

BLUES LETTER

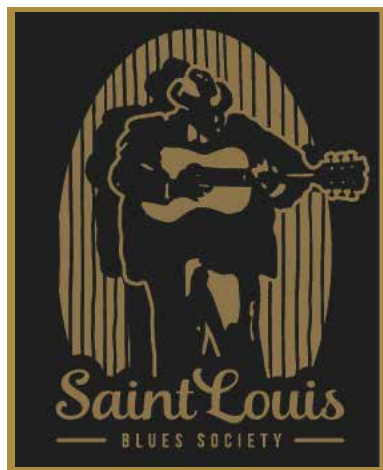
THE BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF THE SAINT LOUIS BLUES SOCIETY Mar/Apr 2018 Number 89



RACE AND THE BLUES

A recap of the recent conversations on
Race and The Blues in St. Louis hosted by
The St. Louis Blues Society and KDHX

PRESERVING AND PERPETUATING BLUES MUSIC IN AND FROM ST. LOUIS SINCE 1984



KDHX and STLBS present *Race and the Blues in St. Louis: A Conversation Series*

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This issue of the St. Louis Blues Society's Bluesletter is completely dedicated to the conversations on Race and The Blues in St. Louis we hosted with KDHX in February. The topic of race and blues is one of the most important conversations to be had in our community, whether we are musicians, venue owners or fans. The goal of the conversations was to open the floor to topics of oppression, appropriation, and the stigmas that keep blues on the fringe—past and present.

The outcome was hugely successful. We had full rooms for every event with talented, articulate panelists, and engaged, thoughtful attendees who participated in the conversation. In many ways the people who came to participate were as important as those on stage. We are very grateful for the honest questions, direct concerns, and respectful listening by the attendees.

We would like to especially thank KDHX for hosting the conversation, Allison Wilson, Darian Wigfall, Dr. Rosalind Norman, and the panelists; Bernie and Uvee Hayes, Jimmy Hinds and Marsha Evans, Dion Brown, Gene Dobbs Bradford, John May, Marquise Knox, Alonzo Townsend, Teec'a Easby and Dylan Triplett.

Also, a big thank you to Bob Baugh who covered the events, took the pictures, and spent hours and hours transcribing the conversations to turn them into the articles included in this issue. Volunteers like Bob are what make the St. Louis Blues Society a relevant and successful organization and we are very grateful for his time and energy!

While these events were important and very needed, they are only the beginning. A few conversations about race and blues won't help unless we take the conversation to the streets. I highly suggest each and every one of us have a conversation with ourselves, our friends, other musicians or fans of the music. It is clear that if you're reading this Bluesletter, you are a fan of the music; and that requires a certain level of responsibility to the originators of the artform. Links to the full video of these programs are available on the STLBS website or kdhx.org. Watch, listen, learn and share. Now is the opportunity to unite and create a positive effect in St. Louis and around the world.

Thanks for your support.

Jeremy Segel-Moss, STLBS Board Chairperson

E-mail Jeremy I'd love to hear from you!

Please write me at jsegelmoss@stlouisbluessociety.org and tell me your ideas for new projects.

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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.

Rent Party

PHOTOS BY BOB BAUGH

On Saturday, March 3, The St. Louis Blues Society hosted a Rent Party at The Focal Point. The musicians who volunteered their time to help us raise some rent money were: Chris Shepard and Ron Roskowske of the Kingdom Brothers; Big Mike Aguirre; and Jason David Cooper and Gregory Hommert. Our most grateful thanks for their time and talent. The St. Louis Blues Society raised over \$600 at the party. Thank you to everyone who came out to support us. Having an office at Nebula has been a wonderful opportunity for STLBS to organize and grow. Thanks to you, we get to stay there a while longer.



**VOLUNTEER
AND MEMBER
Meet and Greet**

Spring 2018
St. Louis Blues Society
Meet and Greet Events
at KDHX - The Stage, 3524 Washington Ave.

Monday, April 23, 6-8pm
Monday, June 25, 6-8pm

Race and the Blues in St. Louis conversation recap of *The Past: Stigma of the Blues* February 04, 2018

by Bob Baugh

Dr. Rosalind Norman doesn't mince words. "I believe love for the arts especially music, which has been documented to aid in healing individuals, should be a common ground for bringing together people from diverse cultures and to restore a sense of community that bridges race relations in support of blues music in the community," she wrote. Her insights set the tone for the February 4 kick-off of the *Race and The Blues in St. Louis Conversation Series* at The Stage at KDHX.

The collaborative venture between the St. Louis Blues Society and KDHX, a three-part series that takes place throughout Black History Month, opened to a full house. Allison Wilson, KDHX's Chief Engagement Officer, and Jeremy Segel-Moss, St. Louis Blues Society Board Chair, worked closely with the moderator, Dr. Norman, a Webster University business professor and longtime black theater advocate, to design an interactive program.

The first conversation, *The Past: Stigma of the Blues*, featured St. Louisans prominent in the music community: Bernie Hayes, an entrepreneur, broadcaster, author, civil rights activist and media professor Webster University, Uvee Hayes, a school psychologist, songstress and recording artist, Jimmy Hinds, an internationally recognized bass guitarist, and Marsha Evans, an educator and blues singer.

