

BLUES LETTER



BLUESWEEK

**"Sonny Boy" Mason talks
St. Louis - NOLA connection**

Summer Blues to Dos

SLBS TURNS 30

**Killer Blues Headstone
Project Update**

Claudettes review

THE ST LOUIS BLUES SOCIETY

May/June 2014 Number 68

BLUES LETTER

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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.

St. Louis Blues Society

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The Bi-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.

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Dear Blues Lovers:

A year ago at this time we were preparing ourselves for The Bluesweek Festival in Downtown St. Louis. Last year's Bluesweek was as World-Class as it gets. The headliners, Trombone Shorty and Mavis Staples, were only a bonus after the local talent that graced the stages all weekend. This year, after some very public confrontations with city hall and out-of-town companies, Bluesweek has found itself at The Chesterfield Amphitheater. Aside from the location and some city politics, not much has changed. The blues hasn't changed. The people that live and love the music hasn't changed. The St. Louis Blues Society (SLBS) definitely hasn't changed its support for what we feel is some of the most important music in the world: St. Louis Blues.

This year's Bluesweek festival has the makings for one of the best to date. The group shows alone; Guitar Masters, Harp Attack and St. Louis Blues Kings, will undeniably be some of the best blues in the world. Not to mention the national acts; Otis Clay, Ronnie Baker Brooks and the Royal Southern Brotherhood, who will absolutely tear down the house! All in all, how else would you want to spend Memorial Day Weekend?

If you attend, stop by and visit the St. Louis Blues Society tent. The SLBS is celebrating 30 years of supporting and celebrating St. Louis blues, and we have printed a limited number of 30 Year Anniversary shirts. Make sure you get one while they are still available! We will also have vintage Blues Society posters and t-shirts, and as always, we will be more than happy to sign you up (or renew) as a member so you too can support the organization that supports the music you love.

Quick note for the future. The SLBS will be sending representatives to Memphis to compete in the International Blues Challenge (IBC) again this year. Last year we were very proud to send Big Mike Aguirre & The Blue City All-Stars and Bob "Bumble Bee" Kamoske. Both acts made a splash in Memphis and we hope to do it again this year. If you are a musician/band interested in being in the local competition, make sure to contact Jerry Minchey jminchey@stlouisbluessociety.org or keep your eye out for information in the upcoming BluesLetters.

Also noteworthy, there is a newly released book about the life of guitarist Lonnie Johnson called *The Original Guitar Hero & the Power of Music*. Among a tremendous amount of good history, there is mention of Kevin Belford's book, *Devil at the Confluence*, and has information provided by our own Leroy Pearson. We will have a review and more information on this book to you soon. For those of you working on learning the story of St. Louis music, this is a must read.

There is no doubt that this is a great time to be a music lover in St. Louis. The city is exploding with talent in every genre. The National Blues Museum keeps moving along. Venues keep opening and hosting music. Music fans seem to multiply daily. As we celebrate blues over Memorial Day weekend, let's all make sure to take time to be thankful to live in a city where there is so much talent and people like you who support it!

Sincerely,
Jeremy Segel-Moss

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF SUPPORTING BLUES MUSIC IN ST LOUIS

It's early in the morning and I have nothin' but the blues...it's been 30 years with the St. Louis Blues Society. Times change, but blues music will always be the part of the St. Louis fabric we champion as an organization.

We are truly fortunate to live in a city with a deep history of American Music recognized around the world as St. Louis music. Imagine that!!! Ragtime, Jazz, Blues, Rhythm & Blues, Rock & Roll, Soul, and now, Hip-Hop, Reggae, Roots Rock, and original Americana run rampant and percolate in venues large and small nightly in St. Louis...nothin' new in this town!!!

My Blues Society membership number is a single digit. As one of the founders and a tribal elder of the organization, I personally thank you for supporting live music and being engaged in a non-virtual world. For 30 years, The St. Louis Blues Society has promoted the unique heritage of St. Louis blues musicians by supporting their endeavors and celebrating their continuing legacy with the public. The musicians of the present are the future and the legends that beckoned us into their kitchen, mentored us through mistakes made in life, encouraged us to live life boldly and without regrets are now increasingly in the past. The current generation of St. Louis blues musicians did not hail from Mississippi, but the "fertile ground" of St. Louis. Thankfully, our soil and muddy waters continue to produce musicians steeped in blues tradition and their efforts will keep the blue flames burning into the future.

