I'm down there cleanin' up the studio." So I started going there, and after a while, he started letting me watch the sessions. I started watching them sessions, not knowing that he was teaching me all along, ya know. Going upstairs to open the door when the light came on, 'cause you know, in the studio you don't have a doorbell. Next thing you know, he started teaching me how to set up sessions, set up the mics, help him engineer. I would go in and test all the mics and mic up the amps.

JP: How old were you at that time?

KR: At that time, I was about 12 or 13. And by then I would practice on the set of Rogers he had there. And his drummer, Sam Harris would sit down and show me some things, ya know. Man, I would practice every day, when the studio was empty. And then I started meeting all these people like Jimmy Hinds, Sam Harris, Harry "Sky" [Campbell], Joanne Lewis, Oswald [Peters] on guitar, then people like Fontella Bass, Barbara Carr, David Dee, all the blues guys, Bennie Smith, everybody would come over to that studio. That was the place to be! Caleb [Emphrey Jr.] would stop by when he was on the road with B.B. [King]. Ike Turner would be there. Everybody from the Parliament Funkadelics to the Barry White musicians...everybody! I learned so much. They started calling me 'Little Man.' "Little Man do this, Little Man run to the store..." but they all took interest in me and playing drums. I thought, "cool, all these guys around here like me" and I was there every day.

And it was amazing to watch guys like Sam Harris, and I don't know if you know a guy named Donnell Wade he passed away, he was the drummer for 13th Floor. Donnell was the first black drummer I ever seen who played double bass like Louie Bellson. He just killed it man, he was just awesome. That was like my school away from school. My momma got on me to do my other school-work, "Boy you don't get to go over there until you get your homework done" but so did the guys at the studio. They helped make sure I got my education too. Oliver and my mom would communicate to where I couldn't go to gigs if my grades weren't good. It was just a good situation, ya know.

JP: What was your first session in Oliver's studio?

KR: My first session was, I must have been about 13 or 14. It was a Gospel session, and they had a drummer coming from Chicago, but he was real late. And then when he got there, Oliver was disappointed with him, and said "we need to get a guy in here that can just play this thing." But I guess he didn't want to bother the band with it, it was late and they all just came in from Chicago. So after they were gone he said "Hey Little Man, go in there and put the headphones on, and just play along with the song." I couldn't even see over the window, all I could see was Oliver's hand, he would be counting along with me. Sometimes in those days I would do everything separately, I would do the hi-hat first, and then the snare and then the kick, and piece it together like that. Then I'd go in and lay my fills. I did that for a long time, I did the Montclair stuff, the O'Neal Twins, a lot of sessions in that studio.

JP: So you did everything one limb at a time?

KR: Just when I was younger, when I got older he let me do the whole part at once. One thing he did, the platform where he had his board set up had this hollow sound, and he would put a microphone and a towel in there, and he could get a bass drum sound out of stomping on that thing. And he taught me a lot about how to place microphones and all that. I wish I could have held on to some of that knowledge, I don't know what I'm doing today when it comes to that.

JP: So, what was your first live gig?

KR: My first professional gig, I remember it like it was yesterday. It was with Jimmy Hinds, he was gonna pay me \$75, I'll never forget it. And my sister took me to that gig, it was on the north side, they were just doing standard R&B stuff. And my sister said, "I'm gonna start managing you. I'm gonna take \$50, and I'm gonna give you \$25, and you gonna get ya some drum sticks, and I'm gonna put that money up." And it's been 50 years, she still got my \$50. *laughing* My first professional gig with Oliver was over in the skating rink in East St. Louis. Sam

couldn't make it 'cause he got tipsy. I was real nervous.

JP: How old were you?

KR: I was about 14 then. I think, it's been so long. I was already the roadie for the band, so I would set up Sam, and then sit by him where nobody could see me, and watch him all night. And I would fall asleep there. Sam would just sit there drawing on a cigarette, and that cigarette would have ashes and he would be playing a shuffle without even dropping the ashes. I don't know how he did it man. And his shuffle, man I saw him playing behind Larry Davis and Albert King one night, I just... ya know these guys were amazing. It just blew my mind. That's what really got me into wanting to play the drums for real.

