

THE INDEPENDENT

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Little Toby Walker: Man of Steel Guitars

By Lisa Cowley

Little Toby Walker has got the blues. And those who have had the pleasure of being blown away by his fingerpicking style and his amazing riffs and solos are very thankful. The blues man is no stranger to Riverhead, as he has headlined at the popular Blues Festival more than once. Fans or newcomers to his music can catch him at the Vail-Leavitt Music Hall on February 11, singing songs from his new CD, *Toby Walker Plays Well With Others*, which features Bob Margolin, and other special guests.

"It can either be sad, or it can be very happy and uplifting, but it is a music that does express many different emotions," Walker said. "I think the music and the history behind [it] is very rich. It's certainly very interesting how the music came about, from sharecroppers in the south, and how it evolved. It certainly is very influential music."

Walker first got turned onto the genre by a local player named Mike Zulich. He heard him playing acoustic blues, when he was just a 15-year-old living in Brentwood. "I was just knocked out by that. When I found out that he used to listen to the Rolling Stones, I listened to [them], but then I realized that the Rolling Stones derived a lot of their music from earlier blues recordings, so I started diving into those earlier recordings, people like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf."

When he was 17, Walker began hitchhiking across the country, as well as touring with different bands. "There was a two-year period where I really didn't have a real address. I was really on the road a lot." He moved back to the island when he was about 20. He started making field trips to the deep south to study with some of the old time blues musicians who were still alive, such as Eugene Powell and Jack Owens. "I really learned a lot just by sitting at the feet of these guys — learning from them, watching them, playing along with them and getting that emotion, getting that feel into it. Seeing visually what they were doing, that helped a lot."

Walker has passed on the torch of the "learn from the masters" approach. In a stroke of serendipity, he taught guitar last year at Jorma Kaukonen's Fur Peace Ranch, and it has now become an annual gig. A friend of Walker's knew the Hot Tuna star. Kaukonen took a liking to Walker's music, found out that he gave lessons, and brought him on board. At the Ohio camp, he teaches blues technique. He also teaches Middle School students blues history and gives blues demonstrations through Carnegie Hall's "American Roots" program. Walker plays a 1930 National Triolian steel guitar. He also uses a National Tri-Cone. "They were used by a lot of musicians in the late '20s and early '30s. This was before electric guitars. They have a very unique sound to them. The style that I do with the blues is what they call fingerstyle. I'm fingerpicking the guitar, but I'm making it sound like two to three different guitars. I'm playing bass, I'm playing rhythm, improvisations, melodies, leads, all at the same time. You need a schizophrenic personality."

He noted: "There's different styles in the blues. There's a Delta style, where I use a bottleneck slide on my finger. Then there's what they call the Piedmont, which comes from the eastern Appalachian mountain region. That's a slightly different style of playing blues. I use fingerpicks to bring out the notes of the guitar a little more succinctly. It actually makes the guitar sound a little louder. I used to play on the streets in Manhattan, so I guess I used fingerpicks to get that volume. I've been doing it ever since."

Walker earned the prestigious International Blues Challenge Award; he was the recipient in 2002, after competing in the finals in Memphis. "It was pretty exciting. I knew there was a lot of competition, so I wasn't really trying to think of competing. I was really just going down there to do my best and then to make contacts with a lot of people. The contest was almost secondary. When I did my half hour set, and at the end of the night they announced my name, I was shocked." The man who handed him the check and trophy was Howard Stovall, the great-grandson of a man that owned the plantation that Muddy Waters worked on. "I can't remember a more surrealistic moment," said Walker. "I'm the only one from New York and Long Island that's ever won the thing. I feel pretty good about that."

One of the contacts he made through the award was Bob Margolin, who was Muddy Waters' guitarist for many years. Walker had met him again at a second Memphis gig, and the two have been keeping in touch ever since. When Walker e-mailed him, requesting his presence on his next CD, he responded that he'd be "honored." They recorded three of the album's songs, actually, in Margolin's North Carolina home, in his living room. The album is produced by Tom Griffith, who has produced albums for the likes of Fats Domino and Dr. John.

The blues is Walker's full-time gig. He starts his sixth tour of England beginning the end of this month. "I am making a living [as a musician]. What it is, I think in this business, it's a lot of planting seeds. You never know which one's going to take and when it's going to take. But all of a sudden, a phone call comes or you happen to meet somebody and an opportunity comes up, just because of doing a lot of seed planting.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't love it. To do this for a living, you have to love it. You absolutely have to have a passion for it. Because if you don't, you'll just drive yourself mad," he said with a laugh. The Vail-Leavitt concert will be preceded with a guitar workshop at 5 p.m. Sign up at littletobywalker.com. The 8 p.m. show will also feature Tommy Keys, a piano player, whom The Long Island Blues Society is sending to Memphis this year to compete for the IBC Award.

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