THE BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF THE SAINT LOUIS BLUES SOCIETY Mar/Apr 2016 Number 79



PLUS Ethan Leinwand on the history of "The 44 Blues"
Reed Radcliffe's photos from "Meet the Blues" salute to KDHX Blues Programmers Show CD Review from Michael Higgins

NEW! Lilley's Corner: A discussion with John McVey



# OBTING BLUES MUSIC IN

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3 Free shipping - buy both original CDs during April

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St. Louis Musicians Listing



It is truly an exciting time to be in St. Louis. Spring is in full swing, the music is moving from the dark clubs out onto the patios, and the National Blues Museum is opening!

The National Blues Museum has been coming together for six years. There have been ups and downs, lots of collaboration, and finally we will all get to see what the hype is all about. One aspect of the museum that will be of interest to all St. Louis blues lovers is the temporary St. Louis Blues Exhibit. The exhibit will talk about the story of St. Louis blues over the last 100 years or so, feature information about black radio history and the DJs who have been at the forefront of blues for decades, a photo show by Peter Newcomb, information about

local blues venues, and a listening station where you can hear songs from the two St. Louis Blues Society compilation cds. As opening weekend comes and goes, I strongly suggest St. Louis comes out and supports such a great attraction for the city and the blues community!

We would like to welcome Mike Battle as our new Education Director. Mike is a local musician and coordinates the Center for Artistic Expression. He is already working on several aspects of St. Louis blues education. If you are interested in helping, please make sure to reach out to him at mikeb@exploremypassion. org or 314.960.7368.

On that note, special thanks to Evangelines Bistro, Tom Bryne and Erika Johnson for their donation to the STLBS Education Fund. We will be using the money to fund some of our co-ventures with The School of Rock and more.

The STLBS has recently created a concert calendar on our website. If you are a venue or band, please send your schedule to concertcalendar@stlouisbluessociety.org. Include the name of the band, venue, date, and time in an easy to read format so we can get it out through our social media!

Thank you for supporting St. Louis Blues Jeremy Segel-Moss, Chairperson of the St. Louis Blues Society



I'd love to hear from you!

Please write me at jsegelmoss@stlouisbluessociety.org and tell me what you think of our current projects.

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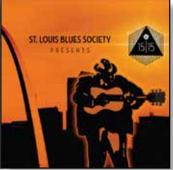
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The St. Louis Blues Society is dedicated to preserving and perpetuating blues music in and from St. Louis, while fostering its growth and appreciation. The St. Louis Blues Society provides blues artists the opportunity for public performance and individual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

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# Bues ne 44

by Ethan Leinwand

"The 44 Blues" is quintessential barrelhouse piano. The song, both in sound and story, encapsulates the art form. From the rumbling sounds of this powerful tune are heard the pianistic and expressive voices of African-Americans of the time. From its complex history—one that spans the pre and post recording eras—emerges a story that defines the genre. The main characters in this drama are the piano players Little Brother Montgomery, Lee Green and Roosevelt Sykes. The setting is the towns around the Mississippi River, including Ferriday, LA, Tallulah, LA, Vicksburg, MS, Durant, MS, West Helena, AR and St. Louis, MO.

"The 44 Blues" is presumed to have originated as an instrumental number. Though each player brought their own flare to it, there are a few commonalities worth a brief description. The bedrock is three chimed chords [I IV I - for the music folks] with an almost gospel feel. The left-hand bass features fast ascending chromatic rolls. The effect of which sounds like the "vroom" of a revving car. This is played over rapid sixteenth notes on the right hand. Keeping steady time while both hands are playing such different rhythms is one of the main difficulties of performing this tune.

In the early and mid-1920s, barrelhouse tunes were taking shape in different regions. They would grow out of a shared development, in which different pianists would add new elements, resulting in complex difficult pieces. To be able play such a tune was to prove your worth as a piano player.

According to Little Brother Montgomery, "The 44 Blues" developed in just this way. Only a teenager in the early 20s, he credits the tune to himself and a group of active but mostly unrecorded deep south pianists. These players include Long Tall Friday, Ernest '44' Johnson aka Flunkey, and Robert 'Big Brother' Johnson (not the guitarist). Others, like Son Cook and Johnny Yeager, "tried to play the 44s, but they weren't any good." (ZurHeide, Deep South Piano) Ernest Johnson was known as the "King of the 44s," though he never recorded it. Little Brother Montgomery's version is, according to some, the great masterpiece. He called it "The Vicksburg Blues." But he wouldn't be the first, or even the third, to record it.