JP: How did the Chuck Berry gig come about?

KR: I was going to sub for Bob Kuban who was playing with Chuck. I already knew at that time that you just have to watch Chuck. You can't go over, you can't go under [tempo]. You can't go there thinking you know the gig. It's not about chops. Jim Marsala the bass player that's been with him for forty-something years came down to BB's one night to hear me play because Bob [Lohr, pianist with Berry] had said "We need to get Keith to sub the gig sometimes." We had been playing together with Arthur Williams. So one day, Bob calls me and says "can you sub for Bob Kuban?"

While I was on stage, Chuck turned around and said, "Who is that playin' the drums?" and Jim Marsala says, "That's Keith." So Chuck looked at me and said, "You hired!" So I said, "Well okay but don't you have to work that out with Bob Kuban? I don't wanna just come in and take nobody's gig." The next thing I know they called me for the next performance, and now it has been over ten years. I can't remember [the year.] But it's been a blessing, and sometimes a curse. But you get to see the world, hang out with some of the biggest stars in music...which I'd had a chance to do with Johnnie Johnson and a few other artists.

JP: How long were you with Johnnie?

KR: I was with Johnnie at least four or five years. It was the late 80s and 90s because I was there for *Blue Hand Johnnie* his first album [Evidence 1987]. But, I had worked with Johnnie before because we toured Europe with the Kings of Rhythm. I loved playing with Johnnie, just to sit there and watch him. I don't know if you remember we were doing a recording with Johnnie for a CD that was never released. It was Johnnie Johnson, Oliver Sain, Erskine Oglesby, Bennie Smith, Tom Maloney, Jimmy Hinds, Marsha Evans...the session was outstanding man!

JP: Why was it never released?

KR: I don't know, I cry to John May today... "Where is that session man?" They rented me a vintage kit, with a big old 24" bass drum, big toms, and a snare drum that looked like one of those marching drums, I'll never forget that snare drum, but in playback it sounded so big. I think that was the best session I ever did, man.

JP: What year was that?

KR: It must have been at least five years before Oliver passed away.¹

JP: What's next?

KR: I've been at the stage in my life for the last three years or so where you say, "What are you gonna do, how are you going to re-create yourself?" I say, "Okay, I've played behind all these people, a lot people know your name, know who you are... What are you gonna do to make a mark for yourself?" So, I'm starting to work on my CD with Dave Torretta, and I've picked a few musicians who I want working with me. I've been working on it for a while 'cause me and Bob [Lohr] and Terry Coleman have been laying tracks down.

JP: Original material?

KR: Oh yeah, all original. I'm gonna do vocals, do percussion on it. I'm 'gonna have a lot of special guests on it. Me and Dave have been working on it, I had to get some structure. This CD is about variety, it's not just going to be blues. I like all kind of things, man, I like metal.

JP: You're gonna put metal on your album?

KR: Nah, I don't think I'm gonna go that heavy! *laughing* But yeah, I like Metallica and them. People laugh at me today, Peter Kriss will always be my favorite KISS drummer. I got stacks of KISS records in there, my wife's like, "You listening to that stuff?" I'm like, "Heck yeah, it might have been bubble gum, but they got rich doing it." ...still going to the bank. I get to run into a lot of guys when I'm out on the road with Chuck. Aerosmith, breaking bread with Joey Kramer and them...man I've been listening to them since I was a teenager.

JP: What would you tell young drummers today?

KR: Keep their head in the game when they're up there, it ain't always about them. Unless you are a solo drummer leading the band, you need to know how to stay out of the way. It's not an easy job being the drummer.

JP: It's thankless sometimes.



Photo by Peter Newcomb

KR: *laughing* Yeah, you hit the nail on the head there! We workin' hard back there trying to keep everything moving and then they don't put your name on the CD—or they misspell it. It hurt me the first time I seen Johnnie's album, *Blue Hand Johnnie*. I'm like, that's not how you spell it, ROBINSON, not Robertson! Then you try to explain that to these people you're trying to get an endorsement deal with. They're like, "You sure that's you?"