Dr. Norman, affectionately known as Dr. Roz, immediately engaged the audience by having volunteers read quotes and the definitions for the words "stigma," "authentic," "culture" and "tradition." The definitions spoke to the heritage embedded in the quotes: "It's as though we were a picture, trapped in time: This had been happening for hundreds of years, people sitting in a room, waiting for dinner, and listening to the blues." - James Baldwin, author and social commentator, and, "It's my truth, it's a lot of people's truth, and it's one that was missing from the conversation" - Jordan Peele, actor and director.

Looking Back

The panel got straight into their experiences. Bernie Hayes grew up in segregated south Chicago, hearing that "the blues was low, beneath our standards." It took years to get beyond that perception and learn "what a wonderful historical genre this is." He also warned about how things get stigmatized by movies like *Cadillac Records* and *What's Love Got to Do with It* that leave "a false perception of what blues and soul really is, specially to blacks in America."



The Past: Stigma of the Blues Panel: Bernie Hayes, Uvee Hayes, Marsha Evans and Jimmy Hinds photo by Bob Baugh

With Hinds, Evans and Uvee Hayes, blues came into their lives early. Hinds says he first learned about the music by deejaying for his parents' card parties and from a "daddy who was from the Delta." Evans grew up in house surrounded by all kinds of music from opera to a "Grandma who played the blues with her boyfriend on the sax." And, "in my neighborhood," she said, "you could walk up and down the street and hear blues playing on 45s, 33s, and 78s."

Uvee Hayes grew up Macon, Mississippi, and explained that "my Mom had a juke joint ... at the age of eight I would sit up all night and hear the blues." She laughed when she intimated that people say to her: "you don't look like you sing the blues. I say how am I supposed to look? That's the stigma. How am I supposed to look?"

Stigmas and Devils

Dr. Roz raised the stigma of the "devil's music" and negative labelling by telling how her grandfather, a delta bluesman, was told by her grandmother he "would have to give up blues to marry her." "Although," she recalled, "he later began sneaking out on weekends." She also identified a "music hierarchy that places classical at the top with jazz, R&B, soul and even rap music above the blues, which is at the very bottom."

The discussion turned to the black churches that played such a central role in the community. Bernie Hayes summarized the experience: "Black preachers repeatedly saying 'this is the devil's music' gets ingrained way down in your psyche. You're brainwashed. The preachers were taught and believed that the devil met at the crossroads. It's generations of perceptions of what the blues is."

Evans pointed out that many of the people clubbing on Saturday night were the same people in church on Sunday morning. She said her aunt was a good example. "My aunt played the blues Saturday night but every Sunday morning she was in church behind the organ. He [the preacher] would let her have it." Hinds had his own take this conflict: "the preacher has a problem selling the devil thing. The blues are honest. If you haven't been through that thing the song is about, wait around, you will."

Hinds offered another blues stigma or barrier to understanding, the words. "If I asked you to recite the lyrics to a blues song you won't know what the words actually mean because of the country dialect." After Uvee sang a couple of lines of "Wang Dang Doodle" he said, "those are words that rhyme to you, but they mean something totally different...who can tell me what 'tell kudu crawlin' red' or 'tell Abyssinian' Ned' means?" Evans agreed, "it wasn't coding when they wrote it; they were writing about their everyday life experience."

Their comments spoke directly to having respect for the underlying culture and traditions that give the words meaning. Breaking the word barrier makes the music more meaningful and relevant to both the player and listener. It shows the differences that sometimes arise between how blues music is presented and perceived.

Shaping Perceptions

Dr. Roz cited the 1986 film, *Crossroads*, as an example of negative connotations of blues music in film. In the movie, a music student is told "you can't serve two masters," referring to blues and classical music, and "excellence

in primitive music is cultural,” meaning blues music. “You have to be born to it.” She noted the words ‘negative connotations with primitive music’ being at the lowest part of hierarchy.

Uvee Hayes lived the movie. More than a decade before the film, she was attending Delta State, a black university in Cleveland, Mississippi, on a music scholarship to sing in the choir. “I was asked to be on a talent show,” she told the audience. “I sang a blues tune, ‘The Man is Down On Me.’ The choir director kicked me out of the class and said, ‘this is classic choir we don’t do that’.”

Images in pop culture can deliberately provide a false narrative, as Bernie Hayes well knows. His anger over *Cadillac Records* is personal. “Little Walter was portrayed as a drunkard and Howlin’ Wolf a fool,” he said. “I grew up with these people. I was at Chess Records. I knew them. None of it was true. These images, they make you think they’re cultural. They’re not cultural, they’re racial. This is what it’s about. Someone wrote those parts for a reason and the reason wasn’t to make us look good.” Uvee agreed, “If you don’t have a history, then what you see is what you will believe. That’s why panels like this are so important.”

The panel presentation wrapped up with a question Bernie Hayes raised at the start: “What are the blues? Howlin’ Wolf says blues is not enough money to pay your rent. Son House says you got blues if a lover done left you. Muddy Waters says you got blues if you can’t get a job.” Those definitions got more complicated with time.

“Now,” Bernie Hayes observed, “what used to be the plain old blues keeps changing with multiple genres: country blues, urban blues, electric blues, Delta blues...All these categories were created for monetary sake and also on racial issues too. It used to be the blues no matter who...Now it’s categorized and it’s monetized.”