As an organization, we have facilitated, produced and promoted international tours beginning in 1984 of the Kings of Rhythm, Henry Townsend, Oliver Sain, Johnnie Johnson, Bennie Smith, Big Bad Smitty, Erskine Oglesby, Arthur Williams, Boo Boo Davis, David Dee, Soulard Blues Band, Rondo, Rich McDonough, and many others. We have without a doubt, organized St. Louis Blues Festivals that became a standard to measure against other world class cities known for their musical heritage. We generate a quality magazine highlighting St. Louis musicians and have created a "Mission Fund" that helps musicians in need. Recently, we have made concerted efforts to help provide headstones and help with final arrangements of our musical treasures. We, The St. Louis Blues Society, continually support and champion our musical icons and events in an attempt to keep the musical legacy alive.

My close association with blues artists and those fine people who support blues music and the organization over the years confirm that what we feel is "real" and will not fade away. The next legend is right in front of you, sharing their music, personalities and wisdom with you. They are the unique characters whose endeavors are clearly dedicated to the preservation and advancement of the St. Louis sound known as "The Blues."

To all of the musicians before, we thank you.

To the generations of musicians to come, we thank you.

You are very special people making music that speaks to our souls in the primal language of the blues.

To members of the Blues Society...Thank You!

It is an endless journey of great people caring about the music and whose efforts will ensure the success of the organization and our mission.

Let's keep the flames burning!

John Michael May
Chairperson, St. Louis Blues Society



John May playing under the low ceiling at BB's Jazz, Blues and Soups in 1998 with two of the most revered blues greats; Henry Townsend on keys (1909-2006) and Robert Jr. Lockwood on guitar (1915-2006).

photo by Diane Trombino



How *z* it NOLA?



By Mark "Sonny Boy" Mason

Since we are celebrating St. Louis' 250th birthday this year, it seems like a good time to look into our town's long time link to our "Mother City," New Orleans. Historically, you've probably read (or ought to) about the French colonials from New Orleans; Monsieurs Laclede and Choteau, who came up the Mississippi 250 years ago to set up a fur trading outpost for their hometown. St. Louis went on to become the capital of Upper Louisiana during the Spanish colonial times until the United States bought us from Napoleon in 1804 for three cents an acre.

As far as our musical heritage goes, St. Louis played a role as both a destination and "gateway" to the North for migrating Southern Blacks looking for opportunity. We have a rich heritage of blues musicians who made St. Louis home either temporarily or permanently. In the very early history of the development of jazz, in the 1910s, there were two St. Louis musicians who brought a whole lot of the originators of jazz up the river, literally, to St. Louis before any of them were famous.

The first was pianist Fate Marable (1890-1947) born in Paducah, Ky., but raised in St. Louis. At 17, he was playing on the steamboats and became a bandleader on boats owned by the Streckfus family. They ran paddle wheelers on excursions from New Orleans, through St. Louis, up to Minneapolis. There was plenty of music and dancing. Marable was enamored of the exciting new jazz being created in New Orleans and hired mostly musicians from the Crescent City.

The other was bandleader Charlie Creath (1890-1951) born in Ironton, Mo., but lived in St. Louis most of his life. He was both a competing bandleader to Marable for the Streckfus boats, but also a collaborator at times. He shared Marable's affection for the up and coming New Orleans players.

These two gentlemen's bands were populated by a who's who of legendary New Orleans musicians on their ways to being musical legends: Johnny Dodds, "Baby" Dodds, Zutty Singleton, "Pops" Foster, Johnny St. Cyr, Narvin Kimball, Al Morgan, Paul Dominguez, Norman Mason, and most famously, Lonnie Johnson, and Louis Armstrong. These musicians came to St. Louis regularly. Since both Marable and Creath were based here, most, including Armstrong, lived in St. Louis while performing on local steamboat cruises and clubs. St. Louis' lack of much

of a recording industry led most to move on to places like Chicago eventually, but the New Orleans influence definitely left its mark.

As an exception, Lonnie Johnson did live in St. Louis for a good part of his life. Johnson had a successful career as both a blues guitarist/singer and a hugely influential jazz guitarist and violinist (the first man to play an amplified one). His guitar style influenced people like Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt. Also, Norman Mason (Reed Man), was a member of the same Fate Marable Band where Louis Armstrong got his start. Mason stayed in St. Louis, playing a major role in the local traditional jazz revival that started in the 40s. Mason was mostly known as a member of the Singleton Palmer Band (as a personal bragging thing, he was a frequent bandmate in the 50s and 60s of my dad, Bill Mason, in the Dixie Stompers).