But you know, I had the chance to play with some of the greatest musicians in St. Louis. I really miss those old cats. I tell people sometimes, "I don't want to play anymore 'cause they not around"...Bennie, Oliver and Johnnie and them. Sometimes it was just a local gig—the money wasn't great—but just to be around them and know you're learning from them all the time.

It all started when I was a kid working with Oliver in that studio just helping set up sessions and doing recordings. Those older guys were always teaching us younger guys, and I don't see that as much today. This younger generation, it seems to be all about being the star, saying, "I can play a bunch of fast notes." I say, "I don't care if you can, it don't matter when you're playing Mustang Sally. They don't know any of the history of the music in this city. We need more musicians doing what Oliver and them did. That is, sharing what they do and what they know with the people that are going to be doing it after we've moved on. It's important to leave something for the next generation. ♪



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BIG MUDDY BLUES FESTIVAL

By Bruce Olson

On a hot Sunday night, on a cobblestoned street a few blocks from the Mississippi River, the spirit of the St. Louis blues raised its beautiful head at the Big Muddy Blues Festival. The appearance of these blues was almost a surprise, a seeming illusion, a sound that floated up above the street despite a show lineup that seemed designed to keep the blues away and despite a sound system that left music from the two free stages largely unheard.

But there it was these blues, and they were there at a star-is-born moment, the kind of moment fans dream of but rarely experience.

It came during the next to last set on what was called the Verizon Stage at Morgan Street in the massive form of George Brock Jr., the designated opening frontman for the Soulard Blues Band, rolling his massive form up to the edge of the stage, blowing his harp and singing the blues. The crowd led by a few slinky women in lighted top hats moved and grooved, the people behind them got into the oily, sweaty moment, the hips of a 100 or so festival goers gyrating together in the heat of the night.

This, my friends, was the St. Louis blues right there just below the pillars of the giant freeway, in the shadow of the monster casino which over the past decade, destroyed the hottest music scene in the city. Right there during a festival that 18 years ago trumpeted the best local blues talent in the country in a legendary free festival.

But that was then, this is now. Music fans rarely venture into the Landing anymore where about all they'll find is a raunchy club that recently had rock music but now features "fire-throwers, hula-hoopers, and snow machines."

The Big Muddy Blues Festival has become, sad to say, an afterthought, its crowds made up of people from Indiana, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, people who don't realize you don't get a deal by buying the \$45 VIP ticket and that you can watch all the music on the Main Stage without paying for a \$13 ticket.

The weather has proven a jinx, too. Last year's downpours drove the music into clubs like Heartbreakers, where hot pants and tight tops played a far larger role than hot riffs and tight sets. This year faced record heat, the brick buildings and the stone streets soaked up the sun and made the fans feel like salmon baking, leaving them dehydrated and unwilling to leave their square of shade even if they couldn't hear the bands play.

None of the evening headliner slots went to St. Louis players, with many of the best in the city—David Dee, Renee Smith, Big George Brock, the Bottoms Up Blues Gang—given 1 p.m. slots. All the other leading local blues performers—Big Mike Aquirre, Melissa Neels, Jeremiah Johnson, Jimmy Lee Kennet, Skeet Rogers, Rich McDonough, as well as the Soulard Blues Band—wound up on the free stages that were dropped in the street with limited sound systems prone to being drowned out by music blaring out of the bars. They all pushed hard to generate some energy and at least they were, in fact, blues bands playing the "blues festival" with a high level of skill and authenticity. Too bad it was so hard to actually hear them.

Oh, and then there were those headliners, the reason that the blues stalwarts were pushed out of the blues festival. One was Anthony Gomes, an up-and-comer from Chicago whose hint of the Delta is drowned out by the kind of rock noodling that leaves the ears ringing and the mind numb. Ditto almost exactly was Walter Trout, another blaster who plays as fast as he can possibly move his fingers; or the Rev. Horton Heat, a wild rock-a-billy cat from Dallas who put on a show, but had no connection to the blues.

At last and least, came the Sunday night closer, the famed David Clayton-Thomas, who made his career during a brief run as the lead singer of briefly popular pop band Blood, Sweat & Tears. He's responsible for a couple of late-60s hits—"Spinning Wheel," "When I Die"—before quitting the band in 1970. At Big Muddy, the stage crew diddled with the sound to a point where



he was half-an-hour late getting started. The crew, however, could do nothing to help a hoarse, 71-year-old voice that was good telling stories but couldn't manage to carry more than a few notes.