Hinds explained that the musician’s approach to the blues is basic, “it’s all musical progression 1, 4, and 5.” He also made the point that the blues are not “just the songs with the deep lyrics.” He went on to say, “it’s a stigma that blues are only about being downtrodden and drinking whiskey. There are happy blues. There’s been so many blues written about the cars we drive, not running or running too well. You can find a blues song for anything you can think about.”

Appropriation and Respect

A floor discussion opened with Alonzo Townsend, music promoter, and St. Louis Blues Society board member, and son of blues musician Henry Townsend. “What is the difference between appropriation and respect and heritage?” he asked. “What we have grown and formed. Those are our roots. We want to nourish our roots without tarnishing our roots.” He cited a provocative article, “White people, blues music and the problem of cultural appropriation” by Imran Rahman-Jones, that

had sparked a lot of online discussion with local blues musician Marquise Knox and many others about the whitewashing of the blues. Townsend and Knox would both be panelists at the February 25 conversation in this series, *The Future: Evolution of the Blues*.

Townsend says there are concerns about “artists who are the face of the blues that have nothing to do with the culture. They have never stood up for any injustice or any [violation of] rights that have happened. Not only to our community and culture, but to our music.” Just playing the music doesn’t cut it. “You have to understand what it is before you take it off and run with it and grow it. If you don’t vocalize the roots...the history gets snuffed out. The mission is to make sure that it doesn’t get snuffed out.”

Hinds was blunt about the history. “The question is who borne the blues,” he said. “That answer don’t change whose music it is and where it came from. It was born in America of black people under certain conditions.” And, as Bernie Hayes reminded everyone, “You don’t have to put another people, a race or culture down to lift yourself up. You can lift up yourself and others with you.”

Marty Spikener, a local musician, spoke up. “Blues is the foundation, but it doesn’t get the acclaim it should. It’s a history of appropriation. When I was young I thought the blues were simple and easy. I wanted to do the complicated stuff of jazz. But I learned. An old jazz musician once told me if you don’t know how to play the blues you don’t know how to play anything.”

Another musician and community activist, Ivan Martin made the connection with Townsend’s comments about injustice. He said, “Love the people that brought you the music. Make sure they can have peace, liberty and justice and be able to go home and enjoy what many of us do.” He challenged the larger blues audience to see what they can do.

“What’s the takeaway for us?” asked one audience member who had lived in Chicago and spent time at the Checkerboard and other clubs. He said for he and his friends, “there was no stigma and nothing but reverence for all the blues masters.” Bernie Hayes recognized their respect. “You had to go to 43rd Street,” he pointed out. “You didn’t mind. You were very rare. You wanted to hear, but so many did not. All they got was a bland thing from a book or the movies which was totally untrue. I bet it changed your life, or at least your music.”

A question about the origins of the blues stigma drew several responses. Hinds said at the basic level music gets linked with bad things like ‘rock ‘n’ roll was associated with dope’—blues were associated with whiskey.”

Bernie Hayes recognized the church divide, but also pointed to prejudice and the power that controls what people get to see and hear, which homogenizes the music. “None of

the people on stage have gotten the recognition they should get for several reasons,” he said. “They’re black, they’re not in control. It’s who’s in control of what you hear or will not hear. Sometimes it’s omitted purposely, sometimes it’s from ignorance. You’ve got to level the playing field.”

The control issue led to further discussion of how FCC deregulation under President Reagan led to conglomerates buying-up many radio stations. As Bernie Hayes puts it, “They are in control because they have the money to control.” Hinds was in full agreement, explaining, “It comes from a capitalistic situation in America. It comes from making money off it. You get the cheats, the liars. Don’t leave out motives like money.” Bernie Hayes also pointed to the on-air racial segregation of artists. “There are a lot of folks that don’t want to hear black music. Stations go to great lengths not to allow certain artists to be aired in certain areas. It sounds harsh but it’s true. What we can do is ask for fairness.” He encouraged people to write letters to stations, demanding different music.

Bringing it Home

A final question to the panel asking them to share a story of a moment when they knew their music mattered provided a sweet end to a pointed discussion.

Uvee Hayes shared a story about a friend going through a rough time with her mother, who suffers from Alzheimer’s. She played one of Uvee Hayes’ CDs and found her mother loved one of her songs. The friend told her, “she listens to it and dances to it even though she doesn’t do anything else. My friend loves it because it makes her mom happy.”

Evans told about the moments before St. Louis musician Oliver Sain passed away. “He was crying. I was holding his hand and he was holding mine. I sang ‘Let’s Stay Together’ and I could just feel him going away but being with him at the same time. God bless you Oliver. I know you’re loving this.”

Hinds said he is surprised by the young guys. “I’m a bass player by trade. It’s the young guys who constantly tell me ‘I’m still playing bass because I heard you’.”

Bernie Hayes had a special moment every day on his radio program: “I would start with ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing’ and then something inspirational by James Cleveland or ‘I’m Black and I’m Proud’ by James Brown. Every day people would come up and tell me ‘Bernie you started my day’.”