Conversely, in somewhat more recent times, there are many St. Louisans who have established themselves in New Orleans and made a mark on the ongoing traditions that are so rich down at that end of the river.

Roosevelt Sykes (1906-1984) was born in Elmar, Ark., but moved to St. Louis in the late 20s. He is considered by many as the father of the modern blues piano style. He moved to Chicago in 1933, where most of his career took place. In 1954, he moved to New Orleans, as his career was waning. He came back to St. Louis in 1958, and, bragging again, my father shared several bills with him. By 1960, Sykes had settled in New Orleans, playing the local clubs, until his death in 1984.

Tom McDermott has been a pianist since age the age of six, pro since 16, and has a Master of Music from Washington University. McDermott came up as a disciple of the very recently deceased Trebor Tichenor of The St. Louis Ragtimers. Originally a Ragtime devotee, McDermott fell in love with the New Orleans piano styles of Professor Longhair, Jelly Roll Morton, and in particular James Booker. He moved to NOLA in 1984, joined the Dukes of Dixieland, formed The New Orleans Nightcrawlers, and has performed extensively with the cream of New Orleans players. He's also become quite the expert on the Caribbean and Latin roots of New Orleans jazz, making numerous trips and collaborating with musicians in Brazil and Cuba. McDermott also had a recurring speaking role on the HBO series "Treme" playing himself.

photo "Sonny Boy" in NOLA courtesy of Mark Mason

St. Louis Slim was a local blues performer in St. Louis until moving to New Orleans in 2001. Soon after moving to New Orleans, Slim joined the New Orleans Jazz Vipers and has been a mainstay in both the blues and trad-jazz scene in the Fauborg Marigny and Lower Quarter. He is currently part of the popular Washboard Chaz Blues Trio.

Trumpeter and vocalist Jeremy Davenport was born in St. Louis into a family of musicians. His mother was a music teacher for over 50 years and his father spent 40 years in the St. Louis Symphony. Davenport had an extensive music education and an early association with jazz great Wynton Marsalis. He went to the Manhattan School of Music, then to The University of New Orleans, studying under Ellis Marsalis, Wynton's father. He spent six years playing with New Orleans' Harry Connick Jr.'s band, then settled in New Orleans, where he now performs at The Davenport Lounge in The Ritz-Carlton.

Charlie Halloran started out playing trombone in rock and ska bands in St. Louis, usually with his older brothers; drummer John and guitarist Tommy. The brothers developed an interest in jazz, blues and other roots music. Charlie went off to graduate from Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. Claiming music he heard on St. Louis' KDHX as his inspiration, he moved to New Orleans in 2008. In the last six years, he's made his mark playing and recording with some of the best bands in New Orleans, including (but not limited to) The New Orleans Moonshiners, Panorama Jazz Band, Meschiya Lake & the Little Big Horns, The Palmetto Bug Stompers, The New Orleans Jazz Vipers, numerous revered veterans at the Palm Court Café, and even a session with Allen Toussaint. He also went on several tours with the Squirrel Nut Zippers

And of course, there's The Bottoms Up Blues Gang. Kari Liston, Jeremy Segel-Moss and Adam Andrews have been one of the hardest working young acoustic blues acts in St. Louis for many years with some soul and grit that belies their relative youth. In the last few years, they've been playing down in New Orleans almost as much as back in St. Louis at most of the good clubs on Frenchmen Street. They've established such a following and presence there that they've been asked to play The French Quarter Festival for the third time this year. This is significant and impressive because the festival has become as big of a draw as The New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and makes a point of only hiring local Louisiana acts. 🎵

Mark "Sonny Boy" Mason is the programmer and host playing blues, jazz, rock, soul, country, pop, zydeco, cajun, Tex-Mex and calypso on KDHX 88.1

St. Louis Community Radio's long-running show "Howzit Bayou" every Tuesday afternoon at 4 pm.