In an interview with Francis Wolford-Smith, c. 1960, Little Brother Montgomery said, "Lee Green was a clothes presser. He kept trying to learn 'the 44s' from me and Ernest Johnson.... He couldn't play nothing. And he taught Roosevelt how to play." These words of are mighty disparaging and not wholly accurate. Lee Green was in fact, a wonderful, though at times unhinged, piano player. So why does Little Brother come off so bitter? And why does he insist that Lee Green had simply learned the tune from him and not contributed to its development? The answer is simple. The first person to record "The 44s," and provide the most influential version, was Roosevelt Sykes.

Sykes met Lee Green in the mid '20s in West Helena, AR. They were close friends, traveled together, and both settled in St. Louis. By the late '20s their repertoires and styles had so many similarities that if it weren't for Roosevelt's claim that Lee Green showed him the blues, it would be hard to tell who influenced who. Lee Green taught Roosevelt "The 44 Blues" and when Sykes went into the studio for the first time, on June 14, 1929, this was the very first song he recorded. Two months later, in August of 1929, Lee Green became the second pianist to record the tune, calling it "Number 44 Blues." In comparing the two recordings, one can see the genius of Sykes' lyrics. In Lee Green's version, the 44 is a train. Indeed, the number 44 was an Illinois Central train that ran North-South on the old Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Track. Green sings of hearing the "44 whistle blow." Sykes, too, sings about the 44 train, but in his first verses, the 44 is a gun.

"I walked all night long, with my 44 in my hand. I was looking for my baby, found her with another man." Also, "I wore my 44 so long, sure makes my shoulder sore." These would become the iconic lyrics of "The 44 Blues."

The third recording of this tune was by a wonderful but obscure Chicago pianist, Blind Leroy Garnett, with singer James 'Boodle-It' Wiggins. Recorded just four months after Sykes, in October of 1929, we can already see the influence of Sykes' recording. The lyrics used by Wiggins are exactly the same. The piano part, though clearly "the 44s," has a uniqueness that leads one to the conclusion that Garnett was not part of the original lineage of players. Meaning he very well might have developed his version from hearing Sykes recording. At the very least, Garnett's version shows that the tune had quickly become popular and recording companies saw a profitability in recording it.

Little Brother Montgomery was late to the party. He waxed "The Vicksburg Blues" in his first recording session in September of 1930. It had been over a year since Sykes first recorded it. In fact, Sykes, under the pseudonym "Willie Kelly," had already recorded it a second time. Down the road, some musicians would be influenced by Little Brother's version. Roosevelt Sykes, for recording it first and writing such great lyrics, will go down as the most influential performer of "The 44 Blues." Howlin' Wolf's version in the mid-50s, using Sykes' lyrics, cemented the song as a blues classic, but in the process, the tune outgrew its barrelhouse piano roots.

Barrelhouse blues is difficult to define properly. Narrowly, it's the music that, with a raucous rhythmic zeal, linked ragtime to boogie-woogie. Broadly, barrelhouse is just about all the crude blues played on a piano from the mid-teens through the '30s. Questions about when and where it emerged, how it spread, and all that it influenced are not easily answered. "The 44 Blues," in its rich history and dynamic recordings, provides a wonderful snapshot into that world.



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The salute to KDHX blues programmers show was one of the most attended shows in the history of the Stage at KDHX. Every seat in the house was taken.



People trickle into BB's Jazz, Blues & Soups on a Friday night. A smattering of patrons—a refreshing balance of age, gender and ethnicity—make small talk at their tables while an ordinary looking man weaves his way toward the stage. In a few minutes, Leroy Jodie Pierson, accompanied by a couple other musicians most St. Louisans have never heard of, will fill the room with country blues, local history and national significance. Not that anyone will notice.

But that's okay with Leroy. It's enough that someone's here. This isn't about fans or fame or fortune; it's about people. The blues have always been about the people.



And he knows them well—nearly forgotten musicians who rarely make it into the mainstream conversation of country blues, rockabilly or reggae, all musical genres in which Leroy specializes. A half hour into his set, he pauses to impart a little wisdom on his audience, which now nearly fills the room.

"Across the river on Third Street was the Valley," he tells us, as if beginning a

grad school lecture but without the pretention. "That was bad news, man. Nothin' but seven blocks of bars and

whore houses." Patrons turn toward Leroy to hear more; the word "whore" has that effect. "And it was run by William Bunch, the High Sheriff of Hell."