Before the fest, KDHX "Soul Selector" Tom Ray had set off a minor social media firestorm by criticizing the Big Muddy bookers for their choice of Clayton-Thomas, asking, "Am I the only one who thinks it's absurd to have David Clayton-Thomas headline a 'blues festival' in St. Louis?"

Emily Kochan, the organizer of the event, told the St. Louis Beacon that the choice was made "to broaden the appeal of the Big Muddy," hoping to bring in "people who might not usually come down to the Landing for the Big Muddy."

A lot of big festivals, of course, are misnamed. The New Orleans' Jazz and Heritage Festival has never been strictly jazz or strictly heritage (whatever that means.) But the New Orleans Festival since it started in 1976 has, at least up to the last few years, featured great quality and an approach that somehow fits the personality of the city from whence it springs.

Big Muddy used to be that way and the current Bluesweek Festival in St. Louis in May manages to bring in out-of-towners who fit with the locals, acts like Trombone Shorty, Bobby Rush and Shemekiah Copeland spring to mind.

The Big Muddy last year brought in Dr. John and Royal Southern Brotherhood, who seemed to fit. But in the past, beginning in 1997, the Big Muddy Festival was almost all local, and after all, when the locals were Johnnie Johnson, Henry Townsend and Bennie Smith, who needed outsiders.

Now, apparently, the financing of the Landing demands more crowds, more money and bigger is better, louder and louder. Such is life in the big city, one tries to find a nugget in the sludge.

And that nugget could be found at this year's Big Muddy—that scene in front of the Wax Museum, across the street from The Ugly Mug, where Marty Abdullah relieved George Junior at the front of the Soulard Blues Band without a missed note. They kept the dancers dancing, kept the slink and the slide flowing, using every ounce of skill and talent to smoothly bring forth a long, brilliant medley that ended with "Down Home Blues." While the crowd sang along,



Soulard Blues Band with George Brock Jr. at the 2013 Big Muddy Blues Festival
Photo by Reed Radcliffe

Tom Maloney broke loose with a moving blues guitar that people like Trout and Gomes can only dream about. "Down home blues, down home blues, every other record or two, now take off those fast jams and let me hear some of those down home blues." 🎵

BLUES CITY DELI

September Live Music

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Thursday	19	Nikki Hill
Saturday	21	Tommy Halloran
Thursday	26	Kilborn Alley Blues Band
Saturday	28	Little Rachael Fenton
Thursday <small>(October)</small>	3	Paul Bonn

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BLUES TO DOS SEPTEMBER 2013

Sunday	1	Big Muddy Blues Festival on Laclede's Landing 1p
Monday	2	Soulard Blues Band at The Broadway Oyster Bar 9p
Tuesday	3	Eugene Johnson & Company at Beale On Broadway 9p
Wednesday	4	Jimmy Lee Kennett at 1860's 9p
Thursday	5	Brian Curran at Broadway Oyster Bar 6p
Friday	6	Sarah Jane & The Blue Notes at Highway 61 Roadhouse 9p
Saturday	7	Eric Guitar Davis at Beale On Broadway 9p
Sunday	8	Voodoo Blues Band at Hammerstones 4p
Monday	9	Hard Tale Blues Band at Beale On Broadway 9p
Tuesday	10	Skeet Rodgers & Inner City Blues Band at 3 of a Kind Bar 8p
Wednesday	11	Paul Bonn & The Bluesmen at Hammerstone's 8p
Thursday	12	Iron Mike Norton at BB's Jazz, Blues & Soups 9:30p
Friday	13	Jeremiah Johnson & The Sliders at Hammerstone's 9p
Saturday	14	Aaron Kamm & The One Drops at Broadway Oyster Bar 10p
Sunday	15	Patti & The Hitmen at Broadway Oyster Bar 4p
Monday	16	Open Mic at The Venice Cafe
Tuesday	17	Big George Brock at the Sheldon Concert Hall 7:30p
Wednesday	18	Chuck Berry at The Duck Room 8p
Thursday	19	Nikki Hill at The Blues City Deli 6:30p
Friday	20	The Bottoms Up Blues Gang at The Venice Cafe 9p
Saturday	21	Old Webster Jazz and Blues Festival 12p (great SLBS volunteer op.)
Sunday	22	Logan and Hopkins at Broadway Oyster Bar 3p
Monday	23	Open Mic at The Atomic Cowboy
Tuesday	24	Bob Bumblebee Kamoske at BB's Jazz, Blues & Soups 9p
Wednesday	25	Miss Jubilee & The Humdingers at Schlafly Bottleworks 8p
Thursday	26	Al Holiday's East Side Rhythm Section at Broadway Oyster Bar 9p
Friday	27	Chris Ruest at Beale On Broadway 9p
Saturday	28	Little Rachel at The Blues City Deli 1p
Sunday	29	Bob Case & Steve Vogel at Great Grizzly Bear 1p
Monday	30	Open Mic at The Gramophone