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Saturday	24	Funky Butt Brass Band
Thursday	29	John Németh
Saturday	31	Dawn Weber
Thursday	5	Miss Jubilee and the Humdingers
Saturday	7	Benefit for Preston Hubbard noon to 4pm featuring: Felix Reyes, Big Mike Aguirre, Paul Niehaus IV, Country Bill Edwards and MORE!
Thursday	12	The Rum Drum Ramblers
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Thursday	19	The Mojo Roots
Saturday	21	Aaron Griffin and Mojo Rising
Thursday	26	The 44s
Saturday	28	Big George Brock and The New Houserockers

The deli has live music just about every Thursday and Saturday. Lookin' for a taste of the blues? Check out our website for upcoming shows and events!

www.bluescitydeli.com

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Sunday, May 11
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The Venice Cafe 9p

Sunday, May 25
Bluesweek Festival 12p

Sunday, May 25
The Shanti 3p

Friday, June 20
Cicero's 9p

Saturday, June 21
Philapoloza at Atomic Cowboy

Friday, June 27
The Shanti 9p

Saturday, June 28
The Duck Club Yacht Club 8p



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May 17- Steve Woolley
May 23- Eugene Johnson Trio
June 7- Steve Woolley
June 13- The Town Drunks
June 14- Rich McDonough Trio
June 21- Rich McDonough Trio
June 27- The Town Drunks
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★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **By Bruce Olson**



St. Louis
BLUESWEEK
FESTIVAL

Zito, whose guitar is soaked with his St. Louis heritage, was the winner of the 2010 Blues Music Award for best song. Allman has done yeoman work carrying the family name through his St. Louis band, Honeytribe. Neville, band philosopher, percussion master and soul singer, is a representative of one of the greatest New Orleans musical families. Bassist Charlie Wooton comes from the southern Wood Brothers' milieu and Scott was the drummer for the Derek Trucks Band and the Allman Brothers Band before helping form RSB.

The band's first album had a top five debut on the Billboard blues chart and stayed on the list for 19 weeks. RSB's second album, *Songs From the Road: Live in Germany* also had a number five debut and was on the current chart for five weeks at the end of April. While the CD's are fine for the living room and car, there's nothing like live music. Those who saw the band's set at the Big Muddy Festival in 2012 are still talking about it and other St. Louis shows have been equally as good.

Saturday's opener gears us up to the Allman influence when guitar slingers Steve Pecaro, Danny Liston and Mark Arbogast play interpretations of the trucker blues defined by the Allman brothers, Duane and Greg, whose career was launched in the sixties from a tiny apartment in Gaslight Square. The not-forgotten St. Louis entertainment district.

Following the Allman tribute the festival will get a heavy dose of the St. Louis sound with three all-star acts in the categories of soul, guitar and harp. The delightful singer Denise Thimes teams up with funk and jazz virtuoso Jim Stevens for the day's first look at the city's soul scene.



Four of St. Louis' finest performers in this year's Bluesweek

8 The St. Louis Blues Society BluesLetter



Mike Zito performing at the Old Rock House with Royal Southern Brotherhood. RSB is Bluesweek's Saturday night headliners.

The Guitar Master's show will feature five of St. Louis' hottest guitar virtuosos. The wild group of guitar heroes, headed by John Mondin, will feature Rich McDonough, Vince Martin, John Mondin, Tony Campanella and Eric Slaughter.

After the guitar showdown, festival goers will get a revival of a city tradition that dates back into the eighties - the Harp Attack! Some of the St. Louis' biggest harp names; Jim McClaren, Eric McSpadden, Tom 'Papa' Ray, Chris Taylor and Adam Andrews, will be backed by the swinging rhythm of the St. Louis Social Club.

Saturday night will feature a newcomer to the festival, Ronnie Baker Brooks. Brooks is a younger bluesman with a deep soul side based out of Chicago, where he is treated as blues royalty. He appears locally in Chicago, as well as, on tour with such acts as Big Head Todd & the Monsters and is the author of three recent albums.

Sunday's headline slot is also a newcomer to the festival, but not to the area. Otis Clay is a Mississippi Delta musician based in Chicago who has been playing the blues for half a century, but only recently started getting the kind of recognition he deserves. Inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame last year, Clay has charted a dozen songs over the years.

Clay will have a tough act to follow Sunday night because the night-time opener will be Marsha Evans and the Coalition. Evans' career dates back to the sixties, when she provided backup for singers like Fontella Bass at Oliver Sain's Archway Studios. She has continued to perform through the years and her recent New Years' Eve show at BB's Jazz, Blues and Soups was a highlight of the musical year in St. Louis. Guitarist David Dee and sax man Marcel Strong will join Evans for the evening.