Final thoughts of the panelists provided a poignant highlight to a candid dialogue about stigma, authenticity, culture and tradition. Their special moments helped ground a serious discussion of heritage and respect in the real-life inspiration that blues music offers as a tool for healing, common ground and building bridges. It was a sweet ending that built a bridge to the next dialogue, *The Present: Reality of Blues Music Today*” 🎵



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MARCH-APRIL EVENTS

WED 07	7:00PM	Sherdonna Denholm
	8:00PM	Angela Perley & the Howlin' Moons Columbus, OH
THUR 08	7:00PM	Randy Erwin
FRI 09	7:00PM	Roadhouse Kings
SAT 10	7:00PM	The Cary Colman Trio
SUN 11	11:30AM	Brunch with Miss Jubilee & The Humdingers
	6:30PM	John Ford Cincinnati, OH
MON 12	7:30PM	Kyle Lacy & the Harlem River Noise NYC, NY
TUES 13	7:00PM	Sharon Hazel & Emmanuel Peake
WED 14	7:00PM	Nick Nash Nashville, TN
THUR 15	7:00PM	The Lovers with Kate Barnette Nashville / Atlanta
FRI 16	7:00PM	ilyAIMY Baltimore, MD
SAT 17	7:00PM	St. Patrick's Day Party with Boogiefoot
SUN 18	11:30AM	Brunch with Roya & the Hightimers!
TUES 20	7:00PM	Pat Joyce
WED 21	7:00PM	Jackson Howard with Lia Menaker
THUR 22	7:00PM	Rebecca Ryan & Tony Estrada
FRI 23	8:00PM	The Grooveline
SAT 24	7:00PM	The Joe Bozzi Band
SUN 25	11:30AM	Brunch with Miss Jubilee & The Humdingers
MON 26	7:00PM	Chris Ruest & Gene Taylor Austin, TX
TUES 27	7:00PM	Jordan Kirk Columbus, OH
WED 28	7:30PM	Bongo Jak vs. The Loop Machine
THUR 29	7:00PM	Josh Waddell Memphis, TN
	9:30PM	VOLK Nashville, TN
FRI 30	7:00PM	Sarah Jane & the Blue Notes
SAT 31	7:00PM	The Bon Bon Plot
	11:30PM	The Retrovaes Huntsville, AL
SUN 01	11:30AM	Brunch with Miss Jubilee & The Humdingers
	6:30PM	Easter Evening with The Jazz Troubadours
TUES 03	7:00PM	Cherokee Moon
WED 04	7:00PM	Brother Jefferson Duo ft. Jeff Chapman
FRI 06	7:00PM	Bottoms Up Blues Gang
SAT 07	7:00PM	Brent Stewart
SUN 08	11:30AM	Brunch with Miss Jubilee & The Humdingers
	6:30PM	Mike Lipel
TUES 10	7:00PM	JIM MANLEY
FRI 13	12:00PM	Grand Day of Piano
SAT 14	7:00PM	Fresh Burn Band Columbia, IL
	11:30PM	Vanessa Silberman & Carissa Johnson
SUN 15	6:00PM	Coleman Hughes Project
MON 16	7:00PM	Honeywise ft. Sophia Landis Cedar Falls, IA
TUES 17	7:00PM	Mitchel Evan Louisville, CO
	8:45PM	Brad Ellebrecht on Piano
TUES 18	7:00PM	Doug E. Rees
THUR 19	11:00AM	Wes Williams New Orleans, LA
FRI 20	7:00PM	PIK'N LIK'N Washington, MO
	12:00AM	Doc Rotten Trenton, NJ
SUN 22	11:30AM	Brunch with Miss Jubilee & The Humdingers
TUES 24	7:00PM	Pat Joyce
WED 25	7:00PM	Joe Metzka
THUR 26	7:00PM	5J BARROW New York City, NY
	8:45PM	The Highway Saints
FRI 27	7:00PM	HARD BOP MESSENGERS
SAT 28	7:00PM	BONGO JACK & the HOOP MACHINE
	8:45PM	Rebecca Ryan & Tony Estrada
SUN 29	11:30AM	Brunch with Miss Jubilee & The Humdingers
	6:30PM	Stephen Chopek Memphis, TN
MON 30	7:00PM	KOSI New York City, NY

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Race and the Blues in St. Louis conversation recap of *The Present: Reality of Blues Music Today* by Bob Baugh February 11, 2018

"We have to discuss the elephant in the room, race and racism," said Dr. Rosalind Norman, the moderator for the February 11 *Race and the Blues in St. Louis* conversation, *The Present: Reality of Blues Music Today*. Their stepchildren: negative labeling, cultural bias and appropriation had been identified in the previous week's dialogue on *The Past: Stigma of the Blues*.

To set the context for a discussion of tradition, appropriation, value and culture, Dr. Norman cited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech, "The Other America," that identified a dominant white culture and another that was poor and black. She said, "We need to think about how that plays into people perceiving them on a cultural basis." And, she used a quote, "if you destroy their history, you destroy their achievements and it's as if they never existed," from the 2014 film *Monuments Men*, to highlight the importance of acknowledgement to the discussion.

Norman stressed the need for honesty and respect in a potentially difficult and discomforting conversation. She then posed a series of questions for the panel on working in the industry, competitive compensation, of copyright laws, perceptions, and investment in the music. The panel for this discussion included the leading institutional figures in the city's blues and jazz scene: Dion Brown, Founding Executive Director of the National Blues Museum, Gene Dobbs Bradford, President and CEO of Jazz St. Louis, and John May, General Manager for BB's Jazz Blues and Soups.

Value, Rights and Technology

Bradford thought the first week's panel was a nice segue "because you can't talk about the support for the organizations we have without talking about the value people put on the blues in our society." May was in full agreement contrasting the amount of money people put into sport and theater tickets with "somebody who has been doing live music their entire life, hustling to get \$5 to \$10 per person to pay their bills and do their craft." May also noted that the city provides little support for an art form that attracts international visitors.



The Present: Reality of Blues Music Today Panel: Gene Dobbs Bradford, John May and Dion Brown photo by Bob Baugh

Bradford sees efforts around the country to educate the public that jazz is as just as important a cultural institution as a symphony, opera, or ballet making progress. "The next step," according to Bradford, "is to create a tradition of giving." For the blues, he sees a longer journey because it is "a cultural institution in its infancy."

There was consensus among the panelists that copyrights can protect musicians and that the manipulation experienced by an earlier generation of uneducated artists had diminished. "Today's modern musicians have learned from the past," Bradford observed, "and are savvy in making sure that the rights and contracts are taken care of." Brown agreed that the younger generation is better protected but cautioned, "you have to be up on your music to see if somebody is using it."

There is also an underlying reality as May reminded everyone: "Unfortunately, the people that could have or should have benefitted the most out of blues, the majority of those original innovators are gone. If you didn't see them and feel them, you can listen to a record but they're not going to get the benefit of what their true value was when they produced that thing."

Another reality identified by the panel is the disruptive impact that technology has had. Technology has made self-production more affordable and the web made access to music easier. Bradford has experienced

it: "Jazz labels used to send out materials and posters for a band touring in support of a record. Now people tour in hopes people will download their music." May sees the new business model every day at BB's. Most musicians have products to sell but they no longer make label records, track royalties or units sold. "You can get to much broader audiences by going to the internet and marketing yourself and make money and not be trapped by having to be connected to the record company and the contracts," he said.

The National Blues Museum uses technology to promote artists by streaming and archiving every live performance. They want people to see artists and book them. Their online performances have resulted in "people flying in from Alaska to see Marquise Knox and a doctor from Pittsburgh to see Big George Brock."

Appropriation and Originality

The issue of appropriation crosses racial and artistic lines. The blues revival in the U.S. was driven by bands from England as much as U.S. folk artists exploring their musical roots. It helped revive careers of blues artists and inspired a new generation of musicians. The problem is that the original musicians were not compensated at anywhere near the rate as those they influenced.

"Today," Brown observed, "The shift is on and it has been. When you go these festivals 90% of the participants and band

members are white people and these artists are very qualified to play.” Bradford stressed what a fine line appropriation can be: “You exist in this time period. You’re listening to the sounds that are around you. You try to take your influences and make your own artistic statement. You try to take that and fuse it into something honest that reflects who you are.”

May had a similar perspective: “Sometimes when listening to an artist I will hear something that reminds me of someone I had met years ago but they don’t even know it. They had absorbed it musically. They weren’t stealing anything they were emulating it.” He also believes artists need to understand the value of originality: “Recording someone else’s music doesn’t mean that you are an artist. It means you are duplicating something that’s already been done. If you have a value, then it’s probably more relevant if it’s something that’s truly original.”

Originality and acknowledgement is one step in addressing appropriation. Emulation, absorption and adaptation all feed into artistic expression. Pay for what you appropriate was one message from the panel. The other was to encourage more original blues music along with awareness and acknowledgement of its roots.

Investments, Evangelists and Branding

A question about investing in the blues drew many of the strands of the afternoon’s dialogue together. May said he knows about it because, “I invest in it every day by having a venue that will support music and encourage artists to make a living out of it.” A founding member and former board chair of the St. Louis Blues Society, he took pride in the three decades of the organizations and events. “Those were a creation of a community of people that were completely invested and were working together. Success isn’t necessarily measured in money. Success is that we brought great St. Louis music and events to the public.”

Dion Brown responded that when it comes to branding and outreach “is a constant battle.” The museums programming and history educates people, but he also advocated some first-hand experience. “Take a deep trip down to the Delta and find out what those people went through. Understand what your singing about. It came from within.”

Bradford urged people to learn “to become the evangelists,” and “help change the culture of the city so that people will

embrace jazz as much as the Cardinals, Ted Drewes and toasted ravioli.” He wants them to use the museum, go to shows and brag about St. Louis. And to do it with swagger. Bradford thought more could be done with the convention and business center message. “It’s one where the arts get a sliver and we get a slice of that,” he said. He cited the job Joe Edwards has done in carrying the flag but saw that more allies were needed. “The arts music community needs to come together,” he said.

Another issue raised was the branding St. Louis blues music. It is broader than the recording industry defined styles of Chicago, Detroit, Memphis and Nashville. The Blues Society’s annual CDs have captured that diversity. The challenge is to turn our musical gumbo make it a brand.

Race and Respect

The honesty and discomfort that Dr. Norman alluded to became apparent during the comment portion. One white musician framed his copyright question by first talking about racism and how his eyes had been opened to “a lot of pain that goes back a long time in St. Louis” because of the Michael Brown shooting. Another long-time musician agreed the that conversation about appropriation was needed, but he worried that it might lead to people saying, “this person can’t play the blues because they’re white.”

Brown and Bradford quickly reject the notion that color determines who can play. Brown said, “If it’s in you, play it. But respect the history, respect the forefathers that created this music form.” Bradford agreed, adding, “the real issue is the African Americans that created the music weren’t able to enjoy the spoils of the success the music would have when performed by people who weren’t black.”

May responded to a question about black musicians going to white clubs for recognition, but white musicians avoiding black clubs. He recalled how things were, “All of us learned blues in black clubs from people we were enamored by. We asked to learn to play blues by real blues people, not from records.” He praised Oliver Sain’s nurturing influence in teaching professionalism, integrity, publishing, craft, and community. The more troubling question raised by May was, “is that our problem, or is it because there is a whole generation of younger black people that reject blues as a form because they have moved on?”

Two audience members pointed out that “racism and classism coexist.” Blues

were perceived as a lower class of music. The music itself reflected class differences because it came from people who had everything taken away from them. Social media was seen as one vehicle to break down the barriers.

Bringing People Together

The conversation about heritage and race was honest and at times uncomfortable, but the shared experience of the music is not. One musician finds the stage to be the most perfect form of meritocracy: “If you can hang and can play, you belong. It doesn’t matter what you look like, how young, how old you are. The optimism of playing with such great people and having friends from across the spectrum, that’s what I’ve always taken away from playing blues music in this town.”

May sees the joy and diversity of the musical experience in his own club: “When I look at BB’s audiences I see a beautiful spectrum of people...white, black, young, old, European, Asian, Brazilian...everybody’s in the same room having a really good time and they’re not talking about what color you are. They’re not talking about what’s authentic. They’re actually participating in an experience that’s not only about the music, it’s a venue and the people within it.”

The succinct closing thoughts of the panel echoed these themes. Bradford told people, “Believe in the power of music to bring people together and unite our community. Get out there and support it. Be evangelists for it.”

May reiterated his support for the music and musicians. “Be honest. Don’t be angry, and make sure to support the people that deserve your support. If they’re true musicians they’re giving you their heart and soul. You deserve to give something back. If it’s money, great. If it’s respect, always. Tell the truth and don’t be angry.”

Brown called for solidarity: “Blues is a healer. Blues is a unifier. It will bring everyone together...We need each other to make this whole melting pot work.”

The second dialogue, *The Present: Reality of Blues Music Today*, gave us panelists with an institutional perspective and an audience that spoke truth to power. The result was a wide-ranging substantive discussion that ran from tradition, value, technology, appropriation and culture to respect, integration, and unity. The dialogue paved the road for the final installment, *The Future: Evolution of the Blues*. 🎵

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Race and the Blues in St. Louis conversation recap of *The Future: Evolution of the Blues* February 25, 2018

by Bob Baugh

When Willie Dixon said, “The blues are the true facts of life expressed in words and song, inspiration, feeling, and understanding,” he could have been talking about the panel for the third *Race and Blues* conversation. The next generation of blues artists put their feelings about the future out there for everyone to hear.

The Sunday panel was the final conversation in a three-part series co-sponsored by the St. Louis Blues Society and KDHX for Black History Month. The first dialogue, *The Past: Stigma of the Blues* drew upon the insights of a group of long-time music artists and educators. The second, *The Present: Reality of Blues Music Today*, provided an institutional perspective on the current challenges blues music faces.

To open the final session Dr. Rosalind Norman identified lessons and themes from the first two dialogues and then posed a series of questions to the panel. The questions covered blues as an art form for change, evolving and preserving its origins, building a stronger cultural identity, and the influence of technology. The panel was a display of St. Louis’ next generation of blues artists: Marquise Knox, band leader and entrepreneur; Alonzo Townsend, music producer, blues historian, and entertainment director at the National Blues Museum; Little Dylan Triplett, a 17-year-old vocalist and blues musician; and Teec’a Easby, a songstress and vocalist with Torrey Casey & the South Side Hustle.

The Past is Present

Marquise Knox got right to the point about how tricky this conversation can be because it’s not just about paying homage, it’s also about current societal issues. “You have to talk about [the] real condition of black people. Our story has to be talked about in light of oppression, dealing with human rights violations.” He also criticized the industry for whitewashing the blues telling how *Blues World* and *Rolling Stone* both named a particular artist as a ‘rising star’ except the latter identified the person as a country music artist. “You can’t have it both ways,” according to Knox, “we need to talk about what the blues are.”



The Future: Evolution of the Blues Panel: Marquise Knox, Alonzo Townsend, Dylan Triplett and Teec’a Easby photo by Bob Baugh

Alonzo Townsend spoke to the role of personal responsibility in artists being mindful of what the roots are when he asked, “Are you willing to nurture the roots, to be a part of our culture, or are you going to just stand on top of them?” He emphasized that this was not about playing but truth in labeling: “It’s one thing to be a musician and do what you love, but it’s a whole other thing to be a bluesman and play the blues because that is not only an art form. It’s our way of life. It’s our history and heritage.”

Just like Knox and Townsend, Dylan Triplett is learning about his blues heritage from family and friends. His dad, Art Pollard, a local saxophone player, encourages his formal education while helping Dylan develop his craft. Triplett said he has learned that “you need to be willing to understand fully what’s going on in the blues to take that next level.” Getting to the roots helps him tap into the passion.

Teec’a Easby sees life as a parent and a performer. For the Normandy High School graduate, music is life: “It is the way we express our feelings, our thoughts. The more positive thoughts we have the better our lives will be.” When it comes to her kids, her message was clear: “We need to do more in our schools. We have to build our foundation for our children.” She wants to help build that foundation by taking her music to schools. “It’s a way for me to give back to our young people no matter what color or race they are.”

What are the Blues

The question Knox raised about “what are the blues” linked the past to the present. It was a theme he would touch on all afternoon. He began by tracing his family’s roots through generations of cotton picking to slavery in New Orleans and North Carolina. “That’s the blues,” he said. People weren’t just dropped off in this country and had a life. “How many black people [were] ran off those lands... that’s the blues,” he said again. To Knox an honest conversation about the future requires a discussion of what people were robbed of and of reparation.

The point about reparation was not about writing individual checks. To Knox, it’s about investing in “our kids so they can get an education.” He likened it to the GI Bill which allowed returning veterans to get a house and education. He also pointed out that it didn’t necessarily work that way for black veterans: “They could not get a loan, and those that did lost everything in the stock market crash. It took all the equity and wealth out of the black community. And, it has not been replaced—where we see money has been replaced in other parts of America. That’s the blues.”

The investment question in the discussion operated at two levels. One was our musical heritage as Townsend put it. “It is one of the greatest treasures this country has, but no one is really willing to stand up

and invest in it. Our city doesn't invest in it. If St. Louisans were willing to stand up and recognize that, then it would help us rise as one of the epicenters of the country." The other level was the condition of the black community and the lack of infrastructure investment in North St. Louis. He sees that as a key to changing the environment and building a stronger community. That's the blues, too, as Knox would say.

Social Change and Changing Perceptions

Talking about economic blues raised the issue of music and musicians as agents of social change. Knox shared his views about heritage, history and politics of social media. His celebrity status as a musician attracts people: "I had a lot of backlash from all kinds of people," he said, "but when I talk about the truth, and it becomes a problem. Then we really need to talk about it." During the panel discussion, his critique ran from the treatment of President Obama, pundits, inequality, displacement and the failure of the nation to address the needs of the Priority Minority.

The Rev. William Barber, whose belief in a common moral duty led to his building the racially diverse Moral Mondays Movement in North Carolina, has been an inspiration to Knox. He sees being engaged and voting as critical to social change. "Put people in office that talk about Medicare for all. This don't help just black people. I live in Bowling Green, Missouri (slapping his hand for emphasis). Most of the folks there are white and poor. They need help. That's the blues."

Triplett, still in high school, sees deficiencies in a system where, "they teach us about Black History in one or two chapters in an entire history book over a month. And they sugar coat it by saying we did the music, but they don't go into any depth." He believes that kids need to have something to look forward to so that they will have something to invest in. He thought it was the same with cities, "if you actually put some investment in it and show that you actually care, then maybe the people will actually care that you are trying to put something in there."

Achieving social change requires being informed and engaged. Townsend said there were many black and younger leaders emerging, but "we need to be informed about the strides they are taking and to get behind them." He called for positive engagements with the police and daily neighborhood conversations that build personal relationships and show each other's humanity.

Townsend also decried the cutting of

school music budgets while "the people who supposed to be leading us promote gangster images like Scarface on television." He sees changing those images, what people see when they walk out their door, and the role younger role models like Marquise Knox are critical to changing the perceptions of young black men.

Triplett is a young black musician whose perceptions are being shaped by the people around him. It began with parents who moved "for better schools and neighborhoods", and a dad who shares the music and the roots. He thanked Knox and Skeet Rodgers as musicians who "opened my eyes and showed the bridge." Knox is his role model. "I can see how he has matured and improved in the last two years, and I know I can do that," he said. Triplett still listens to rap but is put off by its images of sex, drugs, guns and lack of respect.

Self-respect is one of the driving forces in Teec'a Easby's career. "As a woman I've dealt with so much adversity dealing with men in the music industry. I've walked out of many studios, left plenty of groups, stopped dealing with plenty of people, lost plenty of friends because of the disrespect in the music industry towards our black women. We have to represent ourselves way better." She is also put off by the negative imagery on television like *The Housewives of Atlanta*. "It's not real, it's embarrassing," she says.

Easby wished there were way more women like her in music to show young women that there is a better future. She does it by talking to the girls who see her sing: "They are all googly-eyed. I tell them how beautiful they are. Talking to them about their day and life can help change things." And she has changed herself. "I had to find a different frequency," she said, "I had to change my way of thinking, [and] the way the universe comes to me."

Today, education, music and her children are the focus of Easby's life. She believes education is a lifelong opportunity for everyone to make their lives better. That starts at home for her. "I didn't have the best education, but I'm busting my behind to make sure my kids do. I hope we are all taking that measure for our children," she said.

Connecting and Respecting

The audience engagement opened with a perspective from a German participant who offered her home country as an example. "Unless a nation is ready to acknowledge the shame, you cannot change anything. Acknowledge it, rather than trying to

suppress it which is suppressing a people—a whole group of people. When everybody contributes to that acknowledging, then the healing can start."

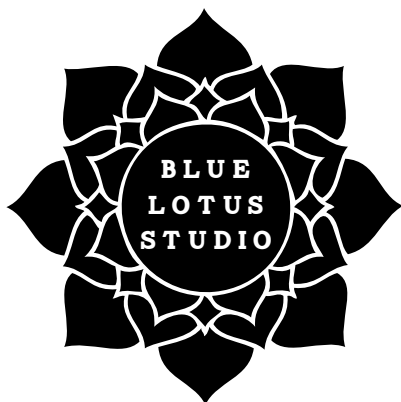
The takeaways for the white community were straightforward. Knox said, "when we stand up for something, stand with us." Triplett agreed by pointing out how under our skin we are all the same and that "united we stand, divided we fall." Using pointed humor, Knox also called out the economic inequality and the generational wealth that underlies it as a takeaway. "Black folks ain't did nothin' but pass down a funeral bill, a sweet tea recipe, and a fried chicken recipe. You all pass down hundreds of thousands of dollars and homes to your kids."

The artists all agreed that being open, approachable and humble was a key in making a connection with a younger generation. Triplett sees himself as a nice guy and role model for others, as Knox is for him. "He makes me proud to be black and talented," Triplett said. Easby goes to schools to encourage people to do what they love. So does Townsend with the *Blues in the Schools* program. He encouraged people to bring their kids to the National Blues Museum, to learn the history, and to see a live show. Several folks talked about taking the music to the community by revitalizing the blues festivals that used to be held in Fairgrounds Park.

A question about a roadmap for respectful white musicians brought the fundamental issues behind the *Race and Blues* conversations full circle. Knox's answer was simple: "The black story is just our story. It's not your story to add, divide, or subtract. You can tell it, if you tell it right. You can come play the blues all night long." Townsend encouraged white artists to invest in and learn the culture, and to "stand next to us shoulder-to-shoulder, not only for the blues, but for the culture."

The conclusion of *Race and Blues* conversations can be boiled down to this: respect, acknowledgement, and investment in the blues, artists, community, and culture are all part of a package that honors and preserves the heritage of black music. But, as the final dialogue emphasized, the past isn't just the past. The struggle goes on. As one audience member put it, "this country is the blues until the folks with color in their skin get the same opportunity that the rest of us have." You could see the panelists nodding their heads and almost hear them thinking: "Yes, that's the blues." 🎵

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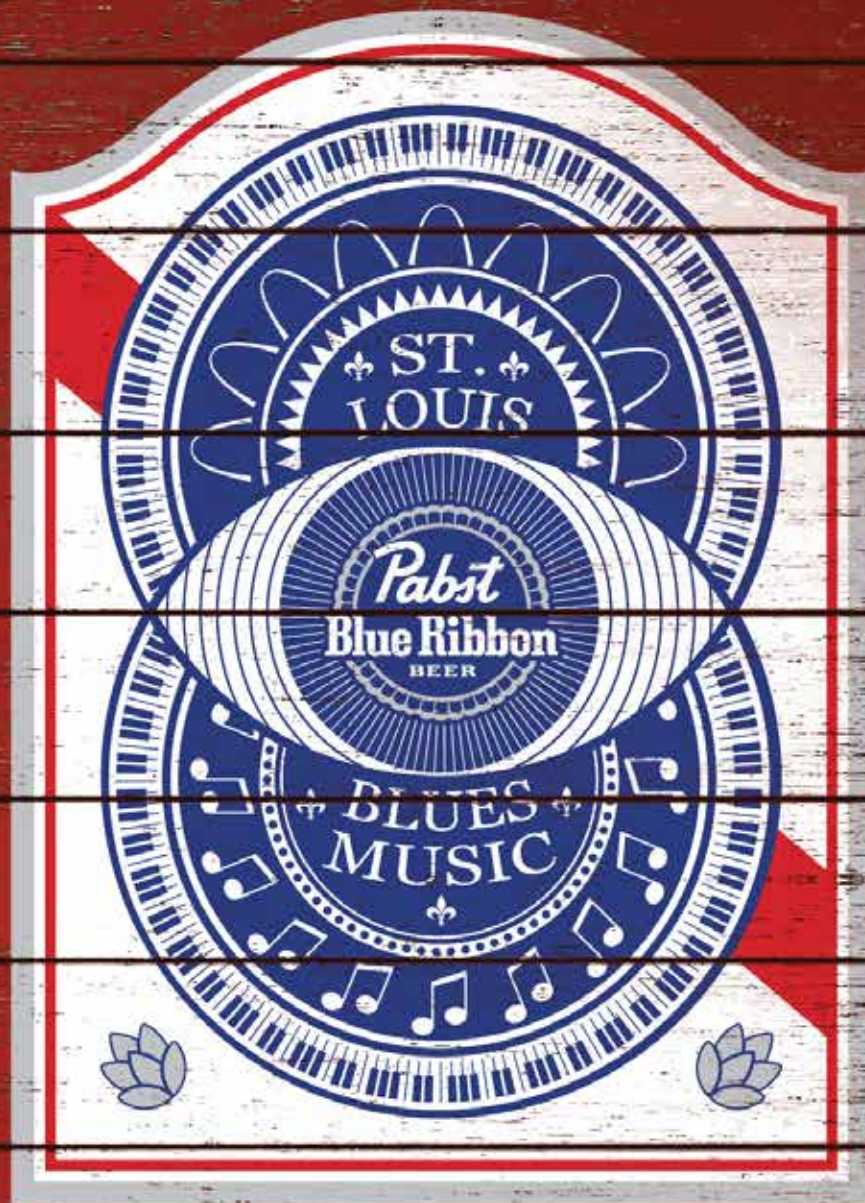
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