Then just as smoothly as he slipped from blues to its local history, Leroy slides back into playing something straight from a 1931 East St. Louis saloon. For a moment, before turning back to our friendly table conversations, we're led across the Eads to Third Street, amid the gangsters, prostitutes and bootleggers.



The combination of Leroy's musical talent and historical knowledge creates a uniquely authentic experience for those lucky enough to be here, to hear how St. Louis fits into blues history. But unless you have the opportunity to hang with Leroy, or with a handful of other local musicians who know the city's musical history, you won't hear much about it. Little of this was ever documented, and even less of it ever shared with the general public.

Until now.

On April 2, music lovers from around the world will finally get a glimpse of just how important St. Louis and genre we call the blues. On that Saturday, thousands will meet on Washington Avenue for the grand opening of the National Blues Museum, the world's only permanent exhibition devoted to preserving, celebrating and sharing the story of "the blues" and its impact on American culture.

greatest benefit of housing the National Blues Museum here: easy access to local venues and musicians. Visitors will have updated information on who's playing where, including BB's Jazz, Blues & Soups; The Broadway Oyster Bar; Beale on Broadway; Hammerstone's; 1860s Saloon; Blues City Deli; and Evangeline's.

Touted as one of the country's must-see attractions of 2016, the National Blues Museum will lead visitors from around the world on a 15,000 square foot chronological tour of blues music, featuring interactive technology, exhibits, classrooms, event space and a theatre for live performances. For the city of St. Louis, it will serve as both an economic boom and a source of civic pride. But for the people—residents, visitors and musicians—the museum is more than that. It is a doorway leading folks into the backyard of the blues, where friends from all walks-of-life gather to talk about life through music.

Before ending the museum tour in the large gift shop—a necessity for any tourist destination—people stroll into a space reserved exclusively for the St. Louis blues music scene, both past and present. A room with a view of how local musicians influenced and inspired a century of American music, right here on both banks of

the Mississippi.

Displays include an exhibit on the city's black radio history, featuring some of the stations, disc jockeys and programs that led the way, such as Gabriel's Tin Pan Alley on KDHX 88.1 FM. There is also a history wall chronicling the evolving story of St. Louis blues music, and a portrait gallery featuring more than 40 current St. Louis musicians. There are also listening stations where folks can hear 29 songs by 29 bands who can be found playing throughout the city.

For the St. Louis blues scene—the pubs and clubs peppering the city and county—this may be the



Museums are wonderful places to store, display and promote elements of culture; without them we are less educated and enlightened. The trouble with such facilities, however, is that they're relatively static. The National Blues Museum addresses this well with its traveling exhibits, stage performances and outreach programs, but when it comes to something as organic as the blues, the only way truly to expose people is to invite them out back, past the parlor and formal rooms, into the back yard.

This is the only way to tell the real story—from the forgotten tales to the evolving accounts of local musicians and music, their influences and escapades, and the undeniable, absolutely essential fact that it all centers around everyday people with everyday problems, plans and prayers. Leroy Jodie Pierson knows this, along with dozens of others, and they're all willing to share.

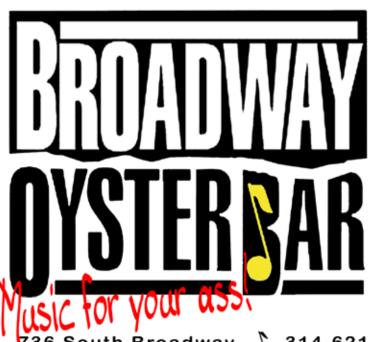


photos of the National Blues Museum from top left: the St. Louis sign on the "Cities" wall, look closely, this piece of art is actually 900 harmonicas owned by Jim McClaren; the "Influence" wall; a portion of the "Travelin" wall; the "Backwater Blues" wall; and the wooden rear entrance wall

# E MUS







# **Upcoming Musical Highlights**

Every Monday at 9PM Soulard Blues Band Open Jam

March 19 Joe Krown Trio 10PM

March 20 Kung Fu with The Provels 8PM

April 1 Cedric Burnside Project with special guests The Maness Brothers 10PM

April 20 Josh Hoyer and Soul Colossal with Funky Butt Brass Band 9PM

April 21 Aaron Kamm and the One Drops with Special Guests Euforquestra 9PM

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C cott Joplin rolled against the grain to our fair city. Traveling Onortheast, his syncopated rags played heavy on our infant blues. So did Lonnie Johnson's guitar. Vacating 'the Big Easy,' his early single-string genius not only lifted our cobblestones, but helped shape modern urban blues.