The undercard for Sunday is a match for that of Saturday, starting with a noon blues greeting from The Bottoms Up Blues Gang (fresh from an appearance at the Peabody Opera House), Tom Hall and Alice Spencer of the Geyer Street Sheiks and Sharon & Doug Foehner. The band will truly be a gang as it gets the second day of the festival underway.

The afternoon continues with three sets of all-stars. Big Mike Aguirre, the St. Louis winner of the International Blues Challenge, will be joined by the veteran blues masters Roland Johnson, Skeet Rodgers and Eugene Johnson. There will be no let up when Billy Peek, that "white boy who can play the blues," joins Art Dwyer and the Souldard Blues Band. The set will get an extra jolt from George Brock Jr., Renee Smith and Miss Monya.

The late afternoon show features a group billed as the St. Louis Blues Kings, who together span seven decades of St. Louis blues music; Big George Brock, the city's elder statesman of the harp; Boo Boo Davis, the east side's living legend; and Marquise Knox, the young torch carrier and touring star for the future.

Festival organizer Mike Kociela, who five years ago started Bluesweek and revived the downtown blues festival tradition, could not contain his enthusiasm for the new venue. "We are incredibly excited about our new location at the beautiful Chesterfield Amphitheater. It's a first-class venue to showcase St. Louis' world-class musicians that will set the perfect vibe for legendary performances all weekend long."

The festival will also include a barbecue competition between 35 teams of rib masters, a free Second Stage featuring St. Louis solo, duo and trio blues performances as well as a series of other activities. 🎵

all photos by Reed Radcliffe

2014 Bluesweek SATURDAY – MAY 24 *Schedule*

12:00 – 1:15 *THE BROTHERS*

featuring Steve Pecaro, Danny Liston & Mark Arbogast
in a tribute to the Allman Brothers

1:30 – 2:30 *GOOD FOR THE SOUL*

featuring special guests Denise Thimes & Jim Stevens

3:00 – 4:30 *GUITAR MASTERS*

headed by John Mondin, featuring Rich McDonough, Vince Martin, Tony Campanella and Eric Slaughter

5:00 – 6:30 *HARP ATTACK!*

featuring Jim McClaren, Eric McSpadden, Tom 'Papa' Ray, Chris Taylor and Adam Andrews

backed by the St. Louis Social Club

7:00 – 8:30 *RONNIE BAKER BROOKS*

9:00 – 10:30 *ROYAL SOUTHERN BROTHERHOOD*

***** SUNDAY – MAY 25

12:00 – 12:45 *"GOOD MORNIN' BLUES"*

with Tom Hall, Alice Spencer, the Bottoms Up Blues Gang
featuring Johnny Diamond, Sharon Bear and Doug Foehner

1:00 – 2:30 *BIG MIKE AGUIRRE & THE BLUE CITY ALL-STARs*

with special guests Roland Johnson, Skeet Rodgers & Eugene Johnson

3:00 – 4:30 *SOULARD BLUES BAND*

featuring Billy Peek, Renee Smith, Marty Abdullah, Big George Brock Jr. & Miss Monya

5:00 – 6:30 *ST. LOUIS BLUES KINGS*

featuring Big George Brock, Boo Boo Davis & Marquise Knox

7:00 – 8:30 *SOUL CITY DISCIPLES*

with Marsha Evans & The Coalition featuring David Dee, Marcel Strong with special guests

9:00 – 10:30 *OTIS CLAY*

St. Louis Blues Festivals THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

For most of its 30 year history, the St. Louis Blues Society has presented or been involved with, the summer showcasing of our wonderful blues heritage that has brought so many memories and so much inspiration to our city.

1986 - St. Louis Blues Club	
<i>St. Louis BluesFest</i>	Mississippi Nights
1987:1990	
<i>Benson & Hedges Blues Festival</i>	various venues
1991 - St. Louis Blues Club	
<i>Blues Showcase</i>	two nights at Mississippi Nights
1992 - St. Louis Blues Society	
<i>Blues Heritage Festival</i>	Market Street
1993:1995 - St. Louis Blues Society	
<i>Blues Heritage Festival</i>	The Landing
1996	
<i>Buder Park Blues Festival</i>	
1997:present	
<i>Big Muddy Blues Festival</i>	The Landing
2010:present	
<i>Bluesweek</i>	various venues:)

Volunteer with the St. Louis Blues Society THE SLBS NEEDS YOUR HELP

BLUESLETTER - volunteer for creation of content and advertising representation.