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20 FEET FROM STARDOM

Gil Frieson Productions and Tremolo Productions
2013
91 minutes

By Sharon Foehner

This musical journey starts where many have before—a conversation with Tom Maloney. Tom is a great musician, currently the guitarist for The Soulard Blues Band, and a music historian. In all musical matters, I definitely trust his judgment. “Sharon,” Tom said, “You’ve got to see this movie girl!” So I went.

Twenty Feet from Stardom, directed by Morgan Neville, is a wonderful glimpse into the lives of a group of dedicated and gifted artists who rarely see the spotlight: background singers. The cast includes Darlene Love, Merry Clayton, Lisa Fisher, Judith Hill and Claudia Lennear. The movie takes a compelling look into the lives of each of these women—all of whom performed with, or were, some of the biggest recording artists in the last 50 years.

Darlene Love was the first singer introduced. Love’s story has been repeated far too many times in the music industry. She recorded #1 hits with Phil Spector, only to see Spector get credit and adulation for her hard work. The greed of individuals such as Phil Spector never ceases to amaze me. Love was repaid for her dedication when she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2011.

Lisa Fisher’s career has been a who’s who of musical icons. She performed with Stevie Wonder, Sting, Luther Vandross, the list goes on and on. The movie shows how Fisher struggled to turn a brilliant backing career into one of a solo artist. As a background singer, Fisher’s career is still unparalleled. However, when she went out front to become a solo artist she was called a flop. It is astounding to me that there are many talented people who don’t become superstars.

Twenty Feet from Stardom also includes commentary from superstars like Bruce Springsteen who

illustrates how the ‘call and response’ technique that came out of the southern African-American church experience became the formula for the recording “Hit Parade.” Mick Jagger describes the very talented and sexy Claudia Lennear, who recorded on the Rolling Stones’ *Let It Bleed* album.

Lennear toured with The Stones for 20 years, as well as with Joe Cocker. She was an Ikettes with Ike and Tina Turner, and recorded with Stephen Stills. To me, that’s incredible.

In the recording industry, there are two sides to the coin—the artistic and the business side. Artists that have a good business sense generally can do well in music, but most musicians aren’t inherently business savvy. These African-American women made such a great impact in the culture of popular music, but still couldn’t find stardom. This movie tells the story of what happens to great artist who are not great business people. They were literally “twenty feet from stardom,” but never got to bask in the spotlight.

As a musician, I liked the realistic, gritty, look into the life of these performers. It was the honest story of what most musicians go through. The dedication of these women is what all musicians have in common. *Twenty Feet from Stardom* is a great commentary, a great film, and you should see it. 🎵



ST. LOUIS musicians directory

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Larry Griffin
lgriff43@yahoo.com
314.662.1857

**Al Holliday & The
East Side Rhythm Band**

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618.210.6078

Bible Belt Sinners

Molly Simms
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Dave Black

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**Eugene Johnson
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The Fab Foehners

Sharon Foehner
sharondougfoehner@sbcglobal.net
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Funky Butt Brass Band

Tim Halpin
www.funkybuttbrassband.com
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**The Harris Brothers
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