But what happens when a young cat in Yankee garb crosses the Big Muddy to settle in Cardinal country? Well, if you play the piano like Ethan Leinwand, you call it a blessing—and a blue one at that.

The Low-Down Piano might be the most unique and surprising CD of the year. A true celebration of St. Louis pre-war barrelhouse and boogie-woogie, solo blues piano comes no purer. And adding surprise to blessings, Ethan actually moved here thanks to our city's storied rep.

Right from the start, Ethan rolls the blacks and whites deep into St. Louis history. "Deep Morgan Blues," Henry Brown's tribute to St. Louis' fabled '20s and '30s entertainment district, barrels forward steadily grinding. The left-hand quarter-notes stomp the bass while the right hand keeps the melody simple with an occasional flourish. Building the 'St. Louis V chord', this sparse bare-boned approach is distinctly St. Louis. Anyone familiar with the great Henry Townsend will know these blues immediately—unobtrusive and sweet—but hauntingly low-down.

The STL connection continues on track seven. The Sparks Brothers, Pinetop on piano and Milton on vocals, are most famously unknown as the originators of the all-time blues classic "Everyday I Have The Blues." A huge hit for blues legends B.B. King, Lowell Fulson and Joe Williams (with Count Basie), it was Memphis Slim who revamped some lyrics and changed the title in 1949 to, "Nobody Loves Me." Word is Slim picked up the tune in the late '30s or early '40s while Roosevelt Sykes showed him about town. Whatever the scenario, Slim claimed royalties from all three hits, even though Pinetop had recorded it first in July of 1935 with Henry Townsend on guitar. Memphis Slim garnished enough dinero from Sparks' song to brag about how it paid for his Rolls Royce...Just a 'blue note' to our new National Blues Museum: If by chance you get hold of the Rolls, you might want to exhibit it where it honestly belongs!. Call it a repossession if you'd like—and a deserved one at that.

Track seven is a lesser known Sparks Brothers tune, the rare, "Louisiana Bound (.... and Gone)." Originally recorded in 1932, the Sparks were a mere 21-years-old when they cut it. Vibrant, voracious and bootlegging on the side, both would bed in St. Louis jail cells on more than one occasion. Was a Louisiana beauty heavy on the mind one of those times? Who knows? Either way, Ethan's interpretation is not only spot on, but adds some sweet improv to the finish.

Jabo Williams' "Pratt City Blues" is also a tune from St. Louis. At least, Jabo was a St. Louis pianist. Leinwand hits it hard with this very wild, early boogie-woogie stuff on track nine.

Track twelve—and the final STL song—"Peetie Wheatstraw's Blues" is a Leinwand original. Years before Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil, Peetie Wheatstraw (aka William Bunch) had already shaped his own satanic myth. He married into the devil's family! "The Devil's Son-In-Law," or "High Sheriff From Hell," was originally from Tennessee. Coming to the Lou' in 1929, he immediately switched his focus from guitar to piano. Crazily popular throughout the '30s, he recorded an incredible 160 songs. Looser and rougher than Henry Brown, Wheatstraw was a strong vocalist and built his own expressive piano-based flavor. Ethan's original captures the High Sheriff's approach in spades. It's a cool, modern-day glimpse into a charismatic, often neglected St. Louis legend.

The Low-Down Piano doesn't just stop in St. Louis, it travels all around. Robert Shaw's cascading "The Ma Grinder" and the complicated classic, "The Cows," showcase the rag-influenced east Texas approach. Chicago is more than openly represented too. Known for their 8-to-the-bar boogie-woogie, pre-war masters Jimmy Yancey and Albert Ammons are covered nicely. So is the great Little Brother Montgomery. Ethan shows a natural love for his sound. There are four Little Brother tracks on the 16-song disc. Most notably is the piano classic "Vicksburg Blues." And maybe I'm going senile, but I swear Ethan's cover of "Farish Street Jive" sports a couple spots that are reminiscent of the refrain on Joe Liggin's 1950 hit "Rag Mop." I'll let your ears be the judge.