MEMBERSHIP OUTREACH - help sign up new members and arrange for new membership benefits.

EVENT COORDINATOR - help coordinate all SLBS events and work on promotion.

EDUCATION - help create curriculum for Blues in Schools and fill SLBS website with content.

BUSINESS OUTREACH - help get more local businesses involved with the SLBS.

STREET TEAM - help with getting the word out about the SLBS by hanging posters, passing fliers and distributing BluesLetters.

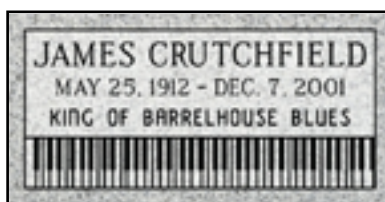
Contact Jeremy Segel-Moss
to volunteer
jsegelmoss@stlouisbluessociety.org
314-482-0314



Killer Blues Headstone Project UPDATE

by Jeremy Segel-Moss

In October, The Killer Blues Headstone Project, in conjunction with the St. Louis Blues Society, hosted a benefit show that raised funds to lay headstones for some of St. Louis' local blues legends. Since 1995 the Killer Blues Headstone Project has provided headstones for blues musicians lying in unmarked graves. The co-hosted benefit at The Schlafly Tap Room raised enough money to lay three headstones for local legends. We are pleased to announce that the James Crutchfield, Bennie Smith and Tommy Bankhead are finished and are being placed at the graves. The first of the three, Bankhead's, was laid in early May.



James Crutchfield's grave is located in Lake Charles Park Cemetery & Mausoleum
7775 St Charles Rock Rd., St Louis



Tommy Bankhead's grave is located in Laurel Hill Memorial Gardens
2000 Pennsylvania Ave., Pagedale



Bennie Smith's grave is also located in Laurel Hill Memorial Gardens

Aaron Pritchard, Vice President of the Killer Blues Headstone Project, has worked tirelessly to research which local musicians do not have headstones. Pritchard, who is from St. Louis, plans to continue to work on finding unmarked graves, placing headstones, and also an on-line map of where musicians are buried in the area. If you know of local musicians in need of a headstone, or would like to donate to future headstones, please visit the Killer Blues website or contact Pritchard at

aaronpritchard.killerblues@yahoo.com

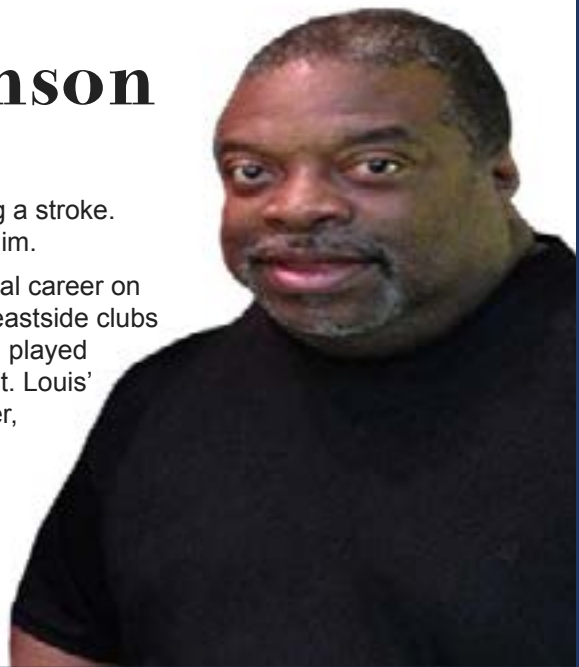
www.killerblues.net

R.I.P.

Mr. Rory Johnson (1962 - 2014)

Rory Johnson passed away on March 27 from complications following a stroke. He will be sorely missed by all those who knew him and played with him.

Rory was known for his keyboard playing but he started out his musical career on drums. While attending high school in East St. Louis, Rory played in eastside clubs with Paper Bag. In the early eighties he began playing keyboards and played with the James Family. His career path led him to play with some of St. Louis' greatest; including Mickey Porter, Albert King, Eddie Fisher, Bill Tucker, Oliver Sain, Melvin Turnage, Erma Whiteside, Erskine Oglesby and Tommy Bankhead. During the last decade, Rory played on a regular basis with Bennie Smith and then, Kim Massie.



By Marty D.Spikener and Keith Robinson

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THE CLAUDETTES

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Yellow Dog Records 2013

By Hound Dog Brown

The first time I listened to The Claudettes' debut CD, *Infernal Piano Plot...Hatched!*, I was a bit perplexed. The music was strangely familiar, yet strangely different. Upon listening to it a second time, it all fell into place, and I've enjoyed the ding-dong-heckamadoodle hell out of it ever since. Simply put, The Claudettes are the brainchild of Johnny Iguana on piano and Mike Caskey on drums. That's it — a piano and drum combo who don't sing a thing!

The familiarity in their sound is that they are firmly grounded in traditional barrelhouse and piano blues and boogie woogie. I'm a serious fan of this sort of stuff. The strangely different feeling jumps in when they use this barrelhouse and boogie DNA as a launch pad into novel and creative trajectories.

Two cuts on this CD are original barrelhouse piano blues compositions, namely, "Stumblin' Home Satisfied" and "Serenading the Clean-up Crew", and one track is a cover of a Little Brother Montgomery piece, "Tremblin' Blues". This is straightforward stuff, and well done, too.

The remaining tracks are all original and highly novel compositions which contain maniacal piano runs, and head off in unpredictable directions, yet often with a strange familiarity. "Deep Soul For High Society", for instance, is reminiscent of Ray Charles' "What'd I Say", yet is done in minor key. Other tracks start in a particular direction, then shift back and forth through totally unrelated bridges. These are not your grandpa's barrelhouse piano blues, but are delightfully novel creations.

What makes this material much more than some sort of transient gimmick are the hefty musical talents and background of both Johnny Iguana (Brian Berkowitz) and Mike Caskey. As a very young guy, Johnny Iguana was tapped by Junior Wells for piano accompaniment duties, both in the studio and on national and international tours for three years. Johnny has done studio backup service with Carey Bell, KoKo Taylor, Lil' Ed, Billy Boy Arnold, John Primer, and the list goes on, with stage appearances with most of these as well. These blues recordings show that Mr. Iguana has an ice-cold grasp of Chicago shuffle blues piano. As for Mike Caskey on the skins, he's played with a range of acts including KoKo Taylor, Chuck Mangione, Marvin Hamlisch, John Sinclair, and a Balkan fusion group.

So who the heck is Claudette? The CD artwork says that she was the proprietor of a tavern in Oglesby, Ill. called Claudette's, who hired these fellows as a house band. The story continues that she lost the lease, moved to Chicago, but continues to employ the band, calling themselves The Claudettes. A photo of an Asian woman is featured in the artwork, and she's also described as accompanying the band to gigs, yelling orders at the band in Korean, while hawking "beer specials" from whatever stage they happen to occupy at the moment, as if she is still running a tavern. (You're entitled to believe all of this back story, or some of it, or none of it, because you're on your own at this juncture.)

The Claudettes came to St. Louis for an afternoon gig at the Blues City Deli, and an early evening show at BB's, on March 8, 2014, and I caught both shows. The Asian Claudette who I thought would appear with them was nowhere in sight, but instead there was a striking Nigerian woman whose real name is Yana, and who says she, actually, is the real Claudette. (You're on your own, once again, to resolve all this.) She dissed the band and otherwise acted as if they are her personal servants, while sitting at a table where there was a scrolling LED sign advertising beer specials while warning patrons of Claudette's to stay away from the Sizzler next door because the food is awful there.

This is all quite amusing; I was giggling my head off, actually. I talked with Yana/Claudette during breaks, and found her to be most pleasant, unlike the haughty persona she projects from the stage. (You don't suppose the surly stuff is just part of the act, do you?)

In the afternoon light at the Deli, the band performed numbers from the CD, plus many others with their unique branding and over-the-top style that they call "cosmic cartoon music." I've coined an alternate descriptive term — "psycho-boogie" — because it's crazy good. (I shared the term with Johnny Iguana, and he warned me that he might steal it from me.) They gave this psycho-boogie treatment to some otherwise familiar songs, including "Grazin' in the Grass", "There's No Business Like Show Business", and a pop tune from the 1960s called "Brazil". Listening to the music on the CD in advance had pretty well prepared me for all this.

