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## ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

### Schoolhouse Blues

An Experience That's Down and Out, Not to Mention Educational and Fun



By LINDA SASLOW

SINGING the blues doesn't have to be melancholy. It can be lighthearted and fun, as Little Toby Walker demonstrated recently to an audience of eighth graders, singing "It Should Have Been Me," a humorous song he had written about a girl who got away.

"Blues tell a story," Mr. Walker, a 49-year-old blues guitarist, singer, songwriter and storyteller from East Northport, told the honors students at M.S. 254 in the Bronx. "That story can be sad, like the songs that the slaves sang with words telling of their suffering, but the blues can also be funny."

As Mr. Walker explained the origin of blues, he sang several railroad work songs that he had learned from other musicians in his travels across the country. Playing several different guitars, including a steel 1930 model and a one-string guitar known as a diddley-bow, as well as a harmonica, he took the students on an imaginary train ride to Chicago, illustrating how the Chicago blues became electric.

At the end of the 45-minute presentation, Mr. Walker encouraged the students to write their own blues lyrics. He then put them to music and sang the original songs



Photographs by Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

for the class.

"Some of their songs, like 'Computer Crashed Blues' and 'I Have Too Much Homework Blues,' were great," Mr. Walker said. "Through their own creativity, the kids were able to see that blues can be uplifting."

Mr. Walker's presentation earlier this month was part of a pilot program called American Roots, developed by the Weill Music Institute of Carnegie Hall. It is the newest addition to the educational programs provided by Carnegie Hall.

Hollis Headrick, director of the Weill Music Institute, said the American Roots program was started last fall in two schools (the other is in Queens) to use American vernacular music — like gospel, bluegrass and the blues — as a window into the social studies curriculum for American history.

"This is a way to get kids more interested in history and to introduce music to a wider audience," Mr. Headrick said. "The lyrics in blues are a narrative of the social conditions of the times. We're using blues to look at the migration of African-Americans from the South to the North during the time of World War I, showing the changes in the rural South and other changes as the population moved into Chicago."

Jaime Dubei, an eighth-grade social studies teacher who played host to Mr. Walker for the program, was enthusiastic about her students' response to the presentation.

"It was fabulous," she said. "He brought history to life and made the kids feel and understand the blues. I watched their eyes light up as they listened, especially when he played their original music."

When the Weill Music Institute decided to develop American Roots, a search began for a suitable blues musician with teaching experience to help start the program. Little Toby Walker was the ideal fit.

Mr. Walker, who has been playing guitar since he was 14 and living in Brentwood, started playing in bands when he was 17 and spent the next two years traveling throughout Mississippi, Arkansas, Virginia and North Carolina, learning from seasoned blues musicians and painting pictures of his travels in his music. He also wanted a nick-

name that would be catchy. "So many blues names had 'little' attached to them, so I thought it would be cool to tag it onto my name," he said. "Then it just caught on, and I've been Little Toby Walker for almost 20 years."

Getting material for his songs has always come easily, he said.

"I often write about things that have happened to me and then invent scenarios," he said.

"But sometimes it's the most fun to write about what I know nothing about. Like a song I just finished, '200 Reasons to Have the Blues,' about someone who lost everything from his divorce. It sounds tragic, but I turned it into a funny scenario."

Through the years, Little Toby Walker has performed across the country, opening shows for artists like Taj Mahal, Bo Diddley, John Hammond and James Cotton. Locally, he has been highlighted at the Riverhead Blues Festival, the Long Beach Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Huntington Folk Music Society's Main Concert Series and the Port Jefferson Maritime Festival.

In 2002, Mr. Walker won the International Blues Challenge Award in Memphis, a showcase for blues musicians presented by the Blues Foundation.

He plans to release a new CD next month called "Toby Walker Plays Well With Others," which features other musicians, including Bob Margolis, the former guitar player for Muddy Waters.

Teaching has also been important for Mr. Walker, who has given private guitar lessons in his studio and presentations in schools throughout the Island.

"My passion is music," Mr. Walker said. "I love passing on my knowledge and inspiring students to share my passion."