Also noteworthy are two wonderful mysteries of early piano blues: Montana Taylor and Romeo Nelson. Arthur Taylor might have been the only blues musician ever born in Montana. The nickname is appropriate though. Balancing out the high altitude of that state, his songs are openly recognized as some of the most low-down piano blues ever recorded. Ethan lays it low on "Indiana Avenue Stomp," a 1929 song referring to Indianapolis where Montana settled. But the real gem is Romeo Nelson's little known "Head Rag Hop." Not much is truly known about Nelson. He lived in Chicago when he recorded. He only recorded four songs. All the songs are beloved not only for their boogie-woogie creativity, but also for his almost comical and frenzied pace. And oh, he learned the basics of his style around 1915 before moving back permanently to the Windy City. And where did he learn those basics you ask? Well, East St. Louis of course.

At first it seems ironic, but in reality it's totally fitting. Timed with the grand opening of our new National Blues Museum, The Low-Down Piano not only musically reaffirms the beauty, but also the true importance of piano blues in America. And having influenced music worldwide, it's also fitting that both the NBM and Ethan Leinwand are here in St. Louis. This CD truly is 'piano blue in the Lou;' a must buy for the true blues lover, enjoy it at all costs. And catch Ethan live too. You can find him playing in The Bottlesnakes, with Miss Jubilee and The Steady Grinders, or in duets with Tom Hall, Mat Wilson or Ron Edwards. Saturday nights at Yaqui's are almost always a given. Enjoy! "

# rner



Welcome to Lilley's Corner. Lilley Halloran, 6th grader and daughter of local musician Tommy Halloran, has been writing for several years already. She is interested in journalism and publishes the Wyoming Street News that you can find around South Grand. Lilley is going to be writing a column for the BluesLetter featuring different musicians.

Her inaugural column is about recent transplant, John McVey who moved to St. Louis from Houston, TX. McVey has quickly become a local favorite; performing with the Soulard Blues Band on Monday nights at the Broadway Oyster Bar and holding down his own set every Wednesday at Hammerstone's in Soulard from 8pm-Midnight.

# with Lilley Halloran

LILLEY: Who was/is your most important musical teacher when it comes to the blues?

**JOHN:** Larry Davis. He wrote and was the first to perform Texas Flood. When I was a young man in my mid-to-early twenties, he brought me up. That was my college, the University of Larry Davis.

LILLEY: What makes Saint Louis blues different from Texas blues?

**JOHN:** There are a lot more similarities than differences. In Texas, with what I do, it's very guitar intensive. Blues bands up here focus more on the song and the lyrics, and the feeling of the lyrics. I have found in my life, that the feeling of the blues is the same wherever it is played.

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John McVey photo by Tiffany Waits

**LILLEY:** Where do you see the blues going in the 21st century?

**JOHN:** I'm sensing the beginning of another blues revival. Young people are starting to pick up on the music again. When popular music gets too artificial with, you know, too many synthesizers and computers and nobody is really playing anything, eventually people get tired of all the razzamatazz, so to speak, and they want something real. That's when they start to gravitate back towards the blues. The blues will never die.

LILLEY: If you didn't play the instrument you do play, what would you play and why?

JOHN: I love saxophone. Good saxophone players seem to make the music fly, like a bird flying through the sky.

LILLEY: Where do you get your inspiration?

JOHN: I get my inspiration from my life. On top of that, Mary Alice, my wife, is the biggest inspiration in my life.

LILLEY: What advice do you have for blues musicians just starting out?

**JOHN:** Don't give up, keep playing if you love playing the music. Don't let people tell you to stop.  $\Pi$ 

For more information about John McVey's shows and music go to: www.johnmcveyblues.com



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Mar 5	7 PM	Joe Bozzi (Big Band Classics)
Mar 6	11 AM	Miss Jubilee Hot Jazz Brunch
Mar 7	7 PM	Singer/Songwriter Night hosted by Ed Belling
Mar 8	7 PM	Tony Memmel (Nashville, TN)
Mar 9	7 PM	Ed Belling & Marion
Mar II	7 PM	Jeff Brown (Three's A Charm) (Chicago, IL)
Mar 12	7:30 PM	Bottoms Up Blues Gang
Mar 13	11 AM	Miss Jubilee Swing Jazz Brunch
Mar 14	7 PM	Singer/Songwriter Night hosted by Ed Belling
Mar 15	7 PM	Sophia Landis (Northeast, Iowa)
Mar 16	10:30 PM	The 10 Cent Cigars (Bayfield, Wisconsin)
Mar 17	7 PM	Jameson Whiskey Presents "Evangeline's St Patty's Live!"
Mar 18	7 PM	Wack-A-Doo (Vaudeville Gypsy Jazz)
Mar 19	7 PM	Franglais (featuring Eve Seltzer & Ben Wood)
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Mar 25	7 PM	Eve Seltzer & Terminal Swing - ALBUM RELEASE PARTY
Mar 26	7 PM	The Sidemen - Swing Jazz/Blues/Rockabilly
Mar 27	11 AM	Miss Jubilee & the Humdingers Swing Jazz Brunch
Mar 28	7 PM	Singer/Songwriter Open Mic Showcase
Mar 30	7 PM	Tommy Halloran
Mar 31	7 PM	Tom Byrne & Erika Johnson (Jazz)

#### **APRIL**

Apr 1	7 PM	Kip Loui & Brian Henneman (Bottle Rockets)
Apr 2	7 PM	Pik'N Lik'N (Americana)
Apr 3	11 AM	Miss Jubilee Hot Swing Jazz Brunch
Apr 4	7 PM	Singer/Songwriter Night Hosted by Ed Belling
Apr 7	7 PM	Bob "Bumblebee" Kamoske
Apr 8	7 PM	Doug Strahan & the Good Neighbors (Austin, Texas)
Apr 9	7 PM	Box of Nerves (members of The Sidemen)
Apr 10	11 AM	"Franglais" Gypsy Jazz Brunch featuring Ben Wood & Eve Seltzer
Apr 11	10 AM	Evangeline's joins KMOV Channel 4 - St Louis Cardinals Baseball Home Opener Kick Off Rally
	6 PM	Evangeline's Post Game Party - Live Music/Drink Specials
Apr 14	7 PM	"Jeremiah" (Los Angeles, CA)
Apr 15	7 PM	The Midwest Jazz-tette
Apr 16	3 PM	Evangeline's 3rd Annual CRAWFISH BOIL
Apr 17	11 AM	Miss Jubilee & the Humdingers Hot Jazz Brunch
Apr 18	7 PM	Ed Belling hosts Singer/Songwriter Night
Apr 22	7 PM	Jazz Vocalist Erika Johnson with guitarist Tom Byrne
Apr 23	7 PM	Wack-A-Doo (1900's Vaudeville Classic)
•	10:30 PM	Steely James (Nashville, TN)
Apr 29	7 PM	KERI JOHNSRUD - Jazz (Chicago, IL)

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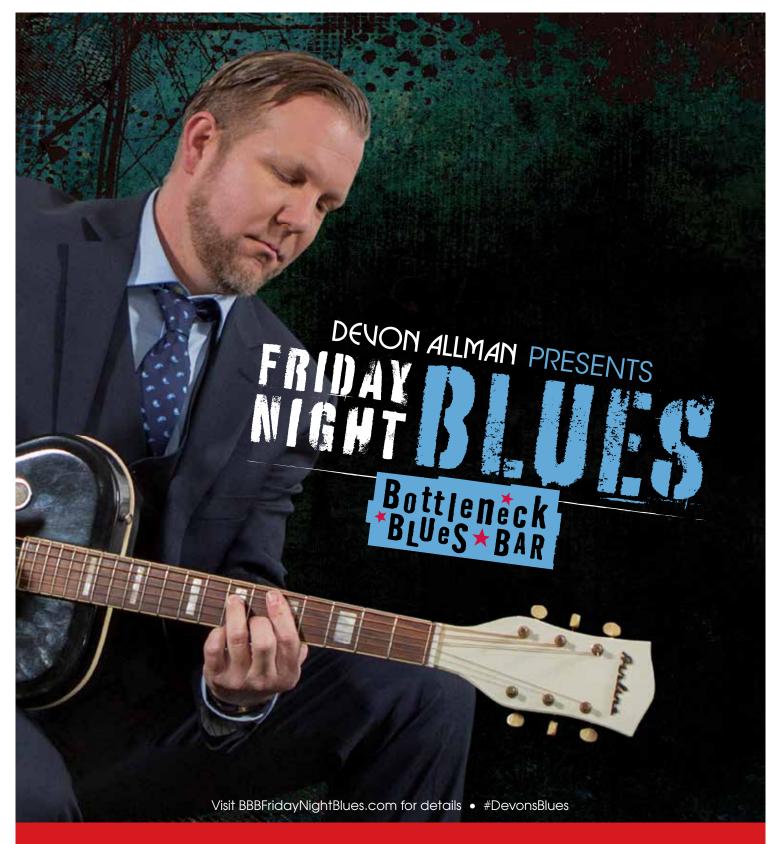
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