Later that evening at BB's unexpected stuff happened. The band was on stage about to start their gig, but all the normal stage lights were off, and stayed off. Instead, when they started the gig, they switched on their own lighting on the dark stage, which consisted of harshly bright white lights mounted on the stage floor. These created glaring illumination with contrasting deep shadows on stage, what I'd describe as a Halloween house-of-horrors effect, as the backdrop for the psycho-boogie material. Though I was hugely entertained by all this, I'm sure there were patrons who didn't quite get it.

The Nigerian Yana/Claudette once again was there to insult the band, while dancing on stage to some of the tunes. The same scrolling LED sign conveyed messages such as single cigarettes being available, and to see Claudette or the band for brands and prices, and that while they take Diner's Club, they will throw those cards in the garbage pail. Psycho-boogie renditions were given of Stevie Wonder's "Boogie on Reggae Woman" and of Link Wray's "Rumble", along with "California Here I Come" done in the manner of a funeral march with glissandos thrown in for free. The band did more of their material from the CD, and Yana /Claudette sang something in French to the band's accompaniment.

Johnny Iguana shared with me that he's wanted to do a piano-and-drums duo thing for quite some time. He cited a recording made by Otis Spann on piano, accompanied only by S.P. Leary on drums, titled "S.P. Blues" as an item that helped plant this idea in his head.

Johnny not only has impressive credentials as a Chicago piano bluesman, he also co-founded a band called oh my god [sic] which is described as an indie-arty-prog-pop band, so it's clear he has a wide ranging and creative musical side. The Claudettes appear to be something of a fusion of his barrelhouse, blues, and boogie woogie background with his other musical interests. Knowing a bit about what to expect before I saw their live performances left me well prepared for a whole lot of fun. ♫

Johnny Iguana returns to BB's on July 31.

Hound Dog Brown is programmer and host of 88.1 KDHX, St. Louis Community Radio's "Boogie on Down" every Sunday morning at 5 am. email him at: boogieondown@kdhx.org



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Friday May 8 Guerilla Swing 9PM
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Sunday May 18 Carrie and the Catapults FREE SHOW 4PM
Thursday May 22 Kory Montgomery Band 9PM
Friday May 23 Jenny Teator and the Fever + The Thin Dimes 10PM
Saturday May 24 The Hatrick plays The Schwag Reunion After Party 10PM
Sunday May 25 Aaron Kamm and the One Drops 10PM
Friday May 30 Fat Pocket 10PM
Saturday May 31 Al Holliday's East Side Rhythm Review

Sunday June 1 77 Jefferson and Friends 9PM
Wednesday June 4 Lowdown Brass Band and Funky Butt Brass Band 9PM
Thursday June 5 New Orleans Suspects 9PM
Friday June 6 The Red Elvies 10PM
Sunday June 8 GrassnRoots Festival 1PM until close
Friday June 13 Funky Butt Brass Band 10PM
Saturday June 14 Chubby Carrier and the Bayou Swamp Band 10PM
Thursday June 19 Big Mike Aguirre and the Blu-City All-Stars
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Compiled by Rich Hughes

BENTON PARK CONCERT SERIES

3-6 pm

June 8 Tommy Halloran/Guerilla Swing

July 30 Tom Hall /Alice Spencer

Sept. 14 Sarah Jane & The Blue Notes

CARONDELET PARK SUMMER CONCERT SERIES

6-8 pm

June 30 Melissa Neels Band

Aug. 17 Hudson & The Hoo Doo Cats

ELLISVILLE/BUEBIRD PARK

7-9 pm

June 12 Jeremiah Johnson Band

July 24 Funky Butt Brass Band

GRACE HILL CONCERT SERIES

Thursdays

List not out yet

LAFAYETTE SQUARE PARK

6-8 pm

Aug. 2 Dawn Weber

Sept. 13 Funky Butt Brass Band

MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDENS

7:30 pm

June 11 Al Holliday

July 9 Big Brother Thunder

July 30 Melissa Neels Band

Aug. 6 Gene Dobbs Bradford Blues Project

MUSIC ON MAIN STREET., ST. CHARLES

5 pm

Sept. 17 Women of the Blues

SOULARD MARKET PARK CONCERT SERIES

Saturdays

List not out yet

UNIVERSITY CITY HEMAN PARK

4-8 pm

June 28 Soulard Blues Band

6:30 pm

June 16 Melvin Turnage Band

July 28 Fat Pocket

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