
CARRYING ON THE TRADITION

by Robin Thrush, Sr.

The Fillmore, San Francisco, circa 1968. It's another night and B.B. and Albert King are scheduled to appear. Like many of my generation, John Mayall's *Bluesbreakers* album had introduced me to the blues, but I really fell in love with the blues the night I saw B.B. and Albert at the Fillmore. Of the hundreds of bands I have seen before and after, this show stands out in my memory as one of the best. Everyone knows how the blues scene exploded during the late '60s. Young guitarists such as Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Peter Green and Mike Bloomfield brought an obscure art form to the world stage.

Today, blues audiences are much older and new blues artists 40 years old are referred to as young. How can blues music help attract younger audiences? Simply, with younger blues artists. An article published March 30, 2004 in *USA Today* stated, "Kids are listening to their parents – their parents' music, that is. Young fans open ears, minds and wallets to rock's roots, revealing there are a large number of teens and young adults who are seeking young, new bands that carry on the tradition of 60's and 70's music."

Just how old were some of the big names in the blues when they started down the road to fame?

Freddie King played in Chicago at 16 and released his first record at age 23. Mike Bloomfield was signed by producer Paul Rothchild at 19. Eric Clapton was the guitarist for the Yardbirds at 18 and played on John Mayall's *Bluesbreakers* album at 20. Jonny Lang released his smash hit album, *Lie to Me*, at 15.

Behind every successful career, there are people with foresight who open doors for them – they are the industry visionaries.

Bill Graham created the San Francisco music scene by giving bands venues to play like the Fillmore and Winterland. Barbara Strauss, of the Sarasota Blues Festival, has a tradition of hiring young artists. "I have had young people opening the Sarasota Bluesfest practically every year since 1993," says Strauss. "I always thought it was a way to support the future of such a great genre of music and give unknown artists an opportunity to play. I have been very proud of all the young musicians that have graced our stage." www.sarasotabluesfest.com The Robert Johnson Blues Foundation is in its second year of the New Generation Award Contest for 12 to 18 year old blues artists. Prizes include a Gibson "Robert Johnson Edition" guitar and an invitation to perform at the Spring Festival in Crystal Springs, Mississippi. www.robertjohnsonbluesfoundation.org John Mayall's significant contributions to keeping the blues alive include giving opportunities to blues guitarists such as Eric Clapton, Peter Green, Coco Montoya, and most recently, Eric Steckel.

Let's look at some of the young talents who will bring the blues to another generation...

DANIEL BANKS of Pembroke, MA is a 13-year-old drummer who began his training at the age six. In 2005, Daniel was interviewed on David Letterman's *Late Show* and performed with Paul Shaffer and the CBS Orchestra. "We have our next



Douglas Banks

Daniel Banks

Buddy Rich/Sandy Nelson in the works...," said Shaffer. Daniel has performed with Shirley King, Ronnie Earl, Duke Robillard, David Maxwell and Billy Branch among others and has formed his own band, The Moondance Blues Band, in 2004. www.danielbanks.net

JIMMY BOWSKILL is a 15-year-old singer/guitarist who has been a mover and shaker on the Canadian blues scene since age 11. His awards include a 2004 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Galaxy Rising Star Award, a 2004 Maple Blues Award for Best New Artist, a 2004 and 2005 Canadian Indie Award for Favorite Blues Artist and a 2005 Juno Nominee

for Blues Album of the Year. Jimmy has performed at major international festivals including the Montreal International Jazz Festival and recently represented Canada at the World Exposition in Japan. Jimmy's debut CD *Old Soul* was released in 2003, and his latest CD, *Soap Bars and Dog Ears*, was nominated for a Juno Award in 2005. www.jimmybowskill.com

SWEETHARP SANTANA KIRK of Santa Rosa, CA is 17 and has been singing and playing

harmonica since the age of 7. Her band Sweetharp performed at the Russian River Blues Festival when she was 12 and 13. She's shared the stage with Charlie Musselwhite, who

also guests on her debut CD *Ain't Kiddin' Around* and also with James Cotton, Kim Wilson, Huey Lewis and Mark Hummel at the 2005 Harmonica Summit. Sweetharp was featured on the PBS program *Blues Variations* and the Johnny Otis radio show. www.sweetharp.com



Edward E. Kirk IV

Sweetharp Santana Kirk

ERIC STECKEL is a 15-year-old guitarist from Jacksonville, FL. Eric has grown in popularity since his performance at the 2003 Sarasota Blues Festival. John Mayall was so impressed, he invited Eric to play during his set. Eric then toured Europe with Mr. Mayall and played lead guitar on a track from the new *Road Dogs* CD. Eric has also toured in Holland with his own band and played festivals around the U.S. such as Springing the Blues. Eric's CD debut, *A Few Degrees Warmer*, was released in 2002, followed by *High Action* in 2004. www.ericsteckel.com

ROBIN THRUSH, JR. is a 16 year old from Nashville, TN and a fifth generation guitarist/vocalist who has been playing since the age of 3. Trained by dear ol' dad, Robin has recorded two CDs, *Live at S.I.R.*, at age 11 and his studio CD, *Born to Play*, at age 12. In 2004, the Robin



James Dittiger

Jimmy Bowskill performing at the Yale Hotel, a well-known "blues haunt" in Vancouver, BC

Scott Steckel

Eric Steckel at Zuiderpark, The Hague, Netherlands, June 2005

Angela Cring

Robin Thrush, Jr.

Thrush Jr. Band performed at the King Biscuit Blues Festival and the Sarasota Blues Festival. A new CD is due out in late 2006. www.robinthrushjrband.com

Q & A with These Young Artists

What were your earliest musical influences and what are you listening to now?

Daniel: B.B. King, T-Bone Walker, Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa, Ringo Starr. I'm listening to as many different styles and musicians as I can.

Jimmy: My earliest influences were Robert Johnson, Jimi Hendrix, Zeppelin, Louis Jordan and Son House. Right now I'm into a lot of ZZ Top stuff, like *Tres Hombres*, *Deguello* and *El Loco*. I'm also into a lot of instrumental jazz like John Coltrane, Dave Brubeck and Charlie Parker. I'm also very much into Cream.

Sweetharp: Charlie Musselwhite, Little Walter, William Clark and my dad. Today I listen to all kinds of innovators – Led Zeppelin to Bob Marley.

Eric: My parents used to take me to blues festivals before I was old enough to know where I was. Before long I was taking formal lessons from Craig Thatcher and I went on to sit in with his band from time to time. Lately I have been listening to Ronnie Earle, Coco Montoya, Walter Trout, Jimmy Thackery, the Allman Brothers and Gov't Mule.

Robin: When I was little, Chuck Berry, Alvin Lee, Freddie and Albert King. Since then I study everything I can get my hands on. We have hundreds of CDs and music DVDs.

What are your top 5 favorite blues artists of all time?

Daniel: B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Duke Robillard, Ronnie Earl

Jimmy: ZZ Top, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, Freddie King

Sweetharp: B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Little Walter, William Clark, Charlie Musselwhite

Eric: Freddie King, B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, John Mayall, Craig Thatcher

Robin: Johnny Winter, Freddie King, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Albert King

What is the highlight of your career so far?

Daniel: Being invited to play with the CBS Orchestra on the *Late Show* with David Letterman. Also performing with Simon Kirke, John Blackwell, Chad Smith and Eguie Castrillo at the Berklee Performance Center in Boston, MA.

Jimmy: I think the highlight of my career so far is getting to meet Billy Gibbons. He is one of my biggest influences and it was great to find out that he is so down-to-earth. We ended up talking about gear for half an hour. It was great!

Sweetharp: When I was back stage with Pinetop Perkins and Francis Clay, they told me stories about Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and the whole Chicago blues scene. The greatest highlight was when he (Pinetop Perkins) asked Francis and me to sit in

with him when he went on stage for a three-number encore. It was fantastic!

Eric: The highlight for me so far is having the opportunity to go on tour with John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers and then later being invited to play on John's latest CD. It sure was cool to play guitar along with Buddy Whittington too.

Robin: Playing the King Biscuit Blues Festival was an honor, but having lunch with Leo Lyons of Ten Years After was really cool.

To reach your level of expertise not only requires talent, but years of daily practice, rehearsal and study. Why do you do it?

Daniel: Because it is my passion to play the drums. And entertain people.


Jimmy: I do it because I enjoy it. A lot of people call it work, but I will always call it play. Practicing isn't really practicing if you're playing guitar. That is what I love about it. It's fun.

Sweetharp: I need it. There's other stuff in my life. But music keeps me positive.

Eric: Simply because I love it. I honestly could not imagine what else I would have been doing for the past six years without music in my life. It is something that is in me and what I have to do.

Robin: I do it because I love it, and because I want to become a great guitarist.

How can we help the future of the blues and its young artists?

Backing any music career is costly and extremely difficult. The parents of these young artists are extremely supportive. To date, Bowskill and Steckel have had an amazing opportunity to tour Europe and were welcomed by very attentive audiences. But to help make sure these youngsters don't just get passed off down-the-road as a novelty, the blues community can help by embracing young, up-and-coming artists which will in turn assure the future of the blues. Promoters should consider hiring them for big festivals and as support acts for legends. "This would give the audience such an incredible diverse show. In turn it will keep the blues genre alive and be an even stronger force with the young audience these young guns bring to the mix," says Teresa Bowskill. "I think the blues community can take a lesson from the success country music enjoys by promoting young artists to young audiences," says Scott Steckel. "The labels, agents and talent buyers could work more outside the box," adds Robin's dad. "Fans can also contact the festivals and talent buyers and let them know they would like to see young talent." "Spread the word," says Myra Kirk. "It takes a village... it really does." 

Author Robin Thrush, Sr. first performed at age five with Texas "Kid" Smith on a venue promoted by his father. Robin's family moved to the S.F. Bay Area in the '60s where he saw virtually all of the bands of the era. His band, J.J. Moon, worked steadily until the mid-70s when he embarked on a career in marketing. If you are a young blues musician, Robin Sr. would like to hear from you! Contact him via email at rwtsr1@msn.com.
