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Get schooled by 'Little' Toby Walker

BY SAMANTHA SPECTOR
FOR THE JOURNAL NEWS

He may sing the blues, but "Little" Toby Walker doesn't live them. The East Northport, N.Y., resident - whose stage moniker belies his immense talent - has spent the past two decades as one of music's most well-received musicians on the road.

"When people ask me what I do for a living," Walker says with a laugh, "I tell them I drive all day and get to play guitar at night."

Walker will bring his one-man acoustic performance to The Turning Point Café in Piermont on Sunday with the Rev. Billy C. Wirtz, and to The Watercolor Café in Larchmont on Tuesday with Rory Block.

"Venues like [Turning Point and Watercolor] seat about 50-100 people," says Walker. "I really like playing in settings like this because I enjoy the intimacy of the venue. I enjoy feeding off the audience and being able to joke around with them."

Walker picked up a guitar at age 14 and can easily recall what made him want to play guitar - The Rolling Stones.

"Keith [Richards] is a big influence on me," says Walker. "The Stones did a lot of early blues music. Now, I didn't know what blues was, but I thought to myself, 'Wow, this is good.' "

Bursting into song, you can hear him smile as he sings: "I said the joint was rocking/Go in 'round and 'round/Yeah, reeling and rocking/What a crazy sound," from the Rolling Stones' "Around and Around."

"I just really liked [that song]. I didn't realize it was a hopped-up form of blues music. I didn't know that the guy writing these songs was Chester Burnett from Howlin' Wolf. I just asked the guy behind the counter at the record store where I could pick some of it up."

He continues: "I consider myself a heavily blues-influenced artist. There's a lot of other things that creep into there ... there's a lot of Western swing and ragtime and of course singer-songwriter acoustic since that is what I mostly play."

In addition to performing, Walker has been teaching music to children throughout New York for years. He has had a lot of success, he says, with the "American Roots" series he teaches as part of a Carnegie Hall-affiliated outreach program. Walker also continues to teach guitar workshops in schools throughout Long Island and Manhattan. Furthermore, many of his gigs include workshops before or after his performances.

"In some cases, I give lessons," says Walker. "In [the most recent] program I demonstrate how blues has played a part in [American history]. When I go to the schools, there are sometimes kids that have already begun to learn how to play the guitar and I encourage them to bring in their instrument so I can teach them how to play their own songs. I don't know who is having more fun ... the kids or me."

Walker is well aware of the impact he has on the kids he teaches and he talks about them the way others might speak of their friends - with warmth and amusement. He tells stories of entire villages who show up for his workshops, gets excited when recalling memories from his life on the road and laughs out loud as he remembers the characters he has met throughout



Jim Marchese

Bluesman "Little" Toby Walker is set to play in Piermont and Larchmont.

If you go ...

Who: "Little" Toby Walker and the Rev. Billy C. Wirtz

When: 5 p.m. Sunday

Where: The Turning Point Café, 468 Piermont Ave., Piermont

Tickets: \$17.50

More info: 845-359-1089 or

www.turningpointcafe.com

And ...

Who: "Little" Toby Walker and Rory Black

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday

Where: The Watercolor Café, 1094 Boston Post Road, Larchmont.

Tickets: \$25

More info: 914-823-2213 or

www.watercolorcafe.net.

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his career.

"I once had this 13-year-old kid take two buses to hear me play," says Walker. The boy, it turns out, was a student in one of the schools he taught in.

"This kid just walked into the bar I was playing in and says, 'Hi, Mr. Walker.' And I'm looking around, trying to find his mom ... who was at home at the time. He just walked right in and sat down and said to me 'I came to hear you play.' I just said 'OK' and sat him down with my friends. But I thought it was pretty cool. Strange, though."

In addition to his young students, Walker has also become a regular instructor at Jorma Kaukonen's [Jefferson Airplane, Hot Tuna] Fur Peace Ranch in Pomeroy, Ohio. The camp is a sort of fantasy camp for adults to immerse themselves in the music they love, no matter their skill level. Walker will return to the Ranch in March.

Between performing and teaching, he also has found time to produce seven original albums, including "Toby Walker Plays Well With Others," which was released early this year. His next CD will be recorded live Jan. 26 in Bay Shore, N.Y.

Walker, however, is an admitted road dog who has always called the East Coast home. Yet his music has reached far beyond the metropolitan area.

"The music is incredibly well received overseas," says Walker, who plans to return to Europe next year.

"I'm just beginning to become known out here, but it's different over in England. They actually love the stuff. I'll sell out all kinds of venues - from huge theaters to a small pub in a little out-of-the-way village. It's funny, whole villages will show up when I play, and that includes kids, grandparents, the dogs - I'll wind up playing for all of them."

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