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Finding the Blues, and Bringing Them Home

By **ROBBIE WOLIVER**

BLUES music is flourishing on Long Island, and Toby Walker, a singer-songwriter-guitarist from Oyster Bay who performs as Little Toby Walker, is one of the main reasons.

"Blues is enjoying a resurgence because of the high quality of blues musicians here," said Charlie McKenna, of the 300-member Long Island Blues Society, "and Toby has really fired up the scene. He's causing a tremendous stir."

While live, original music often has difficulty attracting attention on the Island, over the past year, many new blues clubs have opened and other existing clubs began booking blues acts. Enthusiasts like Mr. McKenna believe that as many rock musicians grow older, they start performing blues, so there's an influx of new players. And with advocates like the Long Island Blues Society, local blues record labels with international acclaim like MC Records, and events like this weekend's Riverhead Blues Festival, which will feature Mr. Walker and has attracted up to 20,000 fans in the past, blues seems to be taking hold.

He is constantly writing, practicing, performing and teaching in his apartment, filled with hundreds of albums, musical instruments and books on blues. His quest for a full understanding of the blues also has him traveling to the South, particularly the Mississippi Delta, to research venerable blues players and visit blues landmarks.



Phil Marino for the New York Times

Mr. Walker said a chance encounter near his childhood home in Brentwood changed his life.

"One summer when I was 15," he said, "I was carrying my guitar down the street, and this guy, working on a car in his front yard, yelled out, 'Hey, what do you play?' I said, 'Blues.' I thought I did, but I didn't know what I was talking about. I tried to sound cool. 'So who do you play?' he asked me. He got me there.

"He took me to his basement and showed me more blues albums than I've ever seen: Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, Robert Johnson. I just absolutely flipped out, and I spent a better part of that summer in that basement."

His thirst for knowledge had him traveling down Highway 61 to the Mississippi Delta to find obscure blues players, underdogs, or "guys who missed the boat," he said.

On one trip, he met James Son Thomas, in Leland, Miss. After finding the home of Mr. Thomas, a guitarist, sculptor and gravedigger, Mr. Walker stood at the man's front door, anxious and excited.

"My heart stopped when I saw him," he recalled. "I just said, 'Can I listen to you play?' He invited me in, and I learned and watched and listened for two days." He met others, including the guitarists Etta Baker, R. L. Burnside and Eugene Powell, a 1930's bluesman. Mr. Walker also visited various notable locations, from prisons to museums, researching the genre throughout the country.

"Talking to those people and visiting those places has augmented things I've read," Mr. Walker said, "and put everything into focus."

Now, Mr. Walker has become the foundation of a different blues scene. "Blues venues and bands have quadrupled within the last several years on Long Island," Mr. Walker said. "Places like Paula Jean's in Setauket, Chesterfield's in Huntington, The Dog and Duck in Sayville, and Patty's Eastport Luncheonette have all helped the scene."

Patty's, a tiny Eastport luncheonette, serves only breakfast and lunch. Its walls are sponge-painted blue and are covered with pictures of blues artists. It has become a popular place to see blues performances.

Other locations that book blues and have opened in the past year include the Flatted Fifth in Riverhead, Port Jazz in Port Jefferson and Baja Brothers in Westhampton.

This past May, Mr. Walker released his debut CD, "[Little Toby Walker](#)," which he sells on his Web site, www.LittleTobyWalker.com. He has also been selected by the Long Island Blues Society to represent Long Island in the International Blues Challenge to be held in Memphis next February.

"It's certainly a highlight of my career," said Mr. Walker, who has shared stages with artists like Taj Mahal, J. J. Cale and Louisiana Red. "It's nice to get that recognition."

Is he worried about the competition? "No, I just compete against myself."

He is preparing for the Challenge by writing new material. The competition requires the performers to play original music. "That's funny," Mr. Walker noted, "because a lot of blues is musicians doing traditional songs in their own way."

Mr. Walker has many styles from which to choose his presentation. He is adept at various techniques of fingerpicking, ragtime and bottleneck guitar. He is most noted for juxtaposing melodies against alternating bass lines, which is the basis of the Piedmont style of fingerpicking, one of the many techniques upon which he improvises. He can play a shuffle with one thumb, lead guitar and rhythm with his other fingers, and slap the guitar percussively with his right hand; and when he does this, he can sound like a full band. He also boasts a sturdy blues voice and strong original blues songs, like his instrumental tribute to Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson, called "Blind Man's Bluff."

"Blues is something that resonates with me," he said. "It moves me. It's what the Japanese call chiyun, sympathetic vibration of the spirit. No matter what's going on, it grounds me. When you bend that note -- ah, that's a good feeling. It's like medicine."

"Many people think blues is always sad, but it covers every emotion. It is lamenting over loss. conquest of love, getting back at 'The Man,' or any authority figure, feeling good with friends, or for just plain dancing. Nothing touches me like the blues does."