
L O N G I S L A N D

pulse

Not So Little Toby Walker by Doc Blues

LONG ISLAND IS an environs well blessed with tremendous blues music riches. Toby Walker has been recognized by his peers as one of the best living purveyors of the art form and was evidenced by his win at the 2002 International Blues Challenge, annually presented by the Blues Foundation in Memphis, Tennessee. Many of us were first introduced to Mr. Walker by WUSB (90.1FM, Stony Brook) and its perennial Tuesday night Blues Show. That spotlight highlighted a man with a raconteur's easy vocalisms, brilliant guitar technique and a unique ability to take his muse to ever-higher levels. As powerful on acoustic as on electric, Toby Walker seemingly effortlessly takes the blues to a totally modern place by keeping it fully in line with its traditional and hereditary basis.

Walker is a native Long Islander. Born in Jamaica and raised in Brentwood, he has lived the blues. First picking up a guitar at age 14, as a late teen into his twenties he was an itinerant guitar player who lived in a series of flophouses, missions, hostels and friends' couches. He hitched cross-country three times, slept al fresco under bridge abutments, was arrested for vagrancy in Arizona and even went so far as to donate blood to eat. The pinnacle was a now ended career as a mailman in Wantagh.

None of the above would've ever happened had the blues not captured Walker's soul. When asked, "Why the Blues?" he insists that passionate people are chosen by their passions, not the other way around. "It may sound fruity, but that's how it was with me. First time I listened to the blues, it

was as if something grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and said, 'see, this is what you're going to be.'" The blues muse as influenced by musical currents and literary giants like Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck and Charles Kuralt, but one of the biggest influences was local guitarist Mike Spero. By day, Spero did auto body and by night, he was an amazing acoustic blues player who taught Toby the rudiments of his unique finger picking style.

In the fluent and moving stage persona and guitar work of Little Toby Walker, lie the influences of hundreds of artists and genres. Blues is the base of the pyramid but country, bluegrass, ragtime, rock, jazz, western swing, gypsy jazz and even classical Indian music coexist, and shape the result. His brilliant transcriptions of John Philip Sousa require more than a passive listen. Few artists can take a show from the sublime finger picking of the Piedmont, the raunchy rasp of the Delta, the delicate filigree of John Fahy, the screaming slide of Big Bill Morganfield, the searing power chords of Townshend and the vocal abilities required of each. Add to that the unique ability to make an audience laugh, feel, move and respond through his stories and personality.

As integral to the sound is the selection of material as the musical ability needed to play them. Toby told me, "Initially, the song has to feel right in my head, heart and hands. If it feels right, there's a good chance I'll be able to mold it into my style... I look for something unique in the music. I'll take that thought and come up with something different and fresh. Finally, the lyrics

have to be interesting, meaningful and relatable. All of my audiences are great listeners and I'll never disappoint them with a tune that isn't 'right' in all ways possible."

It is a rare musician who can take talent and skill to the level of success. Renowned locally but unknown off Long Island, the first major break was his tremendous performance at the 2002 International Blues Challenge in Memphis. As the entrant of the LI Blues Society, Toby won first place among hundreds of artists from a score of countries. That win facilitated the production of his third CD *Cool Hand*, which brought him to the attention of John Adams, a noted English booking agent. Toby now spends about a quarter of the year touring the British Isles and Northern Europe where he is a star. But he's still a fixture at Cedar Beach, Riverhead, in libraries, and at folk and blues oriented organization concerts around LI. In 2007, he will play the Philadelphia Folk Festival, which is one of the premier and most prestigious events for an acoustic artist.

Toby also spends a significant amount of time educating the public about blues and teaching blues guitar. Toby was the first artist to participate in the LI Blues Society's "Blues in the Schools" program and has entertained and educated prisoners in the Suffolk County Jail. Recently, he was hired to participate in a program organized by Carnegie Hall that teaches the students in the NYC Public Schools about American Roots Music. His participation in Jorma Kaukonen's long running guitar seminars at the Fur Piece Ranch has resulted in his making friends with Jack Casady and Bob Margolin who appears on Toby's newest, *Plays Well With Others*.

Between Fur Piece, NYC, LI and much of the East Coast, Toby gets to be on very intimate terms with his car. So much so he tells people, "I drive for a living and get to play guitar at night... Once those lights come down and the sound comes up, that's my time. It's pure heaven. I get

to meet with fans, sign CDs, say good bye. Then I get to do it all over again. I wouldn't be happy doing anything else."

When asked to discuss the local scene, he tells of the multifaceted strengths and weaknesses of our island. On one side, there are so many very talented musicians living and working here, but that is also a problem. Everyone is vying for the same shrinking pool of gigs at a decreasing number of blues friendly venues. Many players here do music as a hobby and have day jobs, but in order to make a go at being a fulltime pro musician, sacrifices need to be made. Doing so with families and bills is a big gamble, and many excellent players are content with whatever crumbs may fall their way locally. Our geography is also a problem. To play in any other state, you have to get off the Island. That's several hours added to any trip for a gig that may not pay much more than gas cash.

Toby's future goals revolve around doing what he is successfully doing. He is also working on a lesson series for guitarists and is shopping around for a publisher. Notably, Toby just recorded a live CD at the Boulton Theater in Bay Shore. The CD was produced by Tom Griffith (Dr. John, George Benson) and recorded by George Trapani. Walker mixed in a ton of new material with some old favorites. Toby will be featured in the upcoming Gathering of the Slides show at Berkner Hall at BNL on February 24th. This February will mark the 5th episode of Walker blowing the doors down on slide in the company of Kane Daily and Kerry Kearney. This show will be a great opportunity for someone to newly experience Little Toby Walker or to just get together with an old friend. Hope you can make